



*Leadership in the Religious Domain,
Leading in Catholic Schools*

*Engaging with generational change and succession
planning*

**Report of the Forum for Directors and Heads of Religious
Education in Catholic School Systems, held in Melbourne, 23-24
August 2005**

Introduction

Changes in Church and parish life and organisation, increasing diversity in school communities, and intensified accountability and compliance arrangements to governments are having significant impacts on the exercise of *leadership in the religious domain* in Catholic schools and school systems.

In August 2005, the Religious Education Committee of the National Catholic Education Commission as part of its strategic charter convened a forum to investigate the practices and issues surrounding leadership in the religious domain in Australia's Catholic schools and school systems. The forum brought together leaders in Catholic school education and was attended by Directors and Heads of Religious Education from diocesan offices, Executive Directors from State and Territory Catholic Education Commissions, members of the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) and Catholic university educators.

In this report of the forum proceedings, the theme of *leadership in the religious domain* is presented in three ways. First, issues and implications of emerging Catholic identity are drawn from the opening address by Fr Richard Lennan entitled *Emerging Ways of Being Authentically Catholic*. These not only involve consideration of what is shaping our present moment in the Church, but also require personal reflection about our faith and openness to the Spirit as well as our understanding and creative appropriation of the living Catholic tradition. From this perspective, the 'person' of the leader is seen as central to matters of Catholic identity and authentic practice.

Second, Fr David Ranson in his address *Forming a New Generation of Leaders for Catholic Schools* highlights leadership in the context of the ecclesial identity of the Catholic school. The emphasis is on the historical and cultural foundations of Australian Catholic schools, changing parish-school relationships and new models of organisation, and implications for the pastoral leadership role of school principals.

The third part of the report presents a synthesis of issues and opportunities identified by diocesan education systems relating to *leadership in the religious domain*. These features are discussed in terms of system priorities and associated areas of policy and program evaluation and development.

The report concludes with an invitation to readers to express interest in following up on matters arising from the forum.

In publishing this report, the Religious Education Committee of the NCEC wishes to thank and honour the contribution of the keynote speakers, session chairs, group leaders, panellists, workshop presenters,

rapporteurs, forum organisers and participants. Their willingness to share their expertise and ideas on the issues, challenges and opportunities associated with leading Catholic schools in these changing times bodes well for the future.

Emerging Ways of Being Authentically Catholic: the Person of The Leader

Fr Richard Lennan

What does it mean to be authentically Catholic? In today's Church and society, ways of being 'authentically' Catholic need to emerge from a personal, informed and creative appropriation of a tradition which is living and nourished by genuine and faithful commentary. As leaders in Catholic education, we have the opportunity and responsibility for expressing faith through our involvement in day to day decisions affecting Catholic schools and school systems and by our creative interpretation of 'what God would want' the future of the Church to be.

To bring this creativity to bear, we must live our faith and exercise leadership in a way that is based on authentic discernment of the tradition and is attuned to the contemporary context. In this respect, the Vatican II concepts of 'aggiornamento' and 'ressourcement' provide useful reference points. 'Aggiornamento' is about being open to what is new, while 'ressourcement' means to re-source, to go again to the source and consider what is at the heart of our faith.

These concepts have application to issues of leadership in Catholic education through:

- *Tradition* that promotes continuity and change
- *Liturgy* that focuses on God and the human, and
- *Authority* that learns as well as teaches.

Leadership in the religious domain should be open to the *aggiornamento* features of changing understandings of tradition, liturgy and authority, as well as to the *ressourcement* foundations which emphasise continuity in tradition, the place of God in liturgy, and the authority of Church structures and teachings. Leaders in Catholic education need to be part of the dialogue around these concepts, and live the tension between the movement of God's spirit transcends all forms of ecclesiastical culture and our experience of God is sacramental. We recognise and respond to the God of Jesus Christ as the Holy Spirit is mediated through sacraments and liturgy, offices and doctrines. Our task is to value our structures, without regarding them as incapable of, or beyond the need for, constant reform and adaptation.

Therefore as leaders, we must continue to discern the direction of the Spirit through openness to Scripture, the signs of the times, and the belief in the action of God in the world today.

