

Young People: the test case in

'The lack of discussion about the impact of welfare reform principles introduced by stealth on the young is particularly disturbing.'

Welfare Reform?

The Welfare Reform Review process has caused debate over the concept of mutual obligation and exactly who is obligated to whom. One part of the debate that has barely attracted a whisper of discussion is the impact of processes of mutual obligation, punitive financial sanctions and other strategies on young people, before they are extended to anyone else.

Debate which has taken place over welfare reform has rarely touched on young people, who have been the guinea pigs of these major initiatives in the Coalition's reform agenda over the last four years. The Youth Allowance, Work for the Dole and compulsory courses in literacy and numeracy, "Dole Diaries", and Case Management by Centrelink social workers, have all been trialled on young and extended to older unemployed people in stages. In general the impact of the Youth Allowance, breaching and mutual obligations on young people, have not been critically analysed in the popular media and are all but forgotten in the debate over welfare reform.

However, as an agency providing services to very disadvantaged and vulnerable young people, UnitingCare Burnside has seen the demoralising and at times dehumanising impact of these changes on young people. Programs in the Macarthur region in outer South Western Sydney report an increase in young people with no access to income at all. These are young people who may have had access to the Youth Allowance, New Start or

Young Homeless Allowance, but who have been (often incomprehensibly) breached and lost that income. There is often very little room for appeal, even where the circumstances are mitigating. (Take for example, Joanna's experience below.) The level of effort required for an appeal is often overwhelming for young people struggling to live independently, find work or study as well as deal with experiences such as onset of mental illness, or abuse and neglect.

Joanna

Joanna is a young woman who regards herself as a relatively strong and creative person with positive attributes. Her first psychotic episode occurred in 1999, and she has since experienced bouts of depression. Prior to recently qualifying for a Disability Support Pension, Joanne was in receipt of the Newstart Incapacity Allowance.

Joanna feels uncomfortable being on a pension because of the associated stigma. However, she acknowledges this allows time for her to recover and face the reality of having a mental illness. Her symptoms are not always visible and may not be readily perceived by others.

Joanne's illness affects her choices in life and has lowered her self-confidence. She has difficulty concentrating, lacks motivation, and finds it difficult to set goals.

Prahran Mission, in Melbourne, has provided support to Joanne in several ways. The Mission's Open House Drop In Program provides an effective support network, and she has also begun to attend the Mission's "Second Story Program", participating in activities which has resulted in an increased feeling of productivity.

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Australia

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The Mission of UnitingCare Australia is to voice the Uniting Church's commitment to supporting individuals, families and communities through advocacy and the enhancement of community service provision.

The UnitingCare Circular is published four times annually, as part of the ongoing communication objective of UnitingCare Australia. However, this year, three editions have been published due to the disruption of the Olympics.

Articles from the network are greatly encouraged. For further information or to submit an article for the UnitingCare Circular, please contact the UnitingCare Australia Secretariat.

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Young People and Welfare Reform

The focus of this *Circular* is on our response to the needs of young people in the context of welfare reform and service delivery. The current discussion and conjecture on what should constitute welfare reform must be evaluated in relation to the Uniting Church's articulated essential elements for sound reform as identified in our position paper, *Principles for a Fair and Equitable Social Security System in Australia*. The critical way forward is through a change process that will be of benefit to all Australians.

Our stories from the experience of UnitingCare's work with young people raise concerns about elements of the reform to date which put many of our young people at severe risk of further isolation and entrenched marginalisation. Maria's, Rosita's and Joanna's stories outline the compounding effect of disadvantage, lack of job search, training and placement support, and the effects of new welfare sanctions.

Young people are also called to be participants in the development and implementation of the very policies and practices that effect their lives, but how well do these participatory mechanisms work? Have our roundtable processes for involving young people been broad and inclusive enough? How can we make such consultative processes include young people from a greater diversity of backgrounds and experiences? Nicola's reflections highlight the strength of commitment of young people to be included if given the opportunity, and the importance of their voice being heard and actioned. Rethinking the paradigms for reassessing welfare policy is always difficult. The article on social insurance provides a reflection for rethinking welfare.

It is critical that reform which is about improvement and amending what is wrong, is always informed by the grass roots of service delivery. Thanks to our agencies for providing the judiciousness of their experience to continually inform the way forward.

