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**'PERSON-CENTRED' -
AN ETHIC OF CHRISTIAN CHARITABLE SERVICE
2009 Baptist Care Australia Conference**

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How many of us really see another human being when we make contact with them, particularly when we might know them already? How often do we look at them closely, look at their eyes, concentrate, take stock of their 'being' at that actual moment? Not many of us and not very often I suspect. Instead, we see someone we've pigeonholed in our mind's eye, and say to ourselves, I know this person – she's a friend, or this person is talkative, or again, this one is boring or challenging – and so on, and we forget to look at them as complete people, with something to say, as someone who is important to me.

I ask these questions because the words 'person-centred' have become fairly humdrum; they are words that were briefly, politically popular but now, for many, they are hollowed-out, retaining only a dim echo of their original meaning. That meaning was, I think, to make us really pay attention and think about the 'Other' when having a conversation with someone who might be wanting services or establishing a work relationship.

More than that, though, being person-centred means that we must take on this other person's worldview and preferences as the perspective from which to think about their expectations rather than projecting our own desires, expectations and those of our organisation onto them.   And so the challenge in for this morning's talk, is for us to think about what person-centred means in our daily lives and how this arises from our understanding and experience of Christian service and what implications this has for our services and practice.   So, I thought I'd share some of my ideas around the invitation to be person-centred, ideas that I hope will make sense and these are:

1. The idea that human beings are made in God's image.

2. The 'Other' in our post-modern society and the implications for personal Christian reflections and sense of community.

3. The constructs of an ethic of Christian charity;

4. Ideas on care work and service and what this means in our motivations, decisions and work practices.

By the end, I hope that we will have re-filled our interpretation of person-centred within an ethic of Christian charity and service.

1.   The idea that human beings are made in God's image.

My starting point was to think about this claim of being 'person-centred' from the Christian theological tradition of the human being, having been created in God's image, what is referred to as 'imago dei'. In this way, we believe that each of us is uniquely precious and known within and by God. And as each of us is created similarly (and I won't take a philosophical detour into what makes us human), it means that all human beings are equally precious and unique, without exception.

This belief provides an entry for all of us into a universal understanding of the human 'being' and humanity. The trap into which we then frequently fall with some relief, is to ignore the fact that we then hurriedly proceed to create God in our own image in order to control our belief system and protect ourselves and our place in the world – whether its to do with gender, class, race, ability/disability and religion as well as our neighbourhoods, our country and our world. We create hierarchies of valued human beings, in descending order.

It might be that we put foreigners and refugees lower on the list of likeness to our God, or women, those living with disabilities, or people with different coloured skins, or those who are poor rather than those who are well-off, or vice versa. We often include the imprisoned, the sick, the elderly and the dying. We all construct the lists to protect ourselves and our God, but at least occasionally, we are able to recognise where some of the social, cultural, economic and religious fault-lines lie, as some clearly have catastrophic effects. As Christians, created in God's image, we have been gifted with the great commandment, 'to love God with our whole hearts, souls and bodies, and to love our neighbours as ourselves'.

There are two magnificent assumptions that come immediately into view in this commandment: firstly, that there is no equivocation or ambivalence about the absoluteness of the commitment asked of us in building our relationship with God, while the invitation to see God in each other as well as ourselves is spelt out in how we must love our neighbours.

Secondly, there is an understanding that we live in community with others, not solitarily, inwardly focussed only on ourselves and our personal relationship with God – (which is seen as being of a higher order, a transcendent relationship worth more than our daily human interactions. This thinking makes us somewhat dualistic in our approach to who we value), but that we live within groups, we belong to groups and are in active relationships with other people, many of whom are in communities that nowadays that can also stretch around the globe. The invitation to love our neighbours requires us to stretch our capacity to enter into God's love as a way of seeing the 'Other'.

And nowadays, we simply cannot get away with the assumption that our neighbour with whom we develop our first identification of God's commandment, is simply the person next door, the one whom I can tolerate, perhaps love, using the Greek word 'agape' and with whom I can be in community.

Today, I am a neighbour to the woman who has been raped in the refugee camps in Dafur, I am a neighbour or perhaps another word might be 'friend', to the refugees arriving on our shores scapegoated as boat people stealing a march on the genuine refugees and our resources, I am a friend to the man who has lost his job and has been caught stealing, I am a friend to the young man selling and buying drugs, the murderer and the child molester and I am a friend to the people who are seeking Baptistcare's services. It is an immense undertaking. And I am invited to see God in the other's eyes, to see the 'Other's' unique humanity in a way that has not been envisaged before, in a way that demands that I see God in each human being as a practicing Christian.

