



Annual Report 2005

Social Action Office -
CLRIQ

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Introduction

2005 has been in many ways for the Social Action Office (SAO) a *fallow year*. The review and evaluation of the 2004 Federal Election campaign provided the SAO with the opportunity to stop and take stock. The changing and challenging nature of the political and social climate of Australia, aspects of which impact directly on the role and work of the SAO, presented both the SAO staff and the wider SAO planning and partner group with the opportunity to review how best the SAO needs to respond in this climate.

Ongoing processes were used during the year (further detail on page 4) that have led the SAO to the position of:

- ✚ strongly affirming the essential prophetic role that religious women and men and their partners in mission are called to – both in *announcing* the Good News in our world today, and *denouncing* all that is not life-giving and advocating on behalf of those most disadvantaged and with few choices.
- ✚ acknowledging the current fragmented and uncoordinated nature of the response to the above, particularly at a national level. This has highlighted the underutilised capacity and potential that religious women and men have to influence public policy for the *Common Good*.
- ✚ undertaking research nationally to investigate the possibility of establishing a national network of religious for justice. ACLRI has strongly endorsed this proposal and the research is currently underway and to be completed by Easter 2006.

Alongside the review process that has taken place in 2005 the SAO has continued to provide its high quality materials and services to people, particularly:

- ✚ the fortnightly email bulletin *SAO Bytes* which currently goes to around 700 people
- ✚ an up-to-date website that averages around 30,000 hits a week (hitting a high this year of over 51,000 for the launch of the IR campaign) and which has provided easy access strategies for lobbying
- ✚ participation in issues relating to housing and homelessness particularly through the Churches Focus Group, The Homelessness Taskforce and the Access to Housing Microcredit Fund project at Kyabra Community Association
- ✚ the hosting of the Brisbane visit of Sr Helen Prejean and Sr Marya Grathwohl
- ✚ the southern Queensland coordinating role for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines
- ✚ addressing the education, organising and lobbying issues around the changes to federal legislation regarding work and welfare.

The socio-political climate in which this report is written is disturbing and so is the challenge of the Gospel! It is with grateful hearts though that we find ourselves disturbed enough to respond diligently, courageously, collaboratively and compassionately to this challenge.

It is important to know who is
opposing us, and
where the ideas are coming
from that we run up against.

Marion Maddox

1.0 2005 SAO Structure and Staffing

SAO Reference Group 2005 - The 2005 SAO Reference Group is made up of Mary Franzmann pbvm (CLRIQ liaison with the SAO), Annette Arnold rsj (Director), Deirdre Gardiner rsm, Mr Tony Robertson, Carmel Bennett fmm, Annette Shears pbvm, Mary Wicks osu and Jim Darcy cfc. The group met bi-monthly as a critical dialogue group for the Director. In 2005 the group reviewed the SAO Position Descriptions and made recommendations to CLRIQ regarding the Project Worker position and the replacement of the Director for 2006; the group explored with the Director the proposal to CLRIQ to investigate the possibility of establishing a national network of religious for justice; generally the group supported the Director in leading the SAO.

Staffing 2005 - The SAO has once again seen some staff changes. The year began with Director Annette Arnold rsj, Pauline Coll sgs as Administrative Assistant, Cathy O’Keeffe pbvm as Communications/IT Officer, and Helen Allen as Bookkeeper. Ms Alison Francis was engaged in April-May as a Project Worker and worked on the Landmine Campaign. Pauline Coll finished as Administrative Assistant at the end of July and Helen Allen took on the combined role of Administrative Assistant and Bookkeeper. It was decided that the best way forward with the SAO project work was to engage a permanent person in this role. Ms Angela Ballard began as Project Officer on 1 August.



Helen Allen and Angela Ballard

2.0 2005 SAO Development and Planning



Meeting of Planning Group with Marion Maddox
L to R: Annette Arnold rsj, Mary Tinney rsm, Pauline Coll sgs, Marion Maddox, Jim Darcy cfc and Chris Christensen

In February 2005 following on from the evaluation and review of the 2004 Federal Election campaign, a group of twelve SAO partners met to begin a further exploration of how best the SAO was to go forward. Mary Franzmann pbvm was warmly welcomed to the group as the new liaison person for CLRIQ.