Tensions around the concepts of *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement* are shaping our present moment in the Church in various ways. These include

- the emergence of *neo-exclusivism*, and the desire for more personal, less ‘institutional’ forms of Catholic life. The former focuses on ‘reclaiming’ the young, reviving traditional piety, and critiquing the recent past in education, while the latter favours respect for personal convictions and compassion over rules.
- the emergence of ‘movements’ outside of existing structures, which coincide with decline in the identification with the traditional parish.
- the decreasing numbers of ordained ministers has coincided with an evolution of how we understand ‘ministry’
- the damage done by clerical sexual abuse and by the official response to it
- the movement towards reconciliation between churches, resulting in the loss of that element of Catholic identity forged by defining ourselves in opposition to other Christians
- the changing ethnic mix of the Catholic Church in Australia, with different traditions of piety, ways of relating within the Church and expectations of the Church
- the de-centring of Christian faith in society, reflective of increased individualism, the pace and secularity of contemporary life, the changed status of women, the multi-faith world, globalisation, sustainability, and the connection between fundamentalist religion and terrorism.

In recognising these tensions, we need to ask how we might appropriate most fruitfully our heritage of faith and seek ways to live these essential elements today in order that their value might become apparent to others, especially young people. While doing so, we must acknowledge that not everything which expresses the Church’s life in the present will continue in the future, where God’s people will have different needs.

From these bases, criteria of authentic Catholic identity can be discerned, as shown in Figure 1.

Criteria of Authentic Catholic Identity

1. **Identity Centred on God:** open to conversion to the God who is always greater
2. **Christ-ian:** draws on God's self-communication in Jesus - affirms the human (history and 'the neighbour'), and commits to pilgrimage in history
3. **Spirit-ual:** depends on, and discerns, presence of Holy Spirit; receptivity rather than control, but also creativity rather than disengagement
4. **Receptive to 'the other'** in its myriad forms: communion, scripture, liturgy, tradition, authority
5. **Oriented to mission:** at the service of the kingdom in the world
6. **Trust over suspicion,** inclusion over exclusion; the willingness to risk, and to be open to dialogue and to pilgrimage

Figure 1. Criteria of Authentic Catholic Identity

These criteria serve to remind us that the Church and Catholic schools are part of one reality, and that we are connected to something bigger than ourselves. At the heart of our faith is a communion of difference, the God of the Trinity. The Spirit is at the heart of the Tradition and of us. Our Tradition is kept alive by creative and authentic dialogue.

As leaders in the religious domain, we need to be aware of the present shape of our society, recognise that the Spirit is active, develop opportunities (both within and beyond the celebration of the Eucharist) to nurture a shared faith, and promote a shared commitment to service.

In the midst of this, our challenge is to bring creativity to bear, while risking the vulnerability which comes from being open to the new.

[Fr Richard Lennan is a priest of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle and teaches Systematic Theology at the Catholic Institute of Sydney; his most recent book is *Risking the Church: The Challenges of Catholic Faith* (Oxford University Press, 2004)]

Forming a New Generation of Leaders in Catholic Schools

Fr David Ranson

In the field of scholarship in which I am involved, which is spirituality, it is a commonly accepted principals that context provides content. By this is meant that the context in which we discover ourselves fashions the way in which we understand our search for, and experience of God. I raise this principle at the outset since a discussion on the possibilities of leadership must be characterised with similar deference to the lived situation of our context.

The Australian context provides particularly flavoured expressions of leadership. Social history and personality combine within this context to argue for a leadership that is pragmatic, non-speculative and without ostentation. It is therefore not surprising that education, health and welfare – the service industries – have been the primary ecclesiastical expression in Australia – distinct from the cultivation of intellectual and theological forums.

To understand past forms of leadership within the Church in Australia we must reflect on the peculiar relationship of Australians to religious institution which is characterised, I believe, by a constitutive historical ambivalence. I find the journalist Chris McGillion's analysis helpful:

Australia was always more a country of Christians than a Christian country. European settlement was not motivated by some noble cause, far less by any notion that it was part of God's grand design. There is no foundational myth for Australia, let alone a religious one, no equivalent of America's Pilgrim Fathers What religious beliefs were brought out with the first settlers came as personal baggage, an emotional comfort from a world abandoned rather than a spiritual resource for conquering the new frontier.

[Subsequently] religion in Australia became a building project [where] Christianity meant rolling up the shirt sleeves at parish weekend bees rather than imagining the nature of God's Kingdom and bringing it into the here and now (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 April 1998).

While I am no sure that religion has been cocooned in this way, there can be little doubt that the establishment of the Church has been a building project. Buildings were the primary means by which continuing Irish socialisation took place in a hostile environment as a defence against assimilation into the Protestant British establishment. From time to time this was combined with the adversarial intervention of the Irish Catholic bishop, whose style of leadership was modelled on the Celtic tribal

chieftain, “ever willing to engage in controversy on behalf of the Faith and their people” (Campion, 1978).

