

Caritas must remember its justice role

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There was some surprise in Justice and Peace circles recently at the sight of a job advertisement for the post of director of Caritas (Westminster) with a salary of £45,000 to £50,000 per annum.

The post holder will "lead the Caritas work within the diocese with the aim of enabling the Catholic community of Westminster to respond appropriately to those experiencing poverty and social exclusion."

The role, it would seem, is the first step in creating a Caritas network across the country, the equivalent of Cafod on the domestic front. The impetus for this development came from the Pope's visit to the UK when he challenged Catholics to engage in the social responsibility agenda.

Following the challenge, Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN) became the vehicle for this development. The engagement initially was with the Government's Big Society agenda.

Launched in 2003, CSAN came about as a result of the merger of the Catholic Agency for Social Concern (CASC) and the Catholic Child Welfare Council. It has 37 fee-paying members, representing a considerable concentration of expertise in the area of social welfare and social action.

Over the years since its formation, CSAN has done some valuable work, notably on supporting elderly people, and on dementia and social care, but it could never be said to have fulfilled the role of becoming a domestic Cafod.

Under its new chief executive Helen O'Brien the organisation has been much more willing to speak out on matters such as housing, workplace injustice and the criminal justice system.

Now with a separate Caritas organisation developing in Westminster, following on from the earlier developments in Salford Diocese, the whole organisation looks set to spread out across the diocese. There are to be CSAN roadshows going around the diocese, with an event a month over the next couple of years inviting people to get involved. How Caritas then develops will depend on the individual diocese.

Concerns, though, have been raised about the new development, especially from justice and peace activists. They fear that an organisation that they effectively paved the way for, in the case of CASC, now looks set to take over and could sideline their activities.

Resourcing is a key concern, though yet to be proven. Only 12 of the 22 dioceses have paid J&P workers, many of these part-time - including Westminster. Whereas the director of Caritas in Westminster will have an administrator, a fieldworker and a secretary.

Another concern is that the new Caritas organisations will be all about charity and forget justice. There is already much for the existing Caritas members to do in picking up the pieces of a society being hit by the Government's cuts agenda. This is a vital part of social action work.

However, it is as important to question the root injustice of policies hitting the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. It would be wrong to simply become another part of the charitable service sector.

Overall, the developments with Caritas are welcome but only if they work with people like the National Justice and Peace Network rather than sidelining them. How resourcing works out, and whether the Caritas developments at diocesan level are from the grass-roots up rather than in corporate

style top-down, will also be key to the likely success or otherwise of the venture. Justice must also be at the centre of the Caritas calling.

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