Very serious questions and issues had arisen about *who the SAO was* and *how best to operate* in the socio-political/religious climate of the day. A core group of SAO partners was formed to forward this work: Mary Tinney rsm, Jim Darcy cfc, Pauline Coll sgs, Chris Christensen and Annette

Arnold rsj, the SAO Director. The group was facilitated by Mary Tinney and met right through until July when a larger group of SAO partners gathered to further the process.

The group worked through a Theological Reflection process in order to clarify the issues. The hoped-for outcome of the whole process was that the SAO:

- a) would have a sharper vision and
- b) would have a very clear understanding of *how* best to carry out its work into the future.

The group engaged the services of Ms Marion Maddox who is Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand. Her work had informed the SAO processes since prior to the 2001 Federal Election. Her first book (written while Parliamentary Fellow in 1991) was *God and Country: Religious Dynamics in Australian Federal Politics* and her second book *God Under Howard: The Assault on Australia's Soul* was published in 2005. Marion (herself a Uniting Church person) was very keen to engage in the SAO process and gave very critical feedback to the group.

The gathering that took place in July took the theme of *Taking the SAO Forward in the Current Context* and the content of the gathering focused on:

- ❖ deepening understanding of the current socio, religious, political context of Australia
- ❖ locating the SAO within this context
- ❖ clarifying the SAO future direction – HOW does the SAO operate best in carrying out its vision and goals in this context?
- ❖ clarifying exactly WHAT the SAO does
- ❖ initial forward planning.

The gathering was informed by Marion Maddox's excellent analysis of the current context. Sandie Cornish (former Executive Director of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council) was invited to the Friday evening session of the gathering and gave some critical feedback on her perception of the issues the SAO was facing. As an "outsider" with wide experience in the field, Sandie's feedback was challenging, particularly regarding how SAO could be perceived in the wider community.

The process of the planning session provided the opportunity to refocus and set new directions – particularly at a time when staffing changes were imminent and knowing that funding was secure for another three years.

An important aspect of the founding myth of SAO that people were connected into at the Planning Days was the fact that the SAO was established because there was a need to facilitate collaborative social action across the member congregations of CLRIQ, social action being the "weak" point for many groups. Discussion led the group to see that this was not necessarily how the SAO was currently working which led to a proposal to explore the possibility of a national network of religious for justice. CLRIQ endorsed this proposal and the SAO Director is carrying out this research and will report to the SAO by April 2006. (See Appendices 1 and 2)



Mary Wicks osu, SAO Reference Group member, at the July planning gathering

The work that was done in 2005 about the SAO direction and planning was truly a *refounding moment* which was grasped and entered into. While this work is ongoing and its fruits inform the work of the SAO, planning has been done to set broad directions for 2006. Marlette Black pbvm facilitated a process which resulted in the group identifying the need to work on monitoring the impact of both the industrial relations and welfare to work reforms.

3.0 Housing and Homelessness

The SAO in 2005 continued to be involved in this area; firstly with the ongoing work of the Churches Focus Group project *Finding Beds for Homeless People* which was an initiative of the Brisbane City Council. The Director was part of the core group of people from different churches who facilitated the process of bringing together interested parties to explore models that could be used to address inner-city homelessness in Brisbane and other areas. A *Finding Beds for Homeless People Forum* was held in early May at the Powerhouse. The model originally established by Fr Brian Stoney sj from Cana Services in Sydney was presented along with other models. The preferred model was one that could easily be adapted and people could become involved in at parish level. The SAO worked hard to get some involvement from inner-city Catholic parishes but there was no response to this invitation. St Mary's Micah Projects at South Brisbane and the St Vincent de Paul Society are major players in responding to the issues of inner-city housing and homelessness but it is of concern that no other Catholic parish showed any interest at all. The SAO also invited Catholic Church Insurances to come to the forum in order to be aware of the insurance issues people might face in becoming involved in the Cana Services model being implemented here in Brisbane. No one was available to come on the day.

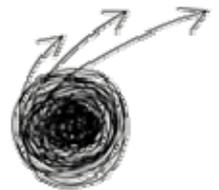
The SAO withdrew from this group after the forum as the work was picked up by those offering service provision at the grassroots level.

