

The Voice

A Quarterly for prophetic and artistic imagination
 Number 26 ISSN 1444-3708 Winter 2010



ANNUAL MEETING TO COMBAT WORK STRESS

Members of the public and friends are invited to the CMN annual meeting, which will include a discussion with Associate Professor Tony LaMontagne on understanding the resistance to accepting work stress as a factor in illness and death.

The AGM will be on Monday 16 August 2010, at 7:30pm at the Network's office, 15 Cromwell Road, South Yarra.

Tony LaMontagne is a distinguished researcher and advocate on public and work health issues. He will provide an informal presentation on the factors that currently resist accepting the research on the links between work stress and a range of physical and mental health illnesses and diseases. CMN is seeking to facilitate a discussion that will strengthen our own engagement with these issues.

Tony is from the McCaughey Centre: VicHealth Centre for the Promotion of Mental Health and Community Wellbeing at Melbourne University's School of Population Health.

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THE VOICE

is published
 by the

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A Proposal For The Church To Engage A More Transformative Ministry In The World Of Work.

Kevin Vaughan responds to the article in the previous issue on ministry at work.

I come from the Catholic tradition and in particular from the inspiration of Joseph Cardijn (Cardinal, 1882-1967). I am not educated in the field of theology so I will not comment on the first part of John Bottomley's paper. My comments will start with the paragraph:

"Supporting church people at their work as the churches front line of mission"

The vocation of lay people in paid employment is the hidden treasure of the churches mission in the world of work. Sadly, for too long the church has looked at lay people as resources for the mission of residential congregations, or Presbytery and Synod committees, rather than empowering its lay people for the mission that they can and do exercise in their working lives."

This statement is a mirror image of the Catholic understanding of the role and work of what we call the Lay Apostolate. This concept has been developed over the past 100 years; it was debated during the Vatican Council 1962-5 and further developed in a synod of bishops in 1988 and finally the issuing of the document, Christifideles Laici, On the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the world. JP11 1988.

In this document the area of lay mission is outlined as:

"their own field of evangelising activity is the vast and complicated world of politics, society and economics, as well as the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media. It also includes other realities which are open to evangelisation, such as human love, the family, the education of children and adolescents, professional work, and suffering."

Joseph Cardijn was a Belgium priest; at age 14 when he completed his primary education he felt a vocation to the priesthood and entered a seminary. On his first holiday home from the

seminary after a few months of study he came across his former school friends who had entered the working world also at 14 yrs. They had become corrupted in the factories and mills where they worked and had given up their faith.

Cardijn dedicated his life to saving the young workers and the working class for Christ. He founded the Young Christian Workers movement in Belgium and over time it became an international organisation operating in 70 countries with over 2 million members.

Cardijn wrote, *"Each young worker, each working girl has a divine destiny and a divine mission, beginning not after death, but from today, in the conditions of their everyday life, where they are the first and immediate apostles of God in their environment and amongst their comrades. This affirmation, which inspired the birth and the belief of the YCW, does not belong to it alone. It is part of the very essence of Christianity and applies to the whole conception of the Christian laity."* Laymen into Action.

Cardijn developed a method of formation of young workers that is also ideal for the formation of adults. That formation was and is based on introducing men and women to an apostolate in their own sphere of life as an individual and in a group.

The basis of this formation is that people meet in small groups on a regular timetable. They study a passage of the Gospel, they reflect on their daily life and environments in a structured method called a systematic inquiry based on the see, judge, and act method of action.

Each week members of the group come together and the subjects they analyse are the various aspects of their lives such as in their family, where they work, their community, in cultural questions, and in the myriad of circumstances people find themselves in. These circumstances are then judged according to the values of the gospel and decisions are made as to the appropriate action to be undertaken on these reported concerns.

The most recent systematic inquiries for adults are, My Community and, Single Fathers, conducted by a Cardijn group in Seaford, Melbourne.