So the God of our religion and faith is as central to our personal religious life and journeying as she is to our external life, lived in community with others, who have been created in God's likeness.

2.   The 'Other' in our post-modern society and the implications for personal Christian reflections and sense of community.

The starting place is found in Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus has given us more insight about our way of 'being' fully human in loving God and thus our neighbours; he says to each of us:

> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me *(Matt 26:35-36).*
> I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine you did for me *(Matt 26:40).*

So what does the Other, the 'stranger' look like? They come in many guises and most often, we think that they refer to the poor and dispossessed. Eduardo Galeano says they are:

> The nobodies: nobody's children, owners of nothing. The nobodies: the no ones, the nobodied, running like rabbits, dying through life, screwed every which way. Who are not, but could be. Who don't speak languages, but dialects. Who don't have religions, but superstitions. Who don't create art, but handicrafts. Who don't have culture, but folklore. Who are not human beings, but human resources. Who do not have faces, but arms. Who do not have names, but numbers. Who do not appear in the history of the world, but in the police blotter of the local paper. The nobodies, who are not worth the bullet that kills them. (Farmer, P. 2005:1 *Pathologies of Power.* University of California Press, London)*.*

Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J. (university president, murdered in 1989) said:

> I want to set your eyes and your hearts on these peoples who are suffering so much – some from poverty and hunger, others from oppression and repression. Then, …. Ask yourselves: what have I done to crucify them? What do I do to uncrucify them? What must I do for this people to rise again.

> How is the presence of God, precisely that God who delivered an enslaved people and became self-manifest in Jesus Christ crucified and risen, actualized today in a world of affliction? The answer: primarily through divine, scandalous love for the poor and the intention that the poor should receive life. If this is the self definition of God's heart, then knowing and loving God means letting one's own life be configured to this shape of divine action in the world. In the midst of people suffering extreme poverty and premature, unjust death, it means letting one's own heart correspond to divine compassion, to love as God's loves (Johnson, E. 2008:84-86 *Quest for the Living God.* The Continuum International Publishing Group, New York).

So here we have some clearer indications about the 'Other' and who we might consider them to be in our Christian work and way of living. But this is not the only 'Other' that we confront and should see in our own communities and society here in Australia. The 'Other' can also be found in our charitable workplaces: they are the staff whom we hire to do poorly paid work and the clients who demand that we alter

our rules in order to meet their expectations. These 'Others' have become commodified by consecutive Governments and by ourselves. The tension for the post-modern charity such as ours lies in the current packaging and branding of the consumer, who has, de facto, become 'the Other'.

The 'Other' is the one who can be scapegoated and dehumanised usefully to ensure the competitive playing field stays reasonably level and does not require us, in faith-based community agencies, to challenge our own belief systems.

The 'Other' may also become the competing agency; the for-profit company against whom we are tendering for a new contract, lobbying against with Government; the 'Other' may be the individual, difficult client who is costing us money without visible reasons for continuing support, or, is even the commodified, outsourced lowest paid employees in positions such as the direct client support carer for the elderly or disabled, or the child care worker, cleaner or cook. The 'Other' from whom we can remove ourselves from having a relationship, not be responsible for their circumstances and whom we can push the blame onto for their own condition, 'its' their own fault'!

In our organisations, clients have become consumers with a hierarchy and value placed on the most lucrative consumer, the one who generates the most funding, the most 'needy' of all the needy. Consequently, there is a consistent desire to seek out the client who brings in money and moral capital but who does not require necessarily a lot of work, money, resources and attention.

It is possible to see the choices made by many agencies at this point, who have decided to operate primarily as for-profit businesses in order to meet the challenges faced by all of us in an environment that calls us to remember who we are and who's work we are about.

I would suggest that the for-profit profile and way of doing business eases the choices and the apparently unresolvable tensions when we try to meet the apparently competing demands of viability and sustainability of organisations alongside the flourishing of the human spirit expressed by both clients and employees. I suspect too, that working in large organisations also makes it easier as we can safely compartmentalise ourselves from the 'Other'. This worldview is a dangerous place to be in, and we ignore it at our peril.