The SAO Director is a member of the Brisbane Homelessness Task Force which was instigated in 1999 and currently consists of 26 founding members, community organisations and individuals. The Homelessness Task Force works to improve the options available to homeless people and to reduce homelessness in Brisbane. The current agenda for this task force include:

- ✚ Indigenous homelessness
- ✚ Family homelessness
- ✚ Prisoners re-entering the community
- ✚ Public space and street offences
- ✚ Persons with mental health and intellectual disabilities that are at risk of homelessness or are homeless.

3.1 Primary Homelessness prevention and microcredit

An important and essential aspect of the SAO work is to remain grounded and in touch with the grassroots of the issues the SAO is working on. For many years the SAO has had a connection with Kyabra Community Association at Runcorn (formally the Sunnybank Neighbourhood Centre). In 2005 the Kyabra Community Development Team invited the SAO to engage in dialogue about their *Community Finance Initiative*. In the International Year of Microcredit this was a timely invitation. ***Access to Housing Microcredit Fund*** is a microcredit program targeted specifically at women's accessibility to housing with a specific emphasis on women experiencing domestic violence. Women are able to access a no interest loan for such things as rental bonds, white goods, children's school uniforms, etc. It is these types of loans that can prevent women and children becoming homeless. The aspect of the program that the SAO would focus on was community education as well as some organising and lobbying around the issues. Joint submissions to the Brisbane City Council



One small loan
can change a family.
Several can strengthen
a community.
Thousands can
transform an entire
economy.

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Homelessness Innovations Project and the Zonta Club of Brisbane North Inc for funding for this program were successful. The project was consequently launched by Lord Mayor Campbell Newman in early August. The SAO will have an ongoing role in the education aspect of this project by preparing materials to be used in presenting information to groups to raise awareness of the real issues underlying homelessness and the benefits of the microcredit approach. This will be taken up again in 2006. Working with Kyabra affirms the ongoing need for the SAO to have its policy work grounded in grassroots connections – this was pointed out to the planning group by Sandie Cornish.

4.0 Restorative Justice

In this SAO agenda area in 2005 the SAO was asked by the Sisters of St Joseph and the Franciscan Friars to host the Brisbane visit of Josephite Sister Helen Prejean and Franciscan Sister Marya Grathwohl. Helen Prejean is renowned for her work with people on death row and restorative justice while Marya is a cosmologist and a presenter at Genesis Farm. These two women work together bringing the two strands of restorative justice and eco-justice. The Brisbane visit included a dynamic public address by Helen in City Hall – *Walking Beside the Dead Man Walking*. This event was a sell-out. The following day the two women worked together to facilitate a dialogue with a large group of people at Corpus Christi College, Nundah. Firstly a presentation was given by Marya and this was followed by a public conversation titled *Connecting Justice*. This forum enabled people to make the connections between justice to the disadvantaged and justice to the earth itself.



Sr Helen Prejean (left) and Sr Marya Grathwohl

5.0 International Campaign to Ban Landmines Australian Network

At the end of 2004 the SAO Director was approached by Sr Patricia Pak Poy rsm, the National Coordinator of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, with the request for the SAO to once again take on a southern Queensland coordinating role for the campaign. Coralie Kingston had previously held this position. While not a major role, the SAO put

significant time into the preparation of materials and organising for *Landmine Action Week* in May 2005. Ms Alison Francis was engaged as a Project Worker to carry out the work that needed to be done.



Bombs Begone Forum at Corpus Christi College, July 2005

The work that was done in this area in 2005 was significant in that it re-established an active landmine network in southern Queensland as well as set the scene for further work in 2006. The SAO initiated the concept of an *Odd Sock Day* which was held in landmine action week. This novel idea, with the resources provided by the SAO, raised awareness of the ongoing issues as well as raised funds for the Australian campaign.

As the Youth Landmine Campaign is gaining momentum throughout the world and especially here in Australia the SAO targeted secondary schools right throughout Queensland. After landmine action week itself, schools were invited to participate in a forum held at Corpus Christi College on 29 July to learn about *Bombs Begone*, a project

begun by Victorian secondary schools to raise both awareness of the issues and funds to clear minefields in Cambodia. Two students and one teacher from the Methodist Ladies College in Melbourne came to Brisbane to run the forum. This project is invaluable in that it is *student* driven and run (with a support and oversight role of teachers). Students from Corpus Christi College, St John Fisher College, Mt Alvernia and All Hallows participated in the forum. Follow-up is essential for this project to grow and develop here in Queensland and this has been difficult for the SAO to do but is being addressed for 2006.

