

# Anatomy of a closure

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## Introduction

In January 1998 the Diocesan Resource Centre, one of the member libraries of ANZTLA, was closed. It was closed for financial reasons by its parent bodies, the Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide, and the Catholic Education Offices of South Australia. The announcement of the closure profoundly shocked both the staff of the centre and its many patrons. As this is perhaps the worst calamity that can occur to any library, it may be salutary to share our experience with other ANZTLA members.

Jocelyn Morris, in a recent article in the *ANZTLA Newsletter*, identified three categories of theological library in Australia. The Diocesan Resource Centre belongs to the third category: "resource centres (for lay people)". It is one of a network of Australian Catholic resource centres servicing the Catholic school system and/or diocesan communities within the Australian states. In South Australia, which has two Catholic dioceses, there was a single resource centre, servicing both dioceses, providing loans of print and audiovisual material to schools and parishes throughout the state.

What factors contributed to the closure of the resource centre? Funding was obviously an issue, but is it possible to identify any others? Could it be that the resource centre was no longer seen to be providing a unique and essential service? Was its historical significance negligible? Had it become irrelevant in the eyes of the funding bodies? Was it failing to deliver an effective or efficient service? Were alternative means of service delivery seen to be replacing the service which the resource centre offered? The manner in which the centre was closed make it difficult to resolve these issues, but I hope to answer some of these questions directly or indirectly in what follows.

## History of the Resource Centre

Diocesan Resource Centre collections reflect the history of Catholic libraries in South Australia as well as the needs of the communities served. During the 1980s a process of amalgamation of collections brought together the Catholic Education Office Teachers' Resource Centre and several other audiovisual, adult education and liturgy collections to make up the Diocesan Resource Centre. In 1987 there followed the 'symbolic' addition of a core collection from the earlier Central Catholic Library, which for almost fifty years had played an important role in the spiritual and intellectual lives of lay Catholics.

While the Diocesan Resource Centre may not hold a significant collection of rare and valuable historical items, the careful selection of material from earlier collections does provide a bridge for many SA Catholics to their Catholic past. This is important as not a great deal has been written about the history of Catholics in South Australia – apart from Margaret Press's two books. Paul and Margaret McGuire, prominent South Australian, founders of the Central Catholic Library, are figures about whom more could be written. On the other hand the

<sup>1</sup> Morris, Jocelyn "Who is on the Lord's side?": theological libraries on the edge, *ANZTLA Newsletter*, no.33, December 1997. p27.

responsibility of carrying this freight from the past may have contributed to the vulnerability of the resource centre at this time.

### **Resource Centre collections and services**

Historical links aside, the resource centre has for the past ten years provided a modern computerized library services with access to a central, collection of current print and audiovisual resources for Religious Education, theology, scripture, spirituality, church, liturgy, church music, personal development and social and ethical issues. The membership was broad-based and included parishes, primary and secondary schools, teachers, adult students, catechists, priests, religious, families, and individuals both Catholic and non-Catholic.

One question prompted by the closure was: "Are people not using the resource centre?" Declining membership or decreased loans might provide one justification for closing a service. This was not the case at the Diocesan Resource Centre whose membership has grown the 5000. Loans remained constant at around 16,500 per annum. Many people also used the resource centre as a reference service. We could be supplying the source for hymn music, statements on bioethical issues, or a biblical quotation. We were continually attracting new users.

The resource centre was unique, in South Australia at least, for its emphasis on audiovisual material. There is a collection of approximately 1000 video titles<sup>2</sup>. These were pre-booked up to 12 months in advance and sent by post or courier all over the state.

The staff provided annotated catalogues and quarterly newsletter updates to keep patrons informed. This service was important to religious education teachers and catechists, who plan their programs round their bookings. The staff included an RE consultant who could offer advice on the use of suitable material and all staff had a familiarity with the collection, which meant they could advise on content, etc. This services was much appreciated by patrons and came to be used also by university lecturers and students in ministry or presenters in pastoral care courses. Nursing home social workers and chaplains also used videos on ageing and pastoral care of the dying to show to staff.

The development of the collection to reflect what is happening on the local scene – for example the centre supported the push towards basic ecclesial communities in Adelaide – meant that the resource centre was both unique in its concentration of material as well as peculiarly responsive to local need. For these reasons there is no other services which can readily fill the same needs and which has such an intimate understanding of them.