3.   The constructs of an ethic of Christian charity;

I have a theory about the ethic of charity and in particular, the ethic of Christian charity. It is my view that the ethic of charity is comprised of three core themes, the female practice of caring wrapped around a generosity of spirit, the elements of thinking that arise out of an active conceptualization and desire for peace through non-violent action, and a commitment to human rights arising specifically from our Christian faith. These three elements combine to bring to life an ethic of charity.

Psychologist Carol Gilligan proposed the ethic of care back in 1982 with a ground breaking book called, *In a Different Voice*. In it she argued that women have a different response to resolving ethical dilemmas. This work was done in response to research by Lawrence Kohlberg, an educationalist of many years, who had run an experiment with school children, predominantly boys, and had come to the conclusion that males have a far greater capacity to develop moral judgment and move through all six stages that he identified, whereas females were less able and less likely to get beyond the middle stages.

Gilligan demonstrated otherwise. What she showed was not that there was a greater or lesser degree of capacity to develop a moral capacity between the sexes, but that the development was different.   She argued that females had a greater inclination towards an ethic of care as opposed to the ethics learned and practiced by males which was more inclined to analysis and judging. (The commentary is greatly simplified).

While there has continued to be debate about both Kohlberg's and Gilligan's findings, I propose that what we see in our charitable, community workplaces, is an expression of that ethic of care highlighted by Gilligan. In a highly female-dominated workplace, (ABS 87% female workforce), women are carrying out the traditional, socially and culturally acceptable work of caring, for those who are not economically and culturally valued in our capitalistic society. Our agencies work with those who are unvalued, children, the sick, the disabled, the poor, the dispossessed, the elderly and the dying. At this point, I remind you of Jesus' commands to us. We are intentionally placing ourselves into service for and with the 'Other' and the 'Other' is not valued.

The second element of the ethic of Christian charity is that of peace and non-violent action. This is not a passive humbling of the human spirit, arising from a lack of power, a retreat from violence because we are frightened, or because we are a 'nobody' as Galeano called it earlier on; but what Vaclav Havel has claimed it to be, we can be human beings who are disturbers of the peace, a people who lead and act in ways that engender change arising out of God's revolutionary instruction to see the other as our neighbour and to love them as much as we love God.

This requires us not to accept the small compromises, the little deaths that we accept each day in our desire to make our lives more comfortable.   Non-violence is not simply a refusal to be violent or absence of conflict, but to look truthfully at our systems and ways of living that act out violently on those around us, our workplace policies that squash people in their employment, services, that require people to behave towards us in ways that we desire, hidden rewards and punishments to ensure our systems are protected and our positions guarded.

The third element of an ethic of Christian charity is that of human rights. Our human rights arise from our belief that says that we are made in God's image. They are rights that belong to everyone simply because they are members of the human race, without exception, a humanity gifted by God to each of us, irrespective of individual colour, race, gender or economic value or any other human-created point of discrimination.

These three elements make up, in my view, an ethic of Christian charity which then goes to the heart of what we do and why we do it.   Charity is frequently translated from the Greek 'agape', as love, a love that is compassionate, caring, honest and filled with grace. It is unearned and unconditional. There is no price as it cannot be bought – an awkward anomaly in our post-modern commodified, capitalizing world where everything has a price. Like 'person-centredness', the word 'charity' has a sort of dusty, slightly embarrassed usage, it has echoes of benevolence and patronage, apparently profiting the giver more than the receiver; and for those in secular community benefit agencies, it is definitely associated with religion and so probably causes slight discomfort and seen as inappropriate, and therefore, it is not an association eagerly sought. Its one of those words that we try, every now and then, to reclaim as it is so useful, but in this current context, is sadly unavailable to us.

However, now that we have explored some of the elements of person-centredness and our Christian perspective of the ethic of charity and its constructs, what I shall do now, is to look at our Care work and service and in particular, what it means in our daily work practices, motivations and decisions.

4. Care work and Service; and what this means in our motivations, decisions and work practices.

In our unpacking of the ethic of charity, we looked briefly at the action of caring, proposing that it is essentially a female activity, given that its done predominantly by women generally, in female work situations which include the client's home. The concept of caring as work is relatively new and the meaning is still evolving. An International Labour Organisation (ILO) publication in 2001 gives a general definition of care work as:

> The work of looking after the physical, psychological, emotional and developmental needs of one or more other people. Care work has more dimensions than many other forms of work and has a distinctive structure (*Meagher and Healey 2005:16-17*).