6.0 Industrial Relations Reform

As it became clearer that the WorkChoices legislation was going to impact heavily on workers' rights, the SAO undertook research into the proposed changes and began an education and lobbying campaign around the changes.

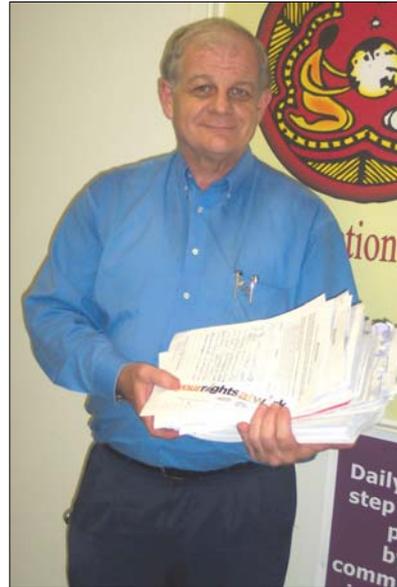
The SAO networked with the Australian Catholic Commission for Employment Relations (ACCER) on this matter. In line with recent SAO campaigns an invitation was extended to SAO partners and an IR Circle of nine people was formed. This group worked with the SAO staff, especially Angela Ballard, the Project Officer, to reflect on the issues and give leadership to the development of campaign materials. Care was taken to collaborate with other major Catholic parties involved in this debate. The campaign was launched online on 18 October. The campaign materials were posted to all Congregation Leaders and the SAO Congregational contact people who were asked to distribute this material to members of their congregations. As SAO partners are scattered right throughout the county the materials were widely distributed – this was evident in a brief analysis of the petitions that were signed.



The SAO prepared a very sound Briefing Paper on the proposed changes as well as a Theological Reflection. Once again the SAO maximised the potential available through the use of the SAO website with both online postcards and an online petition – these were also available in hard copy. Over 5,000 people signed the petition to the Senate which Queensland Senator Claire Moore was asked to table in the Senate prior to the legislation being passed by the Senate.

The SAO received very good media coverage for this campaign with an article on page 4 in *The Courier Mail* as well as items in *CathNews*, *The Catholic Leader* and a request from Margo Kingston's Webdiary to publish the SAO IR material there.

The SAO Planning Group has decided to continue with this campaign into 2006 and beyond. The SAO will monitor the impact the changes will have on people and continue to lobby on these matters.



SAO Reference Group members
 Tony Robertson (left) and Jim Darcy cfc –
 both exhibiting the most remarkable, tireless dedication to social justice...

7.0 Communications and Information Technology

Cathy O’Keeffe pbvm continues to serve the SAO vision and goals with a level of excellence that enables the SAO message to be communicated very effectively via the internet in particular and in print media as well. Each fortnight Cathy formats the SAO email bulletin *SAO Bytes* and sends it out to around 700 people who are registered to receive it. The SAO newsletter *INFORM-A^cTION* is produced four times a year and as internet use increases the number that are sent out in hard copy form is decreasing.

The website is regularly updated and has been very effectively used for both education and lobbying. Although the SAO site is ready for a major overhaul it is still attracting over 2,500 hits a day and they come from all States of Australia and overseas. The most popular pages accessed are Catholic Social Teaching and the ecological material. The “peak hour” for traffic to the site is often after the fortnightly *SAO Bytes* goes out with an average of around 450 people accessing the site within an hour of this bulletin being sent. It is proving that the website is still a major tool for the SAO to use in carrying out its work.

8.0 Other Involvements and Matters

8.1 The 4th Annual Common Wealth for the Common Good Address

This address was given by Mr John Ryan from the Australian Catholic Commission for Employment Relations on 17 October at Marymac Hall, Annerley. The topic of the 2005 address was *The Common Good and Industrial Relations Reform: The Challenge of Distributing Wealth Fairly in Australia*. Sr Anne Manning rgs and Mr Devitt O’Brien (Brisbane YCW) were the two respondents. It was the largest audience to date for this address and no doubt the topic was a strong drawcard. Once again this was an opportunity to network with the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission and provide a Brisbane church-based event for the National Anti-Poverty Week.