The Cardijn methodology of formation and action does not see lay people as passive listeners, as a

group to be preached to or instructed. This tradition understands itself as being an action based and a missionary body, "missionaries of the interior". The mission is understood as being in parallel with the ordained ministry, not subject to it. All members of the lay faithful are able to participate in this mission; the only prerequisite is that a person be a follower of Christ, all else will come as people come together and develop whatever is needed to carry the mission.

There is a large body of writing on this question which can be sourced through the catholic bookshop in the city and or through the Vatican website. I recommend the two books mentioned below as the starting point for a study of this question.

Christifideles Laici: On the Vocation of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World

John Paul 11, 1988

Layman into Action, Joseph Cardijn, 1963 (Out of print). May be purchased through second hand religious book dealers.

An open letter to Australia's first woman Prime Minister

by Margaret Neith

Hi Julia –
Congratulations! I am pleased that Australia has its first female (and red-head!) Prime Minister, and that you are from the Labor Party.

I was sorry to see Kevin Rudd go, because he started off so well and I do think he has a fundamental "goodness" and had good intentions. But I understand why the Labor Party had to replace him and perhaps it's better to do this quickly rather than a long-drawn out fight which would have been even more humiliating for him. I think your speech was very appropriate and it is good that you are thinking of giving him a place on your front bench - it shows generosity of spirit and an appreciation of your former productive and positive relationship with him.

I am mainly emailing about climate change - please take action NOW. We all want it. It's

one of the reasons that Kevin Rudd became so unpopular so quickly - going back on his word on climate change. Please don't disappoint us. The clock is ticking on this one.

Australia, as a major per capita polluter, needs to set an example. (And what a terrible example is our Victorian state government praising a company for getting a big contract to send processed brown coal to Vietnam!) How ridiculous we human beings are - we are on this planet together - climate change will affect us all, no matter where the pollution comes from.

Work is only one part of life - it can become unhealthy for an individual if it takes over that person's life completely to the exclusion of good relationships and time for rejuvenation.

Also - some unasked-for tips:

- Please don't become loud, personally insulting, and nasty during political debates. It's not acceptable coming from a male or a female. Do please try to raise the level and the tone of Parliamentary debates. This would do so much for our country and would set a good example to all those people who are beginning to think that name calling, shouting, sarcastic, bullying behaviour is acceptable in Australian workplaces. It isn't.
- Parliament (as our most public work-place) has been setting a terrible example to our young workers and business managers. Bullying and stand-over tactics are rife in workplaces. It doesn't have to be like that in Parliament, and you can change that. Please bring back rational and thoughtful debate that deals with issues, debate that can be passionate and heart-felt without being unkind.
- Also, try not to fall into the "hard work can achieve anything" trap. Like Kevin Rudd, you seem to revere "hard work" and mention it often, and no doubt this has stood you in good stead personally. But hard work to the exclusion of anything else is not a good thing for most people, and it can actually be very harmful for some to work until they are so tired and so stressed

that they begin to make bad judgements or actually fall ill physically or mentally. My knowledge of these problems comes from working in an organisation that deals with work-related death and work-related suicide.

Work is only one part of life - it can become unhealthy for an individual if it takes over that person's life completely to the exclusion of good relationships and time for rejuvenation. "Hard work" is not necessarily what makes a good citizen - surely kindness towards others and making a contribution towards a better world for everyone, are just as important if not more so.

- Another point - you would be aware of course that "working families" are only part of the mix of households that make up the Australian population.

There are singles (in increasing numbers), couples with or without children, retirees, shared households, extended families, people who are unable to work because of disability or mental illness - so many different types of households and family configurations. During Kevin Rudd's time in office, many people would have felt that that they were excluded from his concerns because they didn't fit the definition of a "working family".

- In relation to refugees - I don't know how you can overcome Australians' general fear of refugees and the racism in our community - but "getting tough" with refugees only panders to and reinforces these fears. Don't turn to the right on this one. We need a better example from our government.