Libby Davies

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Prior to her illness, Joanna co-managed a coffee shop. However, she is not seeking to return to this work. Her aim is to recover and then undertake study in a new area when she is ready to make significant life decisions. Joanna currently participates in some voluntary work in the Prahran Mission Cafe to give something back to the Mission. She has made one attempt to return to employment but found the experience too stressful.

Joanna's social world also changed as a consequence of her illness. She lost some friends but also made some new ones. She doesn't go out much, which is partly income-related. She enjoys dancing and wants to get back into it when she's ready.

Joanna disagrees with the notion that welfare recipients undertake some form of economic or social participation as part of a mutual obligation. She says that each person needs to be considered individually and not be forced to undertake obligations when unwell. She expresses concern that many people may be discriminated against because they are not doing what's expected of them. Joanna is concerned about lack of choice and being forced to do something that she does not want or is not ready for.

Despite this, the debate on welfare reform has ignored the widespread implementation of the Howard government's welfare reform impact on young people. Somehow, young people have been characterised as deserving of a punitive and unfair system of checks and no balances.

Young people attempting to study, often part time due to other personal issues, are required to search for work, often with the same conditions as people who are not studying at all. Complying with the Centrelink regime of reporting on work seeking is a laborious task that undermines time and energy for studying. Take for example "Maria's" experience.

Maria

Maria is 15 and lives in youth accommodation with support from UnitingCare Burnside. Maria lives alone and is unable to live with her parents because of deep family conflict, and her parents' refusal to have any contact with her. Maria, after leaving school prematurely, is trying to obtain her Year 10 School Certificate through a TAFE Program. She has 10 hours a week of classes and thus is not considered a full time student by Centrelink for the purposes of the Youth Allowance.

As a result, Maria is required to search for 3 jobs per week, attend an employment agency each fortnight and provide evidence of this to Centrelink. Maria lives alone and has to budget, shop and organise her own life in order to be able to attend classes and search for work. She describes the stress as "overwhelming" and feels exhausted and disappointed that she has so much to cope with at her young age. There is also the ever present reality of being breached - for failing to turn up at an interview, failing to submit a form on time, for failing to complete a dole diary correctly and sometimes for reasons unknown to any person.

For Maria, the seriousness of breaching is constantly underlined as she struggles to budget for her living expenses, study needs and personal needs. She is currently paying \$30 per fortnight back to Centrelink out of her benefit for a breach committed because of wrong information supplied to her about her status as a part time student.

Young people have been let down by a public consensus that they are undeserving of a social safety net, and an undisputed popular belief that they are lazy and unwilling to work or study. The lack of discussion about the impact of welfare reform principles introduced by stealth on the young is particularly of concern.

The diversity of experience and needs of young people far outweigh adult perceptions about what the limitations of being young may mean. For those young people whose lives do not adhere to a mainstream sensibility of how a young person's life is lived, the system is ready and willing to punish those differences. In effect it is the poor, marginalised and troubled young people who experience the worst end of welfare reform.

The experience of young people under the new system should be flashing warning signals as both sides of politics embrace the objectives of welfare reform and the punitive style of their implementation. As women parenting on their own and people with disabilities become the target for "welfare reform", the same types of experiences can be expected as social welfare agencies seek to pick up the pieces from the negative outcomes amongst the most vulnerable communities.

As the public discourse accepts in turn each of the planks of the McClure Report on Welfare Reform, *Participation support for a more equitable society*, spare a thought for the young people who have been

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Advocacy

Speaking Out: Young people and our

'Get involved with your local communities, lobby local government and interact within the political system at every opportunity.' **Political Processes**

Two years ago if I had been asked whether I believed that our governments and political parties cared about the opinions and concerns of young Australians, I would have probably said – NO, not really. Yet as I sit here and think about the opportunities and experiences I have had in 1999 and 2000 in political processes, my opinion is somewhat different.

During 1999 I was lucky enough to be one of fifty young Australians selected to be on the Prime Minister's National Youth Roundtable (NYRT). Together with 49 other delegates and all the young people they represented, we discussed issues of health and well-being, education, the environment, lifestyle, national perspectives and employment and training, as well as "hot issues" put forward to us by the government, like reconciliation.

This unique experience presented me with the opportunity to meet a diversity of young people, who were varied in their interests and phenomenal in their achievements and ability to express themselves. On several occasions I met with various Ministers such as Dr Wooldridge, to discuss the issues around young people's health and well-being and what is being done, or actions to address the concerns of the youth. The climax of the roundtable was the presentation of our findings to the Prime

Minister and other interested politicians. I felt I had done something worthwhile and had an opportunity to be heard by a variety of people.