8.2 Workshops

The SAO staff are regularly called on to network with others on projects and to give workshops. This year the Director hosted two groups of teachers from Edmund Rice Education giving input on Social Action Ministry and Catholic Social Teaching. Annette also gave workshops at the State Youth Congress of St Vincent de Paul in October. The emphasis of these workshops was the balance between doing works of mercy and taking action to address structural change. The Director was also part of the planning group for the Mission Conference held at Mercy Place on 29 September and led one of the groups in the afternoon session. She was also invited to give an address at St Mary's College, Ipswich for International Women's Day. The theme was *The 100th Anniversary of Women's right to vote in Queensland*.

8.3 Punished Not Protected

For Migrant and Refugee Sunday the SAO joined in the national *Day of Courage* and hosted at Justice Place a viewing of the movie *Punished Not Protected*.

8.4 Justice Place

The number of tenants in Justice Place is at its lowest and the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission has just recently been relocated to the Catholic Centre in Edward Street – this is another of the original tenant groups to close down or move out.

8.5 Fair Earth Fair

The Brisbane Mercy Justice Committee organised this Fair which was held on Saturday 22 October. The Director attended this day and had the SAO eco-justice materials on display.

8.6 Believing Women for a Culture of Peace

The SAO was part of the emergence of this group in 2004, and in 2005 this wonderful group has grown and developed and become an incorporated body. The SAO in supporting this group was able to host the group meeting at Justice Place during 2005.

9.0 Conclusion

In February 1995 I first came to work at Justice Place doing a project for the Centre for Justice and Spirituality. After a year off in 1996 to do my Masters I then came back as Executive Officer of the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, a position I held for four years, the last year of which I also worked part-time at the Social Action Office. This ten year journey of involvement at Justice Place has been one of the most rewarding periods of my life, so it is with a certain sadness that I finish up on 8 December. While many people have come and gone from Justice Place over these ten years there is still a sense of community and solidarity that is a rare gift that I will always treasure.

I wish to acknowledge the support and commitment of CLRIQ during the five years I have been part of the SAO Team. In a time of diminishment for religious congregations, CLRIQ continues to commit resources to the SAO and this is greatly needed in our current context – the prophetic role of religious women and men is urgently needed to both *announce* the Good News and *denounce* all that is not life-giving in our current context. I wish to thank in

particular the support and understanding of Catherine White mfc, President of CLRIQ, and Mary Franzmann pbvm, the CLRIQ liaison person, as well as the SAO Reference Group members – Mary Franzmann pbvm, Jim Darcy cfc, Annette Shears pbvm, Tony Robertson, Dee Gardiner rsm, Mary Wicks osu and Carmel Bennett fmm.

The SAO is served by the staff but the wider group of SAO partners is what *makes* the SAO – it is the commitment, time and energy all given voluntarily by these people that makes the SAO. To all these people my sincere thanks for being able to work on your behalf and with you – you are an inspiration to me and to all those who benefit from your hard work. May we continue to give voice to all that is unjust and sends our planet off balance!

To my colleagues of 2005 – Cathy O’Keeffe, Pauline Coll, Helen Allen, Alison Francis and Angela Ballard – and to Anne O’Farrell (Executive Secretary of CLRIQ), my sincere thanks. Together we do this work.

I leave you with these words which I often reflect and draw inspiration from – they are words of Sr Melinda Roper mm, in the eulogy she gave at the funeral of Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan who were executed in El Salvador on 2 December 1980:

God is calling each of use to a more radical discipleship – one which will not be understood by the powerful of our day. We must be wise as serpents in naming and denouncing the evil which pervades the world. We must be filled with compassion for those for whom suffering from lack of basic necessities has become a way of life. We must be moved to action which clearly identify us with the poor. Above all, let us not be filled with fear. Let us be filled with courage and hope, for ‘in the tender compassion of our God, the dawn shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace’.

Annette Arnold rsj
Director

21 November 2005

Never forget about the option for the poor,
and never forget that grassroots experience
is what keeps you honest.

