



**Catholic Social Services Victoria  
Annual General Meeting**

**All Saints Church Hall, Fitzroy  
11 March 2010  
6.00pm**

**CATHOLIC SOCIAL SERVICES AND ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS:  
WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR GREATER ENGAGEMENT?  
20 minutes**

**Guest Speaker:  
Melissa Brickell, Coordinator, Aboriginal Partnerships**

**MacKillop Family Services**

As a Yorta Yorta Wiradjeri woman I pay my respects by acknowledging the Wurundjeri are the traditional Custodians and First Nations people of this land where we are today.

Thank you Vicki (Walker Clarke) for the very beautiful acknowledgement of Country. For I too need to hear this, as I am not from this Country.

I acknowledge each of you in the room; some I've know for four weeks, some for four years, some for twenty years and someone for forty years.

Let me start with a quote:

"To effectively communicate,  
we must realize that we are all different  
in the way we perceive the world  
and use this understanding  
as a guide to our communication with others."

ANTHONY ROBBINS - AN AMERICAN ADVISOR TO LEADERS



The Australian Government Website of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs; currently has a paper on 'Communicating in a Culturally Appropriate Way', it talks about communication and then culture and combines this to talk about culturally appropriate communications, and at the end tells us that 'we are influenced by culture. It shapes how we see the world, what we value, what we believe in, and how we communicate.'

It got me thinking about communicating here today and wondering if because I'm culturally different to the majority in the room today, will those of you others in the room, therefore, not be influenced by what I have to say. Not that my purpose is to influence. So why would I even speak? Yet, if I want to make a difference in the world around me, the Aboriginal Australian Catholic Social World, is that what I am required to do - communicate my culture appropriately to influence others? Let's back track a little, am I really culturally different to the majority? No; I'm Australian, we're all Australian only different heritages. There we are ... that's the common denominator. So now we have discovered this we can now better understand one another and effectively communicate. We do this all the time. Problem solved boss!

I've been asked to talk about 'opportunities for GREATER engagement' and I've gone off on a tangent talking about communication, sameness, difference, and influence. There is an opportunity here though, for me to speak, and for you to listen. These are 2 aspects of communication that don't really work in isolation, but do, I believe, work better, when we are engaged in purpose.

Let me make clear that I am speaking as an individual for I have no authority to speak as a group or on behalf of my people; that is Aboriginal pedagogy. That is the way that it is. And there is more than one group within the Aboriginal world. And more than one Aboriginal world view within any one group. I can only speak on behalf of any group if elected to do so. That's Australian democracy as well.

I guess that's what we also have in common. Not at all. As a woman, and as an Aboriginal person, and baby boomer to boot, I am accommodating or conforming. I have to adapt all the time. So do Aboriginal people. It has been part of our resilience. The real dichotomy of assimilation. Yet, I'm sure you understand; we all wear masks on occasions; particularly if there is something to be gained.

So how do you, in mission, stand with us, as the conforming other, desiring to support the disadvantaged? The key is to 'stand with us'. Not stand for us. Communicate with us not for us. And, engage with us, not for us. (Unless we ask otherwise.)

Let me suggest that as practice you need to engage the group with purpose. Get together a group of like minded Aboriginal people of influence, who can support the Catholic ethos, and the social services vision; and together, communicate the steps for GREATER engagement.

But what do we mean by greater? Is this the best way to communicate it? Do we mean more? Or what do we want that's better or bigger than before? I guess we know the Aboriginal statistics in this country sit in contrast to the Australian democracy we so often suggest. Aboriginal social and cultural space is always controlled by 'the other' - and Aboriginal mob can say with pride 'as the oldest surviving cultures in the world we are resilient'.

So the GREATER engagement suggests more 'action' to support Aboriginal preservation, and the second of your mission, to support parity.

And, I don't truly know how this can be achieved because in part it's also about attitude ... supporting others to respond 'caringly' to their Aboriginal neighbour. 'Love thy neighbour as thy self.'

We have all been hard at work on social change for a long time now and in over 220 years, the relationships we - Aboriginal and other Australians have - is not enhanced; not to where either side is satisfied.

In talking with Denis (Fitzgerald, Executive Director, CSSV) about the opportunities for Greater engagement it was clear there were many, many questions arising:

- What are the pointers for agencies seeking to work more closely with Aboriginal people?
- What formation do staff need?
- What are the lessons (examples) learnt at MacKillop (MFS)?