I have no idea how to combat racism - I have no expertise here - but personally I don't feel that Australia is in any danger from the "boat people" and we certainly can fit into our country the miniscule numbers of people who arrive by boat. Putting refugees into horrible camps in the middle of deserts (and leaving them there

for years) is a terrible way to deal with "ordinary people" who have experienced wars and poverty are looking to Australia for refuge and a better way of life.

- In relation to the war in Afghanistan, I think it is terrible that casualties are rising and rising, and that young Australians are being killed and terribly wounded. (And they will come home and have their lives and their families' lives permanently affected by post-traumatic stress.)

It doesn't seem, after 9 years, that this war is winnable by conventional means. And the population may turn against the allies as civilian casualties rise as they are bound to do with this current "surge". But what would happen if the allies pulled out? The Taliban would take over presumably - and the Taliban has the reputation of being very cruel towards women. This is the main thing that concerns me - the plight of women should the Taliban resume control in that country.

- In terms of the mining tax - people probably still don't realize that the tax was proposed for "super profits" - the name "super tax" actually sounds more like a tax on superannuation. The name of the tax is a large part of the problem I think. It needs to be re-named and presented in a better way - but not through paid TV or print advertising. Perhaps re-naming it could be part of your discussions with the mining companies.

The way to go, I think, is to remind people that Australia's natural resources belong to everyone, not just to a few, and so should the wealth derived from mining.

- In relation to government spending on advertising, I think people are very fed up with the amount of money governments spends on advertising - state and federal governments. It was a good start to cancel the government's mining tax advertisements. People see services like hospitals and education that need improvement, and they see people

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struggling on pensions, and they resent, rightfully in my opinion, "their" tax money being handed over in huge amounts to advertising companies. \$38 million was a breathtakingly awful amount - particularly when the government "cries poor" on things like improving mental health services.

Thanks - I realise you probably won't get to read this but your staff might pass on some of it - and best of luck.

How the national church life survey harms the Uniting Church's vocation and faith

As CMN plans to establish a congregation as part of the agency's life, Director John Bottomley questions the reliance of UCA mission planners on studies of congregational life carried out by the National Church Life Survey.

Introduction

I first became aware of the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) as a minister of the St. George's East St. Kilda Uniting Church in 1991. Our small congregation completed the first survey run by the NCLS. The survey was promoted as a census of the churches and was conducted in the same year as the ABS census.

As a sociologist I was dismayed that the later survey reports appeared to misuse the 'nationwide census of Australian church attendance'. Explanation in the social sciences is a matter for hypothesis testing research derived from a body of theoretical knowledge. But the explanations offered by the NCLS researchers are 'after the fact' or so called ex post facto theorising, a methodological 'no-no in social science'.

So, on their website, a 2004 media release quotes NCLS researcher Dr. Ruth Powell explaining the growth and decline in denominations as due to the 'fact' that "older age profiles of most mainstream denominations mean that older people can no longer attend and they are not being replaced in the same numbers by young attenders. Growth occurs

where denominations are effective in attracting newcomers to church life, while at the same time working to retain teenagers and young adults."

The concept of 'attracting' people to church appears to be a significant theoretical construct in the NCLS reports, but the methodological limit of their survey data is that it can only describe not explain. To assert that the concept of 'attracting' young people explains observed 'patterns' of behaviour is not a conclusion based on rigorous hypothesis testing research. It is only one of many possible 'after the fact' explanations imposed on the data collected for other more descriptive purposes.

If the NCLS was only poor social science, that would have been bad enough for the time and money it has consumed over nearly 20 years. But it actually does harm to the UCA by its subordination of theology to sociology in its analysis and reflection on its survey material. It is the assumption that sociological research provides scientifically derived explanations for how the church's life is best nurtured that does harm to the church's vocation and faith.