Following this I was nominated and selected to be a part of the National Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, an initiative arising from the previous Homelessness Taskforce. This direct involvement in a political process has taken me on an enormous learning curve and given me a greater understanding of the political system in which I operate and am governed. Our input gained the respect of people who are working daily in prominent roles in such departments as Education, Training and Youth Affairs, and Family and Community Services. After recently reading the draft report of the taskforce's document and recommendations, I feel proud of my part in the discussion, knowing that my voice was heard. I hope that the time and effort I and other young Australians have invested into the roundtable, taskforce and such forums will encourage Australia and its political system to focus in the long term, on the lives and future of ALL young Australians and involve them in the very processes and decisions that directly affect their lives.

I have thoroughly enjoyed and valued this experience, and encourage governments

to continue to provide opportunities for young people to get involved, to offer their views and experiences toward guiding the decision making processes of the future. Young people have a valid and vital role to play.

I feel I have seen the human face of politics, and am encouraged by initiatives which allow young people to play prominent and active roles. There is still work to be done in continuing to challenge the beliefs that young people should be seen and not heard, or to move away from previous tokenistic involvement of young people in political process. My advice to young people is: stand up and be heard! Get involved with your local communities, lobby local government and interact within the political system at every opportunity. Take the time to learn how the system works and where you can make a difference. You already have the knowledge and skills to be active players in an evolving and dynamic world – seize the opportunities and enjoy, learn from and contribute to the experiences before you.

Nicola Haswell, a 1999 Prime Minister's National Youth Roundtable delegate, is currently working with a mental health team on three gambling counselling programs in NSW, TAS & SA, and a mental health triage program for rural and remote areas.

Young People's Participation in the World Forum

**'presentations were greatly strengthened
by the participation of young people...'**

Young people and child welfare professionals from more than 30 countries attended the World Forum 2000 *Children First* Conference in Sydney, July 2000. The Conference covered policy and practice issues in areas as diverse as early intervention, out of home care, child protection, youth at risk, working with indigenous communities, and children affected by armed conflict. Central themes were the participation of young people, and promotion of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The presentations were greatly strengthened by the presence and participation of young people as delegates, presenters, commentators, reporters and entertainers. *WF2000 News*, a brief daily news summary, was produced and distributed by young people, providing a means for conveying young people's observations, criticisms and viewpoints as the Conference progressed.

However, whilst many 'older' delegates clearly valued the input and lively participation of young people, *WF2000 News* reported that a major-

ity (82%) of respondents to a survey of delegates indicated that the views of young people could have been even *better* represented by increasing their representative voice. The World Forum model of participation of young people in issues which impact upon their lives was unquestionably a major step forward, but there is still considerable room for improvement, if young people are to be taken seriously in the decisions and processes which shape the world in which they clearly have a key role.

A Call to Government to Renew its Commitment to Children

The 17th December 2000 will be the tenth anniversary of Australia's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC).

UnitingCare Australia will take the opportunity to renew its call on Government to uphold its obligations under the Convention.

As a signatory to CROC, Australia has critical responsibilities for ensuring the rights of children are enshrined and upheld in legislation, policy and practice.

UnitingCare Australia is concerned that the Australian Government's response to this International Convention has been insufficient, and calls for the establishment of a national independent Commissioner for Children as a first step in renewing Australia's commitment to children.

UnitingCare National Launch

The new national profile for Uniting Church community service agencies was officially launched at the Uniting Church's National Assembly in July 2000.

UnitingCare represents over 400 agencies forming a national network of caring services which interact with the lives of approximately 1 million Australians each year. The network gives expression to a collective vision for the Church's community service activities and informs UnitingCare's advocacy voice.

Rev. Prof. James Haire, new President of the UCA said at the launch, "The Uniting Church's commitment to community services and social justice has been strong and pervasive for many years. However, to a large extent, the breadth of that commitment has been something of an unsung song. With a common identity finally uniting those diverse and widely dispersed programs of support, the 'song' is finally loud and clear."

The official National Launch of UnitingCare is being complemented by launches organised by each of the Synods.

***Libby Davies presenting
UnitingCare to the National
Assembly in Adelaide.***



Communication

Bridging the Gap...