Schools have developed a dependence on the service because they have not built up their own collections or bought material which they know they will use only rarely or seasonally. Parishes generally cannot afford to but these materials. With the price of educational videos often reaching \$100 or more, this is understandable. For searching Catholics and people of other faiths also this service provided a wealth of material to aid their faith journey. (Other Christian churches in South Australia do not have collections of comparable size and breadth.) Doing without the service now is hurting considerably.

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<sup>2</sup> In addition the resource centre holds: 16000 books; 2900 audiovisual items – cassettes, compact discs, music kits, slide kits; 50 journal titles and other newsletters; 500 posters. Special collections include an Aboriginal Studies collection.

The service was certainly labour-intensive by some standards, offering telephone consultations and prebooking of A/V material, but such support was essential for the many users unable to visit the centre personally. Special efforts were made to support teaching and ministry in country areas where resources are often scarce and people are disadvantaged by distance and isolation. However the service required an adequate staffing provision: one librarian, one consultant and one library assistant/secretary. This was generous by comparison with the generally minimalist standards of theological libraries in SA, where one-person libraries are common.

### **The challenge of technology**

One reason quoted for the decision to close the resource centre was the cost of updating and developing technology. In common with other libraries the resource centre was facing the challenge of new technologies. Operating on the Dynix automated library system we were hampered by the necessity of upgrading the system so that networking was possible. Hardware and software are currently obsolete. IT plans which I drew up some years ago looked towards networking and a web presence. As all of this was expensive, I hoped to proceed by stages and planned to make our video catalogue available on the web through the Catholic Education Office network CENET. Discussions and planning with IT staff were proceeding when we were notified of the closure of the resource centre.

Our employer, the Catholic Education Office has pioneered a high tech office environment with access for everyone to email and the internet. However, because of the peculiar arrangements under which the resource centre received all its operational funding from diocesan funds, while it was not a diocesan office and the staff were not diocesan staff, no provision was made in the budgets of either parent body for the upgrading of resource centre technology. The library system has run since 1993 on a PC486 with a PICK operating system. Only because of special lobbying and management of funds have I been able to acquire a separate PC and to be connected by email to the Catholic Education Office. The IT staff there have been very helpful, but the office did not plan to include us in their IT plans. We had to go it alone.

It is here that I think financial considerations intersect with philosophical differences. Why was it so difficult to convince our employer that we had a role in the information technology that they were pioneering? They have been cooperating in the development of EdNA, an Australian educational network on the world wide web. I saw our own role as complimentary and overlapping. The resource centre could provide resources that would be accessed via the internet. We could also assist in accessing information through the net and assessing its usefulness. Through the development of IT, hand in hand with older forms of technology, we might provide a bridge for other users disadvantaged by distance, but still not equipped with all the latest technology. Because the development of religious education material on the web is still in its infancy, the role of the resource centre in providing audiovisual material and promoting production of new material is vital.

### **Different visions of the future**

Our employer had a different vision. The resource centre was to be replaced by the new technology. Our governing bodies were also embarrassed by the need to find a new location for the resource centre, as the excellent ground floor site which we occupied had been promised to the diocese by a paying tenant, a government agency prepared to sign a ten year lease and the offer 'real money' in rent. With the church affected by cuts in interest rates and shrinking contributions from parishioners, this was too tempting an offer to refuse. Finding a suitable site

for the resource centre collections was difficult. Finally it was settled that we would remain in the same building and move to an upper floor. Plans were drawn up, but at the last moment a decision was made not to go ahead with refurbishment, but to close the centre. Behind this decision, I think, may have been a conviction that the resource centre is no longer relevant to faith and education. As my employer said to me on a couple of occasions, 'This is not the way we will be delivering education in the future,' and 'We are making the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century'.

The diocese, we were told, had made a decision not to duplicate services. With the successful amalgamation of three theological libraries in Adelaide, on the joint campus shared by Anglican, Catholic and Uniting Church theological colleges, a separate Catholic service was seen to be an anomaly. Services, it was thought, should be combined or 'outsourced' or another joint venture should be undertaken. As a vision for the future the idea has some distinct attraction, but it is one which will take time to work through.

