

## 1. Director's Report



The year from October 2020/September 2021 has been a year of growth and opportunity for the Queensland Bioethics Centre, thanks to the ongoing support of our funding partners.

The main development has been the arrival of Dr Bridget Pratt, the inaugural Mater Senior Lecturer in Healthcare Ethics. We are very grateful to our partners at Mater for providing significant funding to support this new role that will serve to increase the bioethical capacity in teaching, research, and consultancy in Queensland.

Dr Christi Favor has also joined the centre as Human Research Ethics Specialist. Dr Favor will be developing a new suite of offerings to assist in the formation of Human Research Ethics Committee members, both new and continuing. This is a response to a request from stakeholders and generous support from our partners.

The centre also welcomes a new doctoral candidate, Geetanjali Rogers, who will be conducting research into the role of notions of suffering in debates about assisted suicide and euthanasia (aka Voluntary Assisted Dying or VAD). She will be supervised by myself and co-supervised by Associate Professor Michael Champion in ACU's Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry. Thanks to financial support from ACU, we are in the process of recruiting two more doctoral students who will be offered doctoral stipends to conduct research under the supervision of Dr Pratt.

The year has been dominated by two bioethical issues, VAD and COVID. Regarding VAD, I have advised both Archdiocesan and Catholic Health Australia (CHA) taskforces dealing with the introduction of VAD in Queensland. This included meeting with the Queensland Attorney General as part of a delegation from the Heads of Churches, appearing as a witness before the parliamentary committee, and being part of a parliamentary briefing panel organised by CHA. With Dr Chi Wai Lui and Professor Anita Ho, research into the moral concerns of palliative care workers has been conducted and is currently being prepared for publication.

On the COVID front, the world's attention has turned to vaccination. I have provided advice to several stakeholders. I hosted a webinar on the topic organised by ACU and CHA with Sr Carol Keenan (Pontifical Academy for Life) and Dr Brian Kane (CHAUSA). As ACU representative on the Research Working Group of the Strategic Alliance of Catholic Research Universities (SACRU), I co-authored a working paper to guide Catholic research responses to COVID, titled 'Vulnerability in the Time of COVID-19'. I also helped to organise a series of webinars featuring researchers from ACU and other SACRU members on topics related to the COVID pandemic, including vaccination, populism, and scientific truth. A journal article on the ethics of compulsory vaccination is currently under peer-review. Dr Pratt has published an article on equitable data sharing during pandemics in *BMC Medical Ethics*

In other areas of bioethics, I published an article in the *Medical Journal of Australia* on Non-Invasive Prenatal Testing, with collaborators at Mater and Sullivan Nicolaides, Dr Joseph Thomas and Dr James Harraway. Dr Bridget Pratt has also published a peer-reviewed article on inclusive medical research priority setting in *BMC Medical Ethics*.

I have been appointed by CHA to chair the writing group tasked with revising the 2001 Catholic Health Australia *Code of Ethical Standards for Catholic Health and Aged Care Services in Australia*.

Of ecclesial significance was the publication of the three volumes of *The Churches and Moral Discernment* by the World Council of Churches. These are the product of my work as a Roman Catholic Commissioner on the Faith and Order Commission. The second volume includes a chapter I authored on the Roman Catholic Church's recognition of a civil right to religious freedom. However, the most important contribution, I believe, is the third volume which presents a tool to assist churches to dialogue on issues where there is moral disagreement. I have presented this on a number of occasions including a launch webinar organised by the WCC, to the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC-III), and at the European Academy of Religion. I highly recommend this document.

I was also asked to present as part of a plenary panel at the Australian Catholic Theological Association and Australian Catholic Biblical Association joint session on the themes of the forthcoming Australian Plenary Council. This paper, on what theology can learn from ecology, was well received.

In teaching, thanks to Dr Pratt's arrival, the QBC is expanding the contribution it makes. Dr Pratt is teaching a unit in Healthcare Ethics for ACU and is developing a unit on Digital Health Ethics which will be offered as part of new graduate certificate offerings by ACU. ACU has also had its first enrolments in the Masters in Theological Studies (Bioethics Specialisation), which I helped to develop last year. In addition to two offerings of Catholic Sexual Ethics in the first semester of 2021 that I ran in Brisbane and Adelaide, I have been called upon on a few occasions to provide professional development work in educational and ecclesial contexts, including for the Diocese of Cairns.

Other engagement work includes consultations, workshops and short reports for the Catholic Education Network (CENet), the diocese of Rockhampton, the diocese of Lismore, the diocese of Broken Bay, and St Vincent's Care Services.

I would also like to note with thanks the work and support of Madonna McGahan, who has been on the reference group of the QBC as a representative of the Archbishop since its inception. Madonna has been a great supporter, ally and advocate of the QBC. Madonna has retired from Mater. The new representative of the Archbishop will be Alanna Jacoby, Mater Group Chief of Mission. Welcome, Alanna.

I thank our partners, the Archdiocese of Brisbane, the bishops of Queensland, Mater Group, St Vincent's Health Australia, and Southern Cross Care (QLD) for their ongoing support. Without it, the work we do and the continued growth of the QBC, and with it bioethical capacity at the service of the church and community in Queensland and Australia, would not be possible.

David G. Kirchhoffer  
Brisbane, 30 September 2021