Young people and isolated service delivery

"A place to call home!" That is the title of the Frontier Services Student Group Homes' brochure. The question is how is this achieved? More importantly why would you want to achieve this?

Throughout Australia there are many people who live in isolated outback towns, mining communities and rural properties. These people are not just single people out to make money, but whole families "doing it hard on the land". At some stage the decision-makers in these families have come to a point where they look into the question of schooling for the children. What alternatives do they have? How will this be funded?

School of distance education provides an excellent service for the children whilst they are able to stay at home for their education. Once the family feels the need for a broader education for a particular child they are forced to look outside the family environment. Boarding options are then considered.

Frontier Services' first student group homes were opened in Atherton in 1985, followed by Charleville and Mt Isa. For the first time, people of the outback were able to look into a more local and cost effective alternative to boarding school.

A half to a dozen students may board in these large "family" homes, with specialist supervision and care from dedicated house parents. Children are able to

attend school in town, living in a home-away-from-home atmosphere which fosters opportunities for academic and social learning.

Student group home costs, including general running and staffing costs, are met through student fees (up to \$1200 per term), Uniting Church grants and donations from the wider community. Some government assistance is also available, through the Student Hostel Support Scheme, Isolated Children's Allowance, Abstudy and Austudy.

Communication is a huge factor in the successful transition of any students to this arrangement. The group home manager is cognisant of the need to maintain open, ongoing communication with the child's family. Effective communication between the relevant government services and the outback community is also critical – for example keeping the outback community up to date about schooling options and the types and levels of assistance available.

Moving from an isolated pastoral situation or small mining community to a regional town can be an anxious time for anyone. It's a time of change. There are new things to see and friendships to make. Most of all there is the adjustment to new school and study patterns.

One student who has been living at the student group



Family portraits help to build a family atmosphere - Nov '99.

home from his first year of high school is now, five years further, about to complete his final year. He comes from an isolated community where he lived with his grandparents. They sought a place which would provide security, care, and a home-like atmosphere for their grandson. They chose a student group home.

Grandma says her grandson "has been very happy in the home style environment. We have always been able to contact the house about any problems and we haven't had any worries about our grandson or his safety. It means a lot to people living in the outback to know that their kids are safe and happy in a very friendly environment".

The grandson has his own view - "Living at a student group home helps you get used to living away from home so when you leave school it is a lot easier. Being able to go to a public school has given me a lot more freedom in my schooling. I receive some financial support from the government via the Isolated Children's Allowance. My grandparents provide the rest of the financial support as well as a lot of emotional support. The house parents also give a lot of support – to me, and to my grandparents as well."

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Rethinking Welfare Support: Revisiting the paradigm

'Australia is in the midst of profound economic and social transformation.

The consequences...require us to re-think and re-configure our approach to social support.'
(McClure Report into Welfare Reform, p.2)

The challenge has been laid down to the community services sector to respond to the calls for mutual obligation in ways which appeal to government and other decision makers, and at the same time enhance the social outcomes for those we seek to support. Currently, social support policy decisions tend to be made in a welfare context. This reliance on good will and charity is leading to failures in the system when these appeals to 'better nature' alone fail.

The idea of how community involvement in and support for social policies could be enhanced was developed as part of a Master of Public Policy research project in 1997. The thesis applied the concepts of insurance economics – which deal with the individual relationships between insurance companies and individual insurers – beyond the individual incentives and industry risks utilised in insurance, to the entire community. This concept of **social insurance** is used here as a conceptual approach, rather than the European 'social insurance fund' for welfare and health services.

With regard to developing and implementing new policy strategies, we are continually confronted with policy options which involve weighing, and trading off, 'risk aversion' by or for the individual, and 'moral hazard' to society. These are

concepts confronted in insurance economics, in terms of the risk relationship between the individual and their insurance company, but it hasn't been applied to society as a whole. We can regard – and evaluate – many social issues such as community services, health and education as social insurance – insurance to protect the whole community. The insurer is the society at large. Policy options and strategies from this perspective position these issues into a broader and more integrated social and political context. Currently, policy options which emerge from interest groups (no matter how 'expert') find it difficult to persuade other interest groups because they are advocated in an adversarial climate in which a negotiated outcome, perhaps acceptable to all, is not sought or even envisaged.