Marion Maddox

Appendix 1

“Taking the SAO Forward in the Current Context”

Gathering

Justice Place – 8-9 July 2005

SUMMARY PAGE

In the area of the SAO IDENTITY the following areas will be followed up:

1. Need a **planned response** to our context – identify allies, challenges; possibility of a *strategic response manual* – ready response to vitriolic attacks – Know the “enemy” – who’s who out there? – keep track of this – concerted “watch” – response to criticism.
2. Keep track of cultural context – “**our** way of life” as well – what does that mean and where does that stand with the wider context?
3. Need to very clearly communicate the SAO identity – language and images are critical if we want to speak to ALL – to be inclusive – how to keep the vision and theology and yet have a language that speaks clearly??? Will involve re-formatting promotional material – vision/brochure/website.
4. What does SAO partners/membership/constituents mean? Who are they? Processes and issues surrounding this need to be clarified. Who does SAO form alliances with? Target groups for action/partnerships/alliances?
5. The SAO has been and must continue to be prophetic forerunners with social justice issues – the cutting edge role of religious.
6. Agenda to take up – need to clarify – include the current changes to Industrial Relations.
7. Into the future with minimal resources – campaigning – clarify the way of involving people – taking collective action – being strategic.
8. Know and understand the political importance of Queensland in the current Australian situation.
9. Re-tell the story of origin of the SAO – it came out of the need to fill the gap of social action ministry; the SAO has taken initiative, partnerships – has a good proven track record.
10. Keep affirming and working out of the SAO’s basic purpose – *influencing public policy formation (economic, social and environmental) for the common good using CST.*

In the area of the ORGANISATIONAL the following areas will be followed up:

1. Accessing policy analysis when needed
2. Seek educational opportunities for policy development
3. Clarify and work on partners’ role and function
4. Need for a national dialogue around social action ministry – ACLRI? Need to be organised nationally to have an affect in the current context – keep own identity as well
5. Clarify exactly what level of staffing is needed for the future – what is reasonable?
6. Identify deficits in skills – legal, policy advice, think-tanks – rectify and work from there.

Final comments:

1. The need to grow in policy development – be informed by contextual stuff and be more savvy in this area.
2. Rural connection ... difficult when very little response – keep raising awareness/consciousness – take action when able to on rural issues – keep informed.

3. Reframe/rework concept of Sophia Circles ... something on SAO spirituality needs to come back into play.
4. Murri plank – have we lost this?
5. Congregational links with SAO – need to strengthen and use the contact people – congregations need to resource each other – not duplicate ... find out what's going on – SAO a clearinghouse? Connection to UISG and the many UN congregational connections – establish and use the linkages.
6. New Director ... needs to be able to speak on behalf of CLRIQ – religious...

... the many seemingly small, localised actions we take for social justice might feel to us like a drop in the bucket, but each drop is a potential threat to a whole system which benefits some and disadvantages others. If those who currently benefit feel at risk, they respond with a force which may seem entirely disproportionate to the issue or action which triggered it. So, when someone shouts, threatens or bullies you, remember ... it's not about you.

Marion Maddox 2005

Appendix 2

PROPOSAL

Social Action Office proposal regarding the possibility of a National Network of Religious for Justice September 2005

Factors leading to this proposal:

1. Social Action Office Background

The Social Action Office (SAO) is about to enter into its fourteenth year of operation.