- What are my own experiences in trying to deepen awareness and capability of organisations?
- How are Catholic organisations called to respond to the late Pope John Paul II's speech in Alice Springs

And it was also very clear answering would be beyond 20 minutes; so here's a little 'practical toolbox'. [only a sample of]

\* Improve access to services and programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

\*\*\*\*\*Please Note: I do not speak on authority of Torres Strait Islander but have with respect, included them

- Ensure programs and services meet the needs, and nurture the wellbeing, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, youth and families
- Ensure adequate resourcing
- Ensure realistic achievable timeframes
- Develop Aboriginal Action Plans
- Review all existing programs and services; inject the invigoration
- Develop programs aimed at increasing participation and supporting Aboriginal families; particularly programs on well-being, health and therapeutic; as well as practical programs
- Develop projects with a view to capacity building; hand back; sustain
- Move away from using word such as: disadvantaged, vulnerable, marginalised, and dysfunctional, and use proactive descriptors
- Incorporate strength-based approaches

\* Strongly Support the close the gap campaign

- Really focus on achieving better social and economic outcomes
- Help to bring about a parity with other Australians across employment, housing, homelessness, education, health, and family life
- Be proactive in Aboriginal campaigns where possible, such as: Treaty or Formal Agreement, Bill of Rights, Constitutional amendment, Aboriginal political candidacy, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Day, Make Indigenous Poverty History, Pass on the Message Stick ...
  - Invite an Aboriginal person to join your campaigns

\* Develop and implement an Aboriginal Employment Strategy

- Aboriginal unemployment is currently 12.3% compared to the rest of Australia at 5.3% [Australian Bureau of Statistics, March 2010] - help break the cycle of poverty and disengagement from society and from unemployment - employ Aboriginal people
- Set up Aboriginal traineeships and support young peoples transition to work
- Strongly support self-determination and capacity building;
- Consider and value the cultural knowledge expertise when employing
- Ensure pay equity
- Support leadership development and training outside Aboriginal norms

\* Strongly Support the preservation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, customs and identity

- Aboriginal families are resilient, and strong in culture, by the time they access our many programs and services, this remains the case, but at a point where they need support towards independence and standing in the community
- Value and respect Aboriginal cultural norms and customs
- Often highlight the positives in the Aboriginal community
- Value and recognise Aboriginal exemplary contributions to community
- Strongly support the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- Use the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander not Indigenous
- The term Indigenous is acceptable in the international arena

\* Pursue Organisational Cultural Proficiency

- This requires a commitment top down, bottom up, left, right and weaving in and out; in mission, values, governance, management, policy, programs, practice, and support
- Include Aboriginal people in all processes (and steps of/to) to ensure respectful inclusion
- Understand that cultural respect, cultural responsiveness and cultural safety can be achieved through cultural awareness and shared understandings
- Build in Aboriginal awareness into induction, in-service and program structures
- Seek an Aboriginal Board member
- Seek Aboriginal committees - for reporting, monitoring, and initiatives
- Find out about, respect, and follow Aboriginal community - and organisational - protocol

\* Seek Aboriginal relationships and partnerships

- Where they already exist, expand them
- Confront racism; never let a moment pass that is 'not quite right'
- Strongly support changing the way the wider community think about Aboriginal people
- Familiarity with past history enables a better understanding of the issues; and greater possibility of moving forward in relationships
- Build trust in relationships
- Commit to understanding and supporting self-determination
- Education is a high priority for Aboriginal children and families: Develop a mentoring program in partnership with an Aboriginal organisation such as the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Melbourne; to support tutoring of Aboriginal children in Catholic schools
- Encourage Catholic Education for Aboriginal Catholics; Catholic schools are out of reach for many Aboriginal Catholic families; and equitable funding for their children is not available; Develop an Aboriginal scholarship or trust; or donate to the Opening the Doors Foundation (OTDF; Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Melbourne)
- Establish an incentive for excellence award for school or tertiary
- Enter into a research partnership with an Aboriginal organisation/individual
- Visit Aboriginal Communities; introduction is the best but not only method
- Donate volunteers or project time
- Build on the national apology
- Develop mixed networks, move outside the square
- Engage Aboriginal people to be involved with general programs and projects such as work with poverty, refugees, homelessness etcetera; develop their interests and commitments; don't 'put them in a box'
- There is scope to develop partnerships in the area of healing

\* Participate in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community events

- Again, introduction is the best method
- Know the Aboriginal community in which you live and work
- Celebrate major Aboriginal days in your workplaces
- If you need a calendar of events, contact me
- If you need support in being there, contact me

From my own experience there are many of you in the room that know most of this already. But for those that don't hopefully there's been something of interest. And there's always scope for future dialogue.

Also from my experience, I believe it is often the case that a non-Aboriginal person doesn't do anything or say anything for fear of either getting it wrong, or offending, or looking stupid. People are often very uncomfortable in approaching an Aboriginal person, or speaking on an Aboriginal issue and unsure just how to.