The idea of social insurance could help to break down the adversarial way in which different approaches are currently argued. This could result in an approach (or approaches) which evolves from more genuine community consultations and involvement, and thus a greater sense of inter-sectoral partnership or shared ownership of the resulting policies. This concept provides an effective framework to address the problem of trying to persuade groups whose

relationships tend towards mutual antagonism, of the benefits – to each of them – of cooperation and partnership. Social insurance thus offers a way to bring together the conflicting perspectives in the policy debates, through helping to form effective partnerships among stakeholders, and thus institutionalise community support to help make most – if not all – social policies more effective.

Public sector economics in recent years has gone far beyond the narrow confines of efficiency and productivity, towards helping strengthen the social goals of health and social development. Economics has greatly enhanced our understanding of how societies make choices concerning their use of limited resources. As well as holding the purse strings, economics has become a vital facilitator of better outcomes through improving our understanding of available options.

Applying economic concepts beyond the definitions of efficiency and productivity can help strengthen educational, health and social development. Social insurance utilises the economic concept of public choice to help gain partners and support. Because it uses economic methodology and language, it also enhances cost-benefit analysis and evaluation. (Continued on p.11)

Research and Policy

Reconnect: Dalmar, Wesley Mission Sydney

On December 14th 1998, the Prime Minister announced a commitment to reducing the level of youth homelessness to the tune of \$60m over the following four years. The Prime Minister's Task Force into Youth Homelessness proposed an early intervention program which translated into the Youth Homelessness Pilot Program (YHPP), operating at 26 sites nationally. Through a commitment to Action Research and continuous improvement, the YHPP directed the form of the National strategy now known as *Reconnect*, soon to be operating across 100 sites nationally.

The objective of these *Reconnect* programs is to "improve the level of engagement of homeless young people or those at risk of homelessness with family, work, education, training, and the community". At the heart of *Reconnect* service delivery is the use of family focussed early intervention strategies to achieve family reconciliation.

One such *Reconnect* program, Wesley Dalmar's *Reaching Out*, operates in Sydney's west, servicing the areas of Penrith, Blue Mountains and the Hawkesbury. Launched in March 2000, *Reaching Out* has chosen to pursue a therapeutic approach in addressing the increasing levels of youth homelessness in our society. In essence *Reaching Out* is a mobile counselling service, providing assistance to families who are experiencing conflict and communication difficulties,

while at the same time able to assist practically or financially if necessary. *Reconnect* programs are focussed on those young people who are either at home or who have not been out of home for more than a few months. Another positive strategy has been to take a more informal approach to therapy, commonly meeting with young people and their families at schools, parks, and in their own home.

In working with families in conflict, *Reaching Out* has found a benefit in addressing both immediate and underlying issues. This is done in the contexts of both the family as a "system", where unhealthy patterns of relating and communication difficulties are addressed, as well as working through individual issues such as depression, low self-esteem or anger management. Building on strengths is key to this work. *Reconnect* is an innovative program that adopts a holistic approach addressing family break-

down that leads to early home leaving. In the few months that *Reaching Out* has been operating, there have been many families who have dealt positively with conflict and communication issues, however there have also been some families where communication has broken down completely. For those who do not benefit from counselling, other options need to be available including more community housing and resources for young people who are homeless and those who have few connections in their lives.

Robert Boardman, Coordinator of Reaching Out, Dalmar, Wesley Mission Sydney.

Reconnect - Australia Wide UnitingCare currently provides Reconnect programs in SA (Adelaide Central Mission and Port Pirie Central Mission), NSW (Wesley Dalmar, Wesley Mission and UnitingCare Burnside) and Victoria (UnitingCare Connections and Kildonan Child and Family Services). Contact the UnitingCare Australia Secretariat for more information.

Burnside - Youth Allowance Research Project

UnitingCare Burnside has commenced a social research project into the impact of the Youth Allowance on its clients. The introduction of the Youth Allowance in July 1998 brought changes to the way that eligibility for government benefits is determined and how payments are administered. The UnitingCare Burnside study explores the social and psychological impacts of the youth allowance on young unemployed people and their families. It also looks at how young people perceive their relationship with Centrelink. The purpose of the research is to examine what implementation issues may exist for agency clients as the Youth Allowance is applied in practice.