This article illustrates how the NCLS does harm to the church's vocation and faith, not so much from its poor sociology but from its subordination of theology to the social sciences.

One consequence of this conceptual narrowing of God's call and grace is that the focus of worship shifts from praise and service of God to the needs of worshippers, who are then labelled 'church attenders'.

From worshippers, to consumers

The NCLS researchers accept the sociological 'givenness' of the world. The fact of the world's reality is portrayed in value neutral terms, so the theological question of the world's fall into sin and evil is subordinate at best, and ignored at worst. This means the bulk of the NCLS interpretation of their survey material reduces the complexity and ambiguity of God's vocation for the church and the importance of God's grace for the faith of Christians. Survey reports reduce what God is doing in church and world to human

behaviour that is observable and measurable by sociological survey methods. One consequence of this conceptual narrowing of God's call and grace is that the focus of worship shifts from praise and service of God to the needs of worshippers, who are then labelled 'church attenders'.

While 'worshippers' may be described theologically as people who have responded to God's call on their lives by coming together to worship God, 'church attenders' appears to be a sociological concept for people who come to an organisation (church) to have certain needs met. The NCLS researchers suggest some denominations are 'more attractive' in meeting the needs of young church attenders, for example in providing 'helpful' styles of music, and contemporary and informal styles of worship. According to the researchers, the challenge this represents for churches 'as a new century commences' is to 'connect' with 'a range of sub-cultures', each with their own special needs.

When theology is made subordinate to sociology, it is hardly surprising that sociological researchers recommend the path for the church's future growth is for the church to be better equipped at understanding culture, and specifically, how the church can better meet the needs of a range of sub-cultures. When worshippers are reduced to church attenders with 'needs', the assumption is that sociological experts are required to analyse the church attenders needs and advise how their needs may be met.

For example, the NCLS researchers say they have determined the needs of younger people; they are more likely to be attracted to churches with contemporary styles of music and informal worship styles. But is this form of research really listening to what God is calling young people to be in their vocation and faith?

One consequence of reducing worshippers to church attenders that can be counted is that they lose both their agency as actors and their relationship with God. This is the same bitter fruit for the church provided by Enlightenment thinkers' idolatry of science in their project to shape the modern world. When Enlightenment thinkers put their trust in objective rational thought to explain the world, they intended to

displace God to the margin of society. They intended to remove belief in God from the public world of work, economics and politics to the private sphere of personal and home life.

So when NCLS researchers reduce people from their identity as worshippers to church attenders for research purposes, they encourage church mission planners to deconstruct the congregation as a community of faith and reconstruct them as individual consumers of church worship services. Church attenders are reconstructed as individual consumers of church services and mission planning begins to shift to elevating worshippers' personal 'need' over their participation in the body of Christ.

Paradoxically, while the researchers discuss what worship means to attenders, their focus on church attenders as consumers marginalises church attenders relationship with God. This is in fulfilment of the Enlightenment thinkers' agenda to elevate the role of science and diminish faith in God as the primary source of truth in human affairs. Thus the NCLS research project has contributed to mission planners making naïve use of social science data that fails to think about what God may be saying to the church through its experience of declining attendance at worship.

The privatisation of faith and the abandonment of the public world of work

The NCLS researchers also accept the sociological 'givenness' of the church. The theological question of the church's identity and purpose is subordinate to the church's sociological relocation to the personal and private realm by Enlightenment thinkers. When their project to elevate science as the source of truth appeared to succeed in relocating God from the public world to the private sphere, Enlightenment thinkers also set the church on a trajectory to the margin of society.

