



Father Bill Irwin: The Man, The Vision

By Marc Barylo

It could be said that Father Bill was a rebel: a priest and social worker who combined the best of those two paths to become a catalyst for social action and change.

On August 15, 1961, when he hung up his shingle: “Archdiocese of Edmonton Catholic Charities”, he heralded a new attitude toward social work, a holistic concern for clients’ physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs. He was blessed with an unwavering faith and concern for humanity, bolstered by the very human traits of tenacity, stubbornness, an incisive business sense, and ability to anticipate and meet social needs.

From the beginning, Edmonton Catholic Social Services (CSS) has taken, and maintains, a proactive stance toward helping people of all faiths and cultures, often anticipating social needs and creating programs to meet them even when the decision is unpopular or “socially unacceptable.” This spirit infused and continues to inspire Catholic Social Services.

Its vision is “Dignity, hope and a purpose for people of all faiths and cultures” and its mandate “The enhancement of human well-being in a spirit of truth, justice, freedom, and solidarity”. Both point toward a compassionate vision of the world as described in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25, the foundation upon which Father Bill developed the CSS service philosophy and framework. Jesus enumerates the issues that wear away human dignity: hunger, thirst, sickness, imprisonment and lack of basic material and emotional needs. He stresses the importance of personally responding to each person: “As often as you did it for one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.”

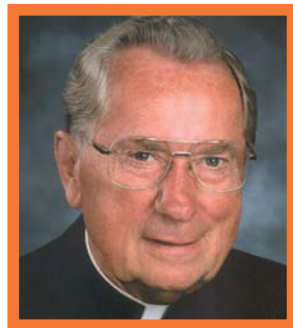
CSS was in response to the city’s rapidly changing landscape and dramatic social transition. Family Counseling, the first service delivered by Father Bill logged nearly 2,000 cases that first year. In conjunction with the Christmas Bureau, CSS engaged in the first Christmas Hamper Drive.

Welcoming “strangers” began early. In 1962, the Agency instituted an Immigration and Settlement Service which provided newcomers with the support needed. CSS was one of the first to sponsor those who could not otherwise immigrate to Canada. In the late 1970s, CSS was a major player in helping the Vietnamese “boat people”.

The Agency’s support for those fleeing violence, war, and fear has continued to grow, welcoming refugees from Afghanistan, Sudan, and Somalia. CSS is cherished by many as the place that first welcomed them to a new life in Edmonton. Florim Tafilaj, current Settlement Counsellor and himself a former CSS client, remembers the upheaval of being a refugee and says of CSS, “In Canada we are their sign of hope, their family where they find support, comfort, love and human touch.” The first years saw rapid expansion. In 1965, CSS opened Marydale, Alberta’s first residence and program for emotionally disturbed children. In 1975, CSS began offering programs to individuals dealing with substance abuse, as well as the first programs for people with developmental disabilities. Over the intervening 48 years, that small, one-man office has grown into Canada’s largest multi-function social service agency offering more than 100 programs, serving 60,000+ clients each year. CSS employs more than 1,200 people who are supported by over 1,900 volunteers.

As Catholic Social Services has grown, it has developed innovative programs: Safe House for sexually-exploited street youth, Elpida programs for those rebuilding their lives after prison, Kairos for people with HIV/AIDS, programs for Temporary Foreign Workers and a range of support for those affected by Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

Over the past 25 years, the Sign of Hope campaign has raised more than \$35 million for Agency programs and provided seed money for many of its undertakings. Each program undertaken over the past five decades is a living testament to the values which fuel CSS. The Sign of Hope campaign was born due to this steadfast adherence to the Agency's core values. When Planned Parenthood joined the United Way, CSS withdrew, and, in order to raise the \$400,000, it had received from the United Way campaign it embarked upon a fundraising campaign of its own. However, CSS is more than programs; for its employees, phrases like "social justice", and "truth" are not idealistic window dressing but a dynamic embodiment of the Catholic social teachings in which the Agency is rooted. The teachings stress inclusivity, dignity, respect for all, and sanctity of life, as well as spiritual health. Clients and employees are supported and encouraged to explore their spirituality, no matter what form it takes or which belief system it may follow. Employees of Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, and Aboriginal backgrounds work together to bring hope to each client. Juma Naikyar, was one of those clients. A former refugee, he is now a Settlement Counsellor with the Agency's Immigration & Settlement Service and experiences this commitment every day. "I am not of the Catholic faith," he says, "but I can proudly say that CSS provides service with a deep sense of integrity."



Father Bill Irwin

Father Bill has been honoured with: Officer of the Order of Canada in 1998; Paul Harris Fellow with the Rotary Foundation of Rotary International; Queen's Commemorative Medal for the 125th Anniversary of Canada; Doctor of Divinity Degree from St. Stephen's College, University of Alberta in 1995; outstanding Citizen of the Year for the City of Edmonton in 1985.

He served on numerous national and international Boards of Directors, including international migration and social services consultant for the United Nations and the Vatican. He was particularly proud of the international development work that Catholic Social Services has done for the last 14 years in the squatter areas of Manila, the Philippines.

Perhaps this is Father Bill's greatest legacy: the wisdom to inspire those around him to put aside differences and work toward a greater good in a Christian spirit that transcends categorization because it lives in the common values which unite all cultures and faiths. Father Bill passed away August 2004. Catholic Social Services has continued to grow and flourish due to this insight and the strength to, in the words of Saint Francis of Assisi, "Witness the Gospel always; if necessary, use words."