The research combines semi structured interviews and qualitative measures with young people, their parents (where this is possible) and UnitingCare Burnside workers. The sample is drawn from three UnitingCare Burnside locations: two urban and one rural. The study commenced in July 2000 and at this stage the majority of interviews have been completed. Analysis of the data will begin in the near future. The final research report should be available by April 2001. Inquiries regarding the research should be directed to Mr Robert Urquhart, Principal Research Officer, on phone (02) 9768 6876 or e-mail urquhart@burnside.org.au

Youth Homelessness Support :

**'When Reconnect...
does not connect'**

Parramatta Mission

The government has to be applauded for the allocation of funding to youth early intervention programmes. Any attempt to rebuild broken relationships and to bring families together must be a good thing. Refuge figures tell us that the incidences of young people leaving home have never been as high.

We do however have to be careful that we do not see the allocation of funding to reunite families as the sole answer to a single problem. What of the situations when reconnection is unwanted and impossible to achieve? A few cases recently within our own youth services have prompted us to look at how situations could have been managed differently.

There are many reasons why family reconnection may be impossible. Sexual, physical or mental abuse immediately come to mind as reasons. In a recent case, a young girl's father had remarried after a long period of being single and the new wife rejected the young person. The new person in the relationship saw the child as a rival for her husband's affection and the father was lost in the magic of a new relationship. The child is forced to become an adult very quickly, an adult who is an imposition, who gets a strong message that she is not wanted or welcome, and who 'hangs around' where she is not welcome.

The family history has a bearing on whether reconnection is possible or desirable. A father with a drinking problem and who has attempted suicide is difficult for a young person to deal with. When that Father is also an authority figure demanding the child be obedient and compliant at all times in an attempt to cope, a lot of responsibility is placed on a child.

The father states that because the child rejects his authority she must be on drugs and that she is uncontrollable. The teacher at school agrees that the child is uncontrollable because she does not do homework and she bosses the other kids around. Is the possibility that the father has a problem and the child is reacting to the family environment taken into consideration?

The child in the refuge is a model of good manners and acceptable social behaviour and is adamant that she will not return home. The father states that the family want her back but she will have to "do what she is told" and that what he does is none of her business. After all "I am the parent and she is the child". What would the outcome for that family have been if early intervention had occurred in relation to the father's drinking problem, his parenting skills and his sense of responsibility to his child?

Is the *Reconnect* program coming too late? Department of Community Services officers, welfare professionals, school teachers, counsellors and concerned adults need resources to address the *core* of the problem, not just its symptoms, and recognise that behavioural problems are learned reactions to broader issues.

Greater emphasis should be placed on support groups and mentoring programs *before* family issues explode irretrievably. Alcohol and drug related '12 step' programs offer support and sponsorship to those who wish to take a different road – family relationship issues could be approached in a similar way, with the offer of support, encouragement and mentoring from a very early stage so that families do not reach that crisis point.

Young people who do not respond to *Reconnect* intervention will always have other options. Group homes, independent living and the streets are all options that are chosen at different times. How much better if society could support the family in their parenting role, and children did not have to grow up too soon.
*Rob McLean, Care Services
Manager, Parramatta Mission,
Sydney.*

Counselling from a Framework of Faith...

**'Acceptance is the key...'
at Lifeline Western Sydney.**

How does an activity of a Church parish mission offer Christian love and hope to young people whose depth of despair includes a rejection of Christian values, but whose same desperation sees them seeking unconditional love and acceptance? How can staff, mindful that they must not overtly express their Christian faith or espouse a particular ethos, convey the essence of that ethos, unconditional love and acceptance, and still uphold the requirements of the organisation and its funding body?

These questions challenge the philosophy of care of the telephone counsellors working for Lifeline Western Sydney. "The immediate response of telephone counsellors has to be to simply 'sit' with the people who are phoning in," says Jenny Fitzgerald, Manager of Lifeline Western Sydney. "Acceptance is the key. True Christian attitudes such as love, acceptance and non-judgmental listening and concern can be conveyed without an overlay of overt Christianity. Many young people who phone in are in a process of rejecting the values and beliefs of their parents, and at the same time, are shouldering considerable guilt for the situations in which they currently find themselves. It would be harmful and very close-minded to try to force particular values onto these young people."

Staff are encouraged to consider their counselling

service to people in need as one of "loving with the love of God". Conveying the spirit of that love means that attitude and openness are all important. What if people phoning in want to pray? Staff have at their fingertips simple prayers which can cover all possibilities, and which are non-threatening in terms of a particular image of God. What if people don't want to pray, or hear any "religious words", but seem to be crying out for words of reassurance and acceptance, the words of love? With discernment and sensitivity, staff are able to connect the person with a general sense of (God's) love and compassion, without attempting to either shape or negate the person's own beliefs or values.