Against this background, the Australian Catholic school became the primary manifestation of the parish and the principal means of the local ecclesial community to religiously enculturate its young members. The extraordinary historical partnership in the Australian context between parish and school finds itself today however, in a new choreography. This relationship is characterised by

1. The success of the Catholic education system, and the end of sectarian sentiment where Catholic schools are sought by a wide non-churched population.
2. Diminishing parish participation to the point where, to use the provocative term of the Australian Jesuit Michael Kelly, ‘parishes have become schools with a chapel attached’.
3. Decreasing numbers of priests resident in parishes and the implications for the exercise of pastoral leadership within the community.

The new generation of leaders of Australian Catholic schools need to understand the historical formative pressures and this ‘new choreography’, recognising that they are working in *liminal period* where the past is known but is no longer instrumental and where the future is intuited but has yet to be realised with effective agency.

Within this current ‘liminality’ new styles of leadership for the Church in Australia will emerge, and these new styles will have direct implication for the way in which leadership of our schools is imagined. This will mean greater involvement of all the baptised in the life and mission of the Church, not as a stop gap measure but as an appropriate complement to the ministerial priesthood. In short, new forms of pastoral leadership are set to emerge.

For parish-based schools, this implies a new level of responsibility for school leaders. Pastoral responsibility, which has always been a feature of the role, may now need to mature into explicit, and at times formal pastoral leadership beyond the confines of the school.

Both the history of the Australian context, which has yielded such a nexus between local church and school, and the future of this context, which is being fashioned by a new sociological alignment, combine to break open any complacency which might continue to view the new generation of leadership of our schools in simply administrative terms, responsible exclusively for an educational community. School leadership will, more and more, need to be seen as religious leadership. This will demand persons who are deeply conscious not only of their own vocation for leadership but also highly aware of the vocation of the Catholic school

community, and yet, at the same time, of the relative and participative place of the school community in the wider evangelical mission.

The intersection at which we find ourselves challenges us to radically retrieve the significance of the Catholic school within the mission of the Church. From an ecclesial perspective, the school community does not exist only as a vehicle for social education and therefore as something entire in itself. It is rather a foundational means of evangelisation and ultimately, must be accountable to, and evaluated by, this fundamental orientation.

Religious leadership begins with a profound sense of Mission and an understanding that the Mission is of God, and of God alone. It is the Mission that has brought forth the Church into existence. It is the Mission towards which every ecclesial agency, including each school community, must be directed.

All Christian leadership can only be imagined from the context of the mystery from which it takes its origin – the Trinity: “the Divine Community in Missionary tension” as Pope John Paul II defined in *Pastores dabo vobis*, 12.

The Christian leader is therefore servant and bearer of this tension. Christian leadership serves to create and sustain a community, as well as fostering ever widening circles of that community’s relationships. As ministers of the ‘community’, we are to be agents of participation, collaboration and reconciliation forging a unity in the midst, but not at the expense of diversity. As ministers of ‘mission’, we are to be agents of hospitality, impelled to redress isolation, marginalisation and exclusion in whatever context we find ourselves.

However it is expressed, Christian religious leadership finds the test of its authenticity in the way that it reverences and engages the Mission, which is our Triune God.

In regard to how school leadership might concretely be endowed with religious leadership, it would need to happen incrementally, be responsive to local context, and be thoroughly and systematically conceived. However, the very possibility that future leadership of our schools will bear a pastoral responsibility beyond simply the school community should begin to impinge upon longer term succession planning.

This succession planning needs to take into consideration three primary strategies of identification, education and formation. If school leadership is going to assume wider religious leadership then persons need to be identified who, alongside possessing administrative capacity, are also grounded in faith, possessing spiritual maturity, a vocational sensibility and the awareness of ecclesial responsibility. Such persons obviously don’t come ready packaged! Such persons, identified by potential, require

sustained formation and requisite education. Both focussed theological and spiritual formation are required.

Perhaps, more significantly, a different imagination is required. The thought of assuming wider pastoral and community leadership beyond the immediate responsibilities of school leadership, under the umbrella of religious leadership, could only send a chill down many spines unless structural reform of school leadership is considered and implemented. Perhaps these times call for a new designation of school leadership that emerges from the school community, remains integrally linked to the conduct of the school, but which has a freedom beyond such administration.

What I have presented is a possibility to play on the imagination. It is a possibility born of a certain history which has brought us to a particular moment. It is a possibility that challenges us to no longer see school leadership 'how it has been' as the only way 'it could be.'

[Fr David Ranson is a priest of the Diocese of Broken Bay, lecturing in Spirituality and Pastoral Theology at the Catholic Institute of Sydney. He is the author of *Across the Great Divide – Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today* (St. Pauls Publications 2002)]

Issues and Opportunities for *Leadership in the Religious Domain*

In preparation for the conference, State and Territory commissions and diocesan offices were invited to identify up to five significant issues with associated opportunities and strategies for addressing those issues.

