

MEDIA RELEASE

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Catholic Agency Leaders Unite for a Just and Compassionate Society this Victorian Election Year

Last week, in the context of the upcoming Victorian state election in November, Catholic Social Services Victoria invited leaders from across its social services membership alongside colleagues from Catholic education and health to discuss core areas of need in our communities. These forums, which will be convened throughout the year, allow us to reflect on our common mission to promote justice and charity in light of overlapping areas of need and concern.

Hang Vo, CEO of Sacred Heart Mission and President of ACOSS led a reflection on her organisations' work to consider not only the needs they see daily in the people they serve who are experiencing homelessness and in aged care, but also how they might attend to unjust structures and conditions that underpin disadvantage. This has led her organisation to consider how at every level they might advocate for positive systemic changes alongside personal accompaniment of people doing it tough, and see an election year as an important time to contribute to change.

She argued there is a distinction between being 'partisan political' and being a part of an engaged polis and urging work for the common good based on the evidence base built up from experiences of service and relationships. Engagement for positive change in an election year is not a leaning in towards partisan politics, but rather a leaning in deeper to the roots of the issues at hand, and promoting an understanding of how intersecting social issues compound hardship in our communities. Organisational experience and evidence can point to the changes required by our political leaders that can best attend to those compounding problems.

Among a number of synergies across sectors, Catholic agency leaders at the meeting expressed concern for the treatment of young people - particularly the dehumanising and denigrating rhetoric used to describe justice involved young people and their behaviour. They emphasised the importance of focus on the support young people and their families need to stay connected with education, communities and a hope-filled future.

With Catholic social and community services alone serving some 300,000 Victorians every year, and Catholic education, health and parishes contributing care, support and connection in many and varied ways for many thousands more, the opportunity to articulate a vision on core areas of social policy that will build up a society where compassion, charity and justice have primacy in policy making is one that should be taken up.

Executive Director of Catholic Social Services Victoria, Josh Lourensz, urged for solidarity across sectors where there is overlapping needs and shared areas of social policy concern. He opened the meeting with a reflection from Pope Paul VI, reading from his encyclical *Populorum Progressio*: "The present state of affairs must be confronted boldly, and its concomitant injustices must be challenged and overcome. Continuing development calls for bold innovations that will work profound changes. The critical state of affairs must be corrected for the better without delay. Everyone must lend a hand to this task, particularly those who can do most by reason of their education, their office, or their authority."

“Part of CSSV’s task this election year is providing the opportunity for everyone to ‘lend a hand to this task’ — to stand with and serve the poor, and be a part of a more just and compassionate society. This will mean engagement with political candidates, incumbent members of parliament and the communities they serve and will vote for or against them, but it will also mean giving space for reflection on what we need to change ourselves, at a community level, an organisational level, and at a personal level, to better be in fidelity to a faith that does justice.”

“This upcoming election can be an invitation to move our thinking outside of our own immediate circumstances, and consider what is necessary to contribute to the good of my neighbour, the creation of neighbours, and what will work best for the common good. As is consistently stressed by Catholic social teachings, these considerations should always be in keeping with a preferential option for the poor.”

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