Lifeline Western Sydney is an activity of Parramatta Mission, a church congregation and community service mission of the Uniting Church. Lifeline counsellors are able to connect clients with other caring activities of the Mission – its youth services, homelessness support, "leisure club" for people with mental illness, and supported accommodation, including refuges. Connections with the spiritual nurture role of the church are, of course, also options for interested clients. Whilst Christian affiliation is not a prerequisite for Lifeline counsellors, all are encouraged to be open to the client in a spirit of love, and acceptance, and wisdom – which might or might not be understood to emanate from an omniscient God.

*Jenny Fitzgerald, Lifeline,
Western Sydney,
Sue Leppert, UnitingCare
Australia*

A Theology of Hope for Outreach Ministry

Theology underlying ministry offered by deacons, or indeed any ministry at the "cutting edge" of society, is based on the model of God incarnate in the life and witness of Jesus himself. Jesus loved people who were alienated, marginalised, broken, and hurting, and he loved sinners. Their encounter with him challenged them to reassess their lives. His love was not conditional on them mending their ways. His followers too should stand behind those in need, even when their need appears to be a result of their own decisions.

Jesus saw that many of the structures of religion and society were dehumanising and alienating and he radically challenged those structures by showing a different way.

I see many of our structures today in much the same way. When human need and contact becomes bureaucratized it becomes dehumanising, when structures become large they become impersonal, yet this is the way of the world today. Too often however, the church wants to dance to the tune of the world, not to challenge that way by showing the way of the gospel. If in outreach ministry we are on about proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, we need to live it out. *(Con't over page)*

If however we are on about welfare distribution and service provision along the lines of the way of the world, then let us name it as such and do just that, and do it well. But let us be clear what it is we are doing.

Our ministry is to live out the gospel message of offering faith, hope and love on a personal basis as demonstrated by acceptance and friendship of those who choose to connect with us. Incorporated in this are practical out workings such as assistance with housing, food, counselling and support in times of crisis such as hospitalisation and court appearances. The offering of faith, hope and love generates a movement to wholeness for people who are often very broken. The issue of hope is essential for people who often see no hope for the future, no hope for change, no hope of breaking the cycles and addictions which hold them captive.

If we can offer nothing else in outreach ministry at the cutting edge, we are one of the few sources that can offer hope. We offer the hope of the message of the Gospel based on the inclusive message of the life of Jesus who came to show God's love, grace, acceptance and forgiveness, and especially show it to people who are marginalised. We endeavour to be a source of love and hope in a sea of isolation and hopelessness.

Rev (Deacon) Graham Morris is in placement at South Port Parks Parish Mission in South Melbourne and operates a drop-in centre where he ministers with people with addiction, predominantly heroin addicts, and people with psychiatric illness.

The Arts

Contemporary Culture and the Mission of the Local Church

A published collection of articles edited by Rod Pattenden which provide a perspective on the possible value of the arts for the mission of the local church.

The collection includes outreach into welfare and justice contexts, community development and cultural celebrations of local communities.

Copies are now available for \$5 each by contacting the Paddington Uniting Church, PO Box 379 Paddington, NSW, 2021.

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On the other hand, community service advocates are struggling with increasing pressure to account for expenditure in terms which public policy makers accept.

The concept of social insurance overcomes this difficulty by providing an approach which *enhances* current social policy frameworks with an economic framework. Social insurance gives us the opportunity to develop and implement effective public policies and programs in the language of mainstream public policy decision-makers: economics.

It gives us the vehicle to build more effective partnerships, bridging many of the disciplinary, bureaucratic, jurisdictional and political chasms that currently divide and prevent us from achieving social goals. The resulting community empowerment will make easier the job of developing more effective social development strategies and advantage the whole community. Perhaps more importantly, if public policy strategies are

Coming Out Alive

A publication affirming perspectives on homosexuality, justice and the Church. Articles are written by Justice Michael Kirby, Dorothy McRae-McMahon, Robert Stringer and Rod Pattenden, as well as stories and resources which highlight the place of gay and lesbian people in the life of the Church.

Copies are available for \$5 each from the Paddington Uniting Church, PO Box 379, Paddington, NSW, 2021.

developed, justified, and explained as programs of social insurance, economists will also find the social need for programs of social support more difficult to ignore or reject. In particular, social insurance provides a valuable and positive concept with which to respond to the current political imperatives for 'mutual obligation' in social services policy, while requiring consideration of the needs of welfare recipients. Perhaps ironically, employing economic concepts in social policy should limit the negative social effects on public health of economic theory unhindered by social considerations!

In this way, social policy can become the wellspring for economic policy, rather than the other way around.

The resulting community empowerment will facilitate developing more effective social development strategies for children, youth, families, people with disabilities, the aged, indeed all our clients.

Bruce Shaw, UnitingCare Australia.

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travelling this great social experiment, unheralded and often unheard over the last four years. The following case study from Sunshine Mission in Victoria emphasises the impact of this 'social experiment' on not just young people, but the entire family.

Rosita

Rosita is a middle aged woman who lives in the West of Melbourne. She accesses financial and emotional support from Sunshine Mission, as well as giving her time as a volunteer. She lives with her eight year old daughter Katrina, and her two older sons who are nineteen and twenty-two. Rosita has a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia, the symptoms of which vary in their severity and manageability. The anti-psychotic medication Rosita is prescribed affects her weight, which she finds embarrassing.

Rosita is living in public housing, for which she is charged 23% of the household's income in rent. The family income includes her Disability Support Pension, a family allowance for Katrina, and her two sons' Youth Allowance. The rent is \$105 per week, with an additional \$10 a week repaying arrears, which means the family pays \$225 per fortnight in rent.

Rosita's relationship with her sons has been strained for a variety of reasons. Her eldest son was removed by Child Protection when he was young, something he remains angry at his mother about, but does not want to address. The sons pay \$40-\$60 a fortnight board 'when they can afford it'. They often do not pay any board at all, though may contribute by buying food. Both boys get intermittent casual work, and they will often contribute more during these times. Rosita is torn between asking her sons to leave because they don't contribute financially, and the resulting damage this will do to her relationship with them. She therefore usually pays all the rent herself, which can be up to half her income. Rosita regularly supplements her income with support from welfare agencies, which compounds her self esteem issues. The situation has worsened since her eldest son has been 'breached' by Centrelink. In the first incident he was breached for not attending an appointment with the employment agency, which reduced his benefit by 18% for 26 weeks. Although he was unwell, he did not have a 'medical certificate', so did not have the basis for appeal. When Sunshine Mission was unable to negotiate with this penalty, he missed two further appointments that were automatically scheduled. For his second offence he received a 24% reduction for twelve months, and for his third a total benefit cut-off for 8 weeks. The Department of Housing would not reduce the rent over these six months, as the breaches are seen as fines, not a change in income. Naturally he did not contribute to the family income over these two months making the financial situation very tight for Rosita and Katrina.

Even though his payment has now been partly restored, he is unable to contribute to the family income as he now has accumulated debts from when he did not have an income.

The punishment to Rosita's son and his entire family seems greatly disproportionate to his lack of compliance. The family has endured greater financial and emotional strain due to the reduction in already tight income. Policies of the Department of Housing, both to generally increase rents, and not to recalculate rent over the 'breach period', mean that it would be impossible for this family to independently manage financially.

None of this changes the fact that little work is available to the young men in this household. Even if they do 'jump through all the hoops' in order to retain their benefit, there is little hope that permanent and full-time work will become available.

However as time goes on the young men feel increasingly isolated and judged by mainstream society, and their behaviour will reflect this. To not comply with Centrelink requirements can reflect a desire to retain some sense of personal independence. It does not seem that Welfare Reform changes 'support' these young men to 'participate' in their community.

This article was written by Karen Bevan, UnitingCare Burnside NSW, Joan Clarke, Prahran Mission Vic and Jessica Goldsworthy, Sunshine Mission Vic.

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"I think the student group home has been better for me than a boarding school or house. The best thing about a student group home is the involvement of everybody in the house with each other."

Frontier Services' student group homes are designed and equipped with young people in mind. All homes are close to quality schools. The home plus the school attracts a diverse array of children, from mining, property and outback community families. Whilst not replacing the family home, it can go a long way towards making it feel 'just like home'.

Mary Quilty, Manager, Frontier Services Student Group Home, Mt. Isa, QLD.