### **Working party**

Sudden closure of the resource centre necessitated decisions about disposal of the material. In response to overwhelming feedback from users, efforts are now being made to keep the collections together. A working party was set up with a 3 month timeline to establish what needs were being met by the resource centre and in what alternative way service might be delivered. The task in front of the working party is almost insurmountable. Closure was not preceded by a review of services, which might have clarified the issues and established priorities. The working party is to consult and determine needs, explore and cost alternative options and come up with some recommendations before the end of April 1998. Over all the proceedings hangs the spectre of continued closure and loss of the resources to the community.

If evidence were needed of the value of the service and the resources to the community, it has come from round 100 letters, some several pages long, addressed to the working party and the Diocesan authorities. Letters affirmed the need for the service, expressed disappointment over the closure and consternation about where else correspondents might obtain resources and service. There was support for a centralised collection and service as the best means to serve everyone, and concern about the commitment of church authorities to the education of the laity, which is one of the tenets of the Second Vatican Council.

### **Conclusion**

What lessons are to be learnt in all of this? The Diocesan Resource Centre espoused diversity. Was this one factor in its demise? The centre had gone through a process of amalgamation and physical expansion in the eighties. Would an attempt to reduce its collections and functions have streamlined it and made it less unwieldy in the eyes of administrators? Who should have been responsible for this process, given that there were a number of different stakeholders? Was there a lack of will to define essential services, with a consequent 'all or nothing' approach? There was clearly a failure of communication in the whole affair and a lack of shared vision.

Are the libraries which do not have clearly defined populations also at risk? Can it be that, as academic and theological college libraries gain in status and raise their profile, the resource centre has become more vulnerable under the impact of shrinking church budgets, changing technologies and – dare we say it? – the spread of economic rationalism in church circles? Or is what happened here a peculiarly local occurrence? As was said to us, 'Over the years the resource centre has changed its character. This is just one more change.'

The role of resource centres in the Association has perhaps not been fully explored. While they have a more diverse membership base than theological college libraries, they are an index of the health of church communities. If there are flourishing resource centres, this enriches and supports the lay communities from which candidates for ministry emerge and nourishes the life of the church. The death of a resource centre feels like the uprooting of a great tree; its roots go deep in the community and as it is

pulled from the spiritual soil, many small faith enterprises are shaken by its loss and will struggle to survive. Let us hope that out of this closure is born a new enterprise which will indeed help us towards the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## George Knight Library

The Pacific Theological College strives to uphold the good reputation of its programmes, as the most advanced theological training available in the South Pacific islands, by providing a quality theological library in terms of both the collection and the services offered to the students. The use of the library by students from other theological institutions and Bible colleges in and around Suva is testimony to the value of the library collection and the library staff's ability to assist people find the materials they need.

The George Knight Library, named in honour of the college's first principal, was opened in 1972. It now has about 20,000 books and receives about 100 periodical titles. It also has a computer database on Pacific church history, a computer-based index to religious periodical literature, access to the University of the South Pacific Library catalogue via modem, and a growing collection of microfilms, microfiche and videos related to the courses offered by the college. These developments using newer technology have become essential for the research expected from students studying at advanced levels.

The founders of Pacific Theological College intended the Library to provide advanced theological training for Pacific people that was both contextual and comparable to what they would receive elsewhere. The library tries to support these two objectives, but is finding it increasingly difficult because of lack of finance. We are struggling to purchase the new publications required by faculty for background reading for their courses.

We are also unable to build up a collection of relevant material generated by Pacific Islanders themselves (such as theses written at other institutions) and are aware that student research is hampered by a lack of library resources, including reference books and microfilms of historical records.

The library has developed to its present standard because of the contributions of many people throughout its history who have understood the importance of an adequate library for a sound theological education. It continues to rely on the generosity of its supporters.

### Computer Project

The Pacific Theological College has 10 computers available for student use. Networking throughout the College will provide a more efficient system, particularly with increased use of the computerised catalogue, and will reduce costs on printers and provide for email.

The funding for this project has come from NMZ Hamburg, a total of FJ\$43,778.71. Maintenance for the computers will come from the annual budget of the College. Our special thanks goes to the Mission Board in Hamburg and to Wolfgang Kruger for implementing this project as part of the development of PTC.

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