The NCLS also accepts the location of church attendance as an activity in the personal and private realm of society, and the church's separation from paid work in the public sphere. The sociological reality of the separation of residentially based church life from the world of work takes on a fatalistic air in the NCLS reflection on the church's relations with blue-

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collar workers. For example, a NCLS report on blue-collar workers bemoans, "Most Protestant churches have had little success in connecting with blue-collar workers. This is a situation of long standing in Australia and reflects the situation in England during the Industrial Revolution." The researchers appear to have no way of asking what God may be saying to the church or the world about their observations on the church's engagement with workers. The separation is simply a 'long standing' historical fact.

In the 'givenness' of the church as a residentially based organisation within the private sphere of social life, work is a barrier to church attendance. For blue-collar workers, according to NCLS researchers, shift work is a 'constraint' on Sunday church attendance. One response to this 'fact' is for churches to 'provide worship on other days of the week besides Sunday'. Broader issues the NCLS identifies are mostly located in the private sphere of blue-collar workers' experience – "their personal motivations, their beliefs and their perceptions of church".

Rather than discerning God may be calling the church to engage and transform the world of work, the sociological 'givenness' of the church means all that can be imagined is how the church could 'connect' with blue-collar workers in their private lives. The church is encouraged to help workers fit in to both the 'givenness' of church and world.

Suggestions for the church to 'attract' blue collar workers include having church at the pub in workers' leisure time, changing worship to fit in with their non-working time, or by changing workers minds about their motivation, beliefs and perceptions of church.

NCLS researchers suggest that for professional people, work that focuses on technical areas is more likely to be a barrier to church attendance than work that meets the needs of people. NCLS suggests churches can build connection with professional people by forming Christian business groups or mentoring programs. Again, the NCLS researchers locate the church on the margins of working life as a leisure time or personal development activity.

The emphasis on the church's mission as an activity focussed on home and private/personal

life is reinforced by the researchers' suggestion that the church could connect with young parents through activities and events designed for families, not just individuals. This mission strategy appears to be based on the finding that young parents' leisure is more centred on their children, reinforcing the church's focus on the non-work sphere of young parents' lives.

At a time when fewer and fewer employed people attend worship, the NCLS harms the church by reinforcing the UCA's long-standing separation from the world of paid employment.

The sociology of despair

According to NCLS studies in 2001, eight per cent of UCA attenders are aged between 15 and 29 years, compared with 14 per cent of all church attenders who are in this age group. The NCLS suggests an explanation for the under-representation of young adults in church life "is the effect of life stage. ... they are busy establishing careers". It is suggested the disruptive effect of life-style changes disrupts young adults' church attendance. This is the sociology of despair. Such a sociology discerns 'facts' about people's lives and it is then as if there is little, if anything, that can be done to make a difference.

The NCLS use of 'life stages' as a concept to explain the low numbers of young people attending church also assumes that sociological concepts have more explanatory power than theology to interpret the data. The hidden assumption in the NCLS researchers' explanation is that work is by definition separate from church life. They seem to assume the pursuit of a career is automatically incompatible with church life. This assumption is sad testimony to the church's neglect of the vital concept of vocation, and is further evidence of how the NCLS appears to render invisible the theological wisdom of the church.

Conclusion

Today, the UCA would be better served by cutting its ties with the NCLS, and committing the funds to theologically informed research. Ideally, any research facility supported by the UCA would have the capacity to engage theologically with multi-disciplinary and multi-faith perspectives. Such a research commitment may better embody the UCA's vocation and faith, and help the church to better discern what God is saying to the church for the sake of the world.



Fifth Monday Faithful Conversation: 29 November 2010

The focus of 'Fifth Monday Faithful Conversations' is the life questions, faith and doubts of the participants. Each evening kicks off from a focus in the Network's Directions Vision.

The next gathering will be a conversation on what it means to know 'that through Jesus call, we are called to all people'

The evening begins at 6.30 p.m. with a take-in meal from one of our local take-aways, and the conversation will begin around 7.00 p.m. for about an hour and a half. The cost of the meal will be split between participants, so please RSVP your attendance by noon on the day.

The final 5th Monday for 2010 is 29 November.