You know what you know,  
and you know what you don't know,  
but - you don't know what you don't know.

Some advice - it's best never to assume anything.

One very clear example is on intake, registration, enrolment, or application forms where the identity question asks, are you of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent. This speaks to a bigger issue for workers. Some choose to assume and judge, or guess; others may avoid the question entirely; and some may ask in the awkward or offensive way; and this marks out the rest of any possible interaction.

In my work at MacKillop, and especially in training, I try to ensure workers are informed, and they can become more competent and confident in: approaching, asking a question, or making a statement 'without fear'. This is a huge shift. This can also be done one-to-one providing the communication is very clear. Sometimes I have to spout my position or role to get to that point. That's frustrating but okay. So again, there is difference, but the 'sameness' is that I am a colleague on the 'same side/team'.

Pope Benedict XVI delivered a message of Peace to start this year off; he claimed "if you want to cultivate Peace, Protect Creation". He talked about relationships as a challenge with respect and peace in mind; of both human and environmental relationships. He called for a cultural renewal - a refresher, an energizer. And he talked about intergenerational solidarity. And of course he urged the efforts of individuals, organisations, business and governments.

On the late Pope John Paul II's famous speech in Alice Springs in 2006, this is a great guide to understanding acknowledgment and acceptance of our Aboriginal spirituality, Aboriginal being, and Aboriginal contributions that we make to the Church and Australia. Of course I'm simplifying only to conform to the clock that's ticking at this time.

There is a new resource available on Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families & Organisations; especially modelled for Family Relationships services and out in downloadable PDF and available through SNAICC, so check out their website. It appears to be most useful in providing organisations and workers with information, ideas and guiding principles to develop culturally appropriate services and professional practice that are respectful of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and communities. Similar resources are available from the DHS, and the Cultural Competence, Building Respectful Partnerships one MFS and Berry Street and VACCA worked on is at the printers.

There are many examples from MacKillop but here is a few: For the last 5 years MFS has worked in partnership with the VACCA and Berry Street Victoria on the 'Building Respectful Partnerships' Project. The key aspects were 'the importance of respectful partnerships between mainstream organisation and Aboriginal peoples, and the 'self determination of Aboriginal peoples'. The 3 organisations were engaged for a purpose: the commitment to work together to achieve positive outcomes for Aboriginal children. Interestingly, VACCA refer to the project as 'Building Aboriginal Cultural Competence.' Same communication, different viewpoint, same outcome.

MFS are characterized by strong and committed leadership, and respectful relationships at all levels of the organisation, and recognized the journey to cultural competence requires sustained and committed effort at all levels of an organisation.

And so, MFS is on the way in this journey, and my role is aimed at identifying, strengthening, and supporting staff on this journey.

Another of MacKillop's projects for the last nine years is the annual NAIDOC Week Audit. The audit is part of an ongoing commitment to ensuring that MFS provides the best possible service to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander clients and families. The audit provides a profile of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait

Islander children, young people and families using the services; and assesses the organisation's compliance with policy and practice commitments.

One more practical example is the inclusion of the age old traditional Acknowledgment of Country. MFS has been strong on this for many, many years now at significant events, but now it is often done at less significant meetings; as well as it's written on our business cards, and has been approved for the network signature.

At the Office of the CEO where I am located, we had a lunch time share-meal of soup, with people taking turns to cook. People had made wonderful efforts and really shone in their culinary skills with chicken soup, lentil soup, tomato soup and so on. 'Oh, what would I do I wondered'. So I decided to do Stone Soup and damper. As people, came in they opened the large pot on the stove only to see a large stone in the pot. Looking around them and quietly putting the lid on. Oh yes, they were curious. Lunch time came and they walked into the kitchen in to what could best be described as an outback bush scene, complete with delicious vegetable soup and damper, and the story of the Aboriginal con man.

Well you and I know that these are small things, but as the saying goes, 'from little things big things grow'.

I take this time to say thank you for my invitation to be challenged. We see things differently, you and I know this. And equally, there are many different ways to make a difference to we. You and me, and the 100s of others in social services can 'better' work together - when you and me become we.

I thank you for your preparedness to embrace the challenges and ask you seek the impossible. Like me, I'll know I'm on a parity when, my contributions - complete with Aboriginal language, art, signs, symbols and customs - to the Catholic Church, and Australia generally, are understood and 'joyfully received'. When Aboriginal Studies is compulsory, when Aboriginal language is an elective and when the Prime Minister speaks fluent Aboriginal as he does Mandarin!

Thank YOU for all you do for us, and for others.

Thank You.



*Photo: Melissa Brickell and Julie Edwards, Executive Director of Jesuit Social Services.  
Julie responded to Melissa's talk*