The definition and explanations are then stretched to include the fact that it takes place both formally and informally, it incorporates social, physical and emotional aspects of an individual's well-being. It is connected to a range of relationships with diverse work areas including education and health. However, housing, justice, employment and advocacy should also be added to their list. More specifically, care work can be defined as:

> Work that provides a face-to-face service that develops the capabilities of the recipient. By 'human capabilities' we refer to health, skills, or proclivities that are useful to oneself or others. These include physical and mental health, physical skills, cognitive skills, and emotional skills, such as self-discipline, empathy, and care. Examples of caring labour include the unpaid work of parents, and the paid work of teachers, nurses, child care workers, and therapists *(Meagher and Healey 2005:16).*

As a growing definition, care work involves paid and unpaid work and refers to the activity itself and its motivations. It is very difficult to demarcate as it is a relational activity which stretches into so many areas of work and human interaction; it requires the people to be present ontologically in consciously acknowledged experiences. Often, caring is experienced passively, but in today's world there is a similar and evolving expectation of the 'good recipient' operating in a climate of reciprocal arrangements, and 'workers are enhanced by the inherent identity arising from the work that each individual does, with the response that is elicited as a consequence, being of value. 'Goodness' and 'value' are catalogued both in the transaction and in the emerging relationship; then they are judged either as worthwhile or not.

Service: When this concept of caring with these emerging definitions in our workplaces combines with the ideas of service, it makes for some rich thinking and debate. The word 'service' as with 'care', when offered within a Christian context, both offer an additional or perhaps an alternative dimension for consideration and an opportunity to reflect on how our work might be different from any other community organisation. And some of it is highlighted throughout this discussion; our care and service is not simply a transactional process, I do something for you in return for something back from you. God's love is unconditional, our motivation, decisions and

actions require us to come from a different perspective as we see the 'Other' at all times in our work and we find ourselves providing services that come from our commitment to God, first and foremost.

So in practice, it means we must review our policies and procedures to ensure that our workplaces are places that enliven people's spirits and they can flourish as human beings, they are seen unconditionally and valued; we need to make sure that we do not have our priorities out of order; that we have services that listen to clients and staff and provide what is needed rather than exist to meet governments' needs; have systems that seek out and abolish hidden discrimination and subtle violence; that we apply our perspective of human rights equally with passion and that we disturb the comfortable peace in which we operate as middle of the road, middle class white charities.   And as part of our ethic of charity, let's remember that human rights apply to all of us, therefore, taking advantage of staff, as well as clients, is not acceptable.

Finally, when I think of service, I do not see it as Mr McAuber used to say, in one of Dickens' novels as always 'being ever so 'umble' and hoping for maximum output, but as a hugely intentional commitment, driven by the power of God's love, working within community, as an expression of our faith, loving God and therefore loving our neighbours as ourselves.   Robert Greenleaf talks about the concept of 'servant leadership', which is the subject of much research and debate, particularly within a Christian context. While much of the servant leadership concept is valuable, the word 'servant' can be tricky with some of its gendered discriminatory overtones. However, the idea of leadership being evident in service, as a transformational experience that invites our spirit as well as ourselves, to engage in working with others has great potential. It is a leadership concept that enables many of those not traditionally seen as potential leaders to consider what it might be like, particularly women and men working in unvalued service areas, that being of service, means being influential and leading by example, as the best possible way to serve. The engagement of the spirit, or for us as Christians, the engagement of our faith, with hope and grace, is what tips our concept of service into something different within our organisations.

In our decision making and our outward expression of our Christian faith, working in agencies that are based on this commitment, we need to think of John's words when he said: 'Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action' *(1 John 3:18).* So the challenge to us as leaders is significant. How do we provide services, what services do we provide, how do we ensure that each contact experience either with people seeking our services or with staff seeking employment with us, that our motivation shines through our words, decisions and actions. I would suggest its by making sure we see each person truly and become person-centred in our way of serving. A Christian ethic of charity.

In conclusion, I invite you instead, to imagine a world in which we can see and take responsibility for our own decisions and services through to the very last person in the queue, the 'nobody' in our system who is generally too small to count, because I am in relationship with God and with them as my neighbour and friend. We cannot wriggle away from this commitment simply because the system does not give us room to do so; if that's the case, let's change the system and do so as our life's work as Christians or shut our services up and reallocate the limited resources to those agencies that do not pretend to be anything other than community-based in their approach!

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