Responses from commissions and dioceses were presented for participants' consideration during the conference, in the form of posters. The information from the posters was analysed and various themes were identified. These are shown in Figure 2.

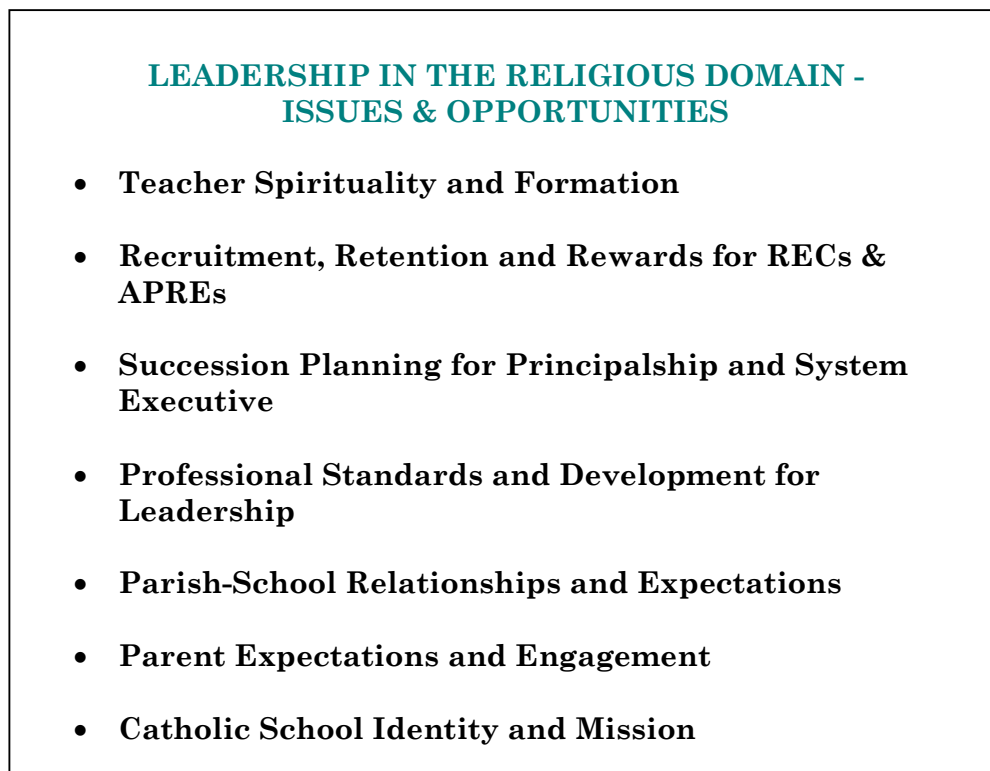


Figure 2. Themes for Leadership in the Religious Domain

Teacher Spirituality and Formation

The readiness of teachers to take up the challenge of being leaders in the religious domain and the need to design and support high quality formation programs were cited as major issues. Concerns were expressed about the decline in religious practice among staff and their confidence and relationship with the Church.

On the other hand, recent developments in teacher formation programs were seen to hold significant promise. These included carefully integrated

forms of professional learning and catechesis, immersion experiences, and associated induction and mentoring activities which are guided by a formalised systemic framework for teacher spiritual and professional growth. Emphases were being placed by dioceses on formation programs characterised by

- deepening knowledge of theology, Church teaching and tradition, and the ‘Catholic school story’;
- engagement in various forms of community action; and
- appreciation of the spiritual and vocational dimensions of teaching.

Recruitment, Retention and Rewards for Coordinators and Assistant Principals in Religious Education

Decreasing numbers of suitable applicants for the positions of Religious Education Coordinators (RECs) and Assistant Principal – Religious Education (APRE) was noted as an issue by several dioceses. One explanation, as one diocesan office put it, was that *good people feel uncomfortable in stepping up to be ‘Big C’ Catholics when they don’t support the whole deal of Catholic teaching.*

Allied with this, was concern about the need for RECs and APREs to have sound theological as well as educational background. Disenchantment of experienced leaders in working with students, families and staff of varied faith backgrounds together with the work demands associated with classroom teaching, delivery of staff formation and professional development, and organisation of sacramental programs were cited as factors affecting the retention of RECs and APREs.

Strategies for dealing with these issues involved a combination of incentives and creative restructuring of these roles. Sample incentives included the provision of scholarships and mentoring opportunities for prospective applicants and study leave