- The SAO was established after a careful process of consultation with all religious in Queensland. The initial objective in establishing the SAO was **to facilitate collaborative social action across the member congregations of CLRIQ**. The SAO has had a defined framework of education, lobbying and organising to positively influence public policy. Historically, the weakest aspect of that has been *organising* so that the voice of religious congregations is heard. This requires strategic collaboration and networking – not only within Queensland but nationally and internationally.
- The SAO has a very good profile both in Queensland and nationally and is highly regarded for the quality of its work – particularly its research, networking, participatory processes and campaign strategies. It has a very good website and an effective fortnightly e-bulletin (*SAO Bytes*). Currently there is around 700 people nationally and internationally who are connected to the SAO electronically as well as around 300 who the SAO communicates with through hard copy materials. The SAO website on the average records about 30,000 hits a week.
- The SAO has had over the past 13 years two Directors – Ms Coralie Kingston for the first 10 years and Annette Arnold rsj for the past 3 years. Annette will finish in December 2005 and because of this proposal an *Acting Director* will be employed for 2006.
- The SAO was *downsized* three years ago from a staff of five to a staff of four – a Director (4 days a week), a Project Officer (4 days a week), Administrative Assistant (1 day a week) and Communications/IT Officer (2 days a week which is contributed by the Queensland Presentation Congregation).
- The SAO is financed by CLRIQ through a grant it receives from the Archdiocesan Development Fund. The SAO's financial overheads are very high for such a small organisation (e.g. rent of premises, rent of copier, insurances, phone/internet, subscriptions, resources, computer, printing). The current infrastructure has the capacity to accommodate a greater capacity of work.
- The SAO is now operating in a different political climate and context from that of 1992 when it first became operational. Today, the political climate is distinguished by:

- i. the rise of an Australian version of the American Religious Right which promotes a type of “prosperity gospel”
- ii. the philosophy of the Federal Government that promotes “individual choice” rather than a “common good” philosophy
- iii. the continuous questioning and public debate about the role religious leaders/religious groups have in the political process when they take a prophetic stand for the poor and for social justice
- iv. a “culture war” that is taking place in this country which has at stake the ideas and myths that give meaning to what it means to be an Australian today.

In the current political climate, groups such as SAO cannot ignore these significant shifts in the political climate. They must be strategic, organised and networked if they are to be effective at all in positively influencing public policy for the common good.

Alongside changes in the political climate, there have been changes in the “social justice landscape” of religious congregations. This encompasses the following:

- i. the developing trend of religious congregations strengthening their own social justice groups, agencies and networks with no connection to each other or to SAO – this trend has been happening progressively in Queensland despite the SAO consistently inviting collaboration
- ii. the demise of the national *Forum for Justice* which brought together religious and their partners in mission to focus on social justice issues
- iii. the demise of the ACLRI justice desk/network
- iv. the role/place of *PolMin* as a national group that is not officially connected with the Catholic Church but whose main donors are religious congregations
- v. the growing number of different religious congregations who have a strong focus/commitment to eco-spirituality, sustainability, etc.
- vi. the recent initiative of *Earthsong* in Victoria to establish a national network of religious involved and/or interested in eco-spirituality
- vii. the diminishing resources and personnel of religious congregations, particularly regarding working/giving leadership to social justice desks/groups
- viii. the number of religious congregations who have direct connection with the United Nations through the congregation having NGO status, but this equates with little or no networking with others here in Australia.

Overall, this landscape can be described as “fragmented”, “lacking cohesion” and “lacking a national strategic focus”.

The outstanding question is:

Is the current “social justice landscape” of religious congregations across Australia strategic and effective in the current political climate?

2. Focusing the Question for SAO:

After the 2004 Federal Election Campaign the SAO entered a process of reflection and re-founding. The above issues arose as part of that process and are critical. It is evident from this that any re-founding of the SAO has to be set in this context.

The question for CLRIQ and the SAO is how to address these issues so that the re-founding of the SAO is on a solid, strategic foundation, that is, that the SAO is *not an end in itself* but

rather, a part of a wider, national organisational network, focused and strategic, responding effectively to the current political climate.

A collective, networked approach would maximise the unique opportunity available to religious to influence social and public policy for the sake of those marginalised and with few choices and for the sake of the common good of all.

3. **The Proposal:**

That the SAO carry out a consultation with interested parties across Australia around the following question:

**What interest and commitment would you have
to setting up a national network of religious for justice?**

- a. The focus of this action-research would be to work with any party/ies across Australia to canvass the possibility of establishing an intentional, social action national network of religious congregations. This *could* be linked through ACLRI or CLRIs to breakdown fragmentation and act strategically. Such a network would provide a strategic, coordinated and focused approach to social action ministry – a ministry that would provide research, education and lobbying opportunities, giving voice to selected issues for justice, peace and creation.
- b. The consultation process will begin in the last quarter of 2005 and continue into 2006. The final strategy of this process *could possibly* lead to a gathering of all interested parties who would determine the purpose, nature, functions and structure to sustain and nourish such a network.