

“Working for a just Tasmania” 25 Years of Anglicare
by Dr James Boyce launched at St David’s Cathedral,
Hobart on 25 September 2008
Author’s address at the launch.



What will be immediately clear from even a first glance of this history is that it is not a comprehensive history of Anglicare. No history could be this of course. Choices must always be made by the historian, and in a small book like this, which we hope can be consumed in one sitting and with only one pot of tea or a single bottle of red, choice making becomes even more urgent.

And the choice I made was to concentrate on Anglicare’s Christian foundations. While I conveniently knew that this was also central to the concerns of my patron, Bishop Chris, it was also I believed the heart of the matter, and where this history might be of greatest benefit in bridging the sometime disparate everyday world of the wider church and its very grown up and somewhat largish daughter.

And, besides this, we must never forget that Anglicare was founded and exists out of faith. Some of us might wish this was not so, but it is, to use one of the apt clichés of our age, the inconvenient truth.

My interests in this question of what faith might mean for a modern welfare organisation, as Chris knew, is a long term one. As a social worker, Anglicare staff member and occasional visitor to many different pews, I know how fraught this question of Christian faith and church welfare organisations can be, and how easily misunderstood it is.

The last thing I would want for this history however, is for it to be seen to answer this foundation question. Indeed the day this question gets resolved and stops causing passionate disagreement will be the day Anglicare stops being a Christian organization. Church history surely shows that faith can not be tamed without it killing it. Christianity is not simply some value foundation underpinning Anglicare’s good work. It must be something much more uncomfortable and wild and harder to pin down than that.

Nevertheless the essential debate about the relevance of Christian faith to Anglicare must be informed - we need to know what we are disagreeing about if it is to be productive discussion. My hope is that this modest history will provided an additional resource to inform such necessary reflection.

I had two audiences in mind while writing – the first is ordinary Anglicare staff, and there are now so many of these that this might be thought to be this was a very wise marketing move, and the second, is the ordinary, if such a person still exists, Anglican.

The first of these groups, appropriately so, predominantly have no links with the Anglican Church outside of working for Anglicare and probably most wouldn't identify with the expression of faith and church and Christianity expressed by the Anglican church. While for the second, church and faith is presumably and hopefully a central part of our lives.

But the truth is of course there is no such thing as an ordinary staff member or ordinary parishioner, and no one fits neatly into *any* category as all social workers and historians soon learn. The result is that this book, like any other book, will represent varying degrees of sense and nonsense to both these groups of folk, not to mention those who might read it from outside of either of them.

Nevertheless I hope it can help staff see just how valuable and exciting and potentially transformative the faith dimension is and can be for the life of Anglicare, and how it is the Christian faith which paradoxically offers the best defense in the modern context of government contracting regimes to professional values and autonomy, client empowerment and commitment to social justice. To the great credit of Anglicare's board, management and staff, Christianity has not been a conservative influence in Anglicare's history, but has underpinned the Board and managements long term commitment to social justice work, to progressive new services and to challenging government and community attitudes where they marginalize, vilify and exploit disadvantaged Tasmanians. Building on this honourable heritage, I hope this history might help every staff member, from atheist to fundamentalist, to further challenge and critique the organisation in terms of its foundation faith, and to thus push Anglicare to go further, and to continue to question if we are being true to our central values.

And for the history's second audience - those within the wider church - I hope the history will help us to better understand the challenges, constraints and opportunities of Anglicare's own distinctive mission field, the modern welfare state, in which core public funded social welfare services are delivered by Anglicare under strict state contracts.

This mission field is not the same as that of the parish. Anglicare is not a Christian community substitute. If the wider church can understand a little better the context of Anglicare's mission this will I hope reduce irrelevant critique – ie that Anglicare is not behaving like a parish – and allow a more productive focus on the main question – how can Anglicare better express the Christian faith in its own and very particular field of mission. Anglicare very much needs the church to hold it accountable to its mission, but if the church is to do this, it needs to understand the nature of this mission. And given that this mission field directly determines the lives of most disadvantaged Tasmanians, it is surely an important one to understand.

Such awareness will also, I hope, also allow a more honest acknowledgment of the limits of Anglicare. Sometimes I think church welfare agencies elsewhere have done harm to the wider church by pretending to be something other than they are.

The work of everyday community outreach, of community building alongside disadvantaged people should not be exclusively or even largely the work of welfare agencies. Relationships with marginalized people is not specialized or professional work, it is everyone's responsibility. And where church agencies have claimed that they do this work on behalf of the church, and that they have the expertise to do it better, they have inhibited people experiencing the growth and discomfort involved in forming genuine relationships with those very different from ourselves.

This can be potentially very costly because, leaving the Anglicare history aside for a moment, and speaking as a fellow traveler and seeker, I don't think there can be genuine renewal, individual or communal, without these relationships. Surely if one thing is clear from the contested ground of the Gospels it is that God is most clearly found with the outcasts, those who don't fit in, those on the margins of our society, who aren't respected or powerful. We are called to relationship with these folk not to just do good and help them, but to help ourselves, to receive much more than to give. When this occurs in an honest and mutual way, much of what we initially believed about God commonly gets stripped aside and often we are left with very little of the comforting faith we started with. But my reading of the Gospels, is that it will be at this point, that we might be closest to Jesus.

This is never an easy journey for an individual or a group. It requires companions, and the wider Anglican Church in Tasmania is very fortunate indeed to have a companion like Anglicare. It is an extraordinary organisation, and it has been on any measure a remarkable 25 years. I have not done justice to this quarter century of action, but I hope to have at least provided a preface to a story which I am sure has many chapters to come.

In closing I would like to give thanks and pay tribute to all the staff, management and Board of Anglicare, past and present. Anglicare is not a small book, but a lived out daily reality, and hundreds, even thousands of committed people have made and continue to make the organisation. Almost none of your story can be told in words, but this does not for a moment diminish its eternal value.

I want to also say a specific thank you to Chris Jones and Jo Flanagan – who were instrumental in getting this history written, from the initial idea to final production. These two people embody so much of what Anglicare is about and while they are around we can be sure that the fruitful questioning of whether the organisation is being true to its faith foundation will never cease, and Anglicare's long standing call to stand alongside disadvantaged Tasmanians and work for a just Tasmania will continue to be honoured in both truth and in spirit.

Thank you all for coming along tonight and for your support of Anglicare and this history. Here's to the next twenty five years!

DR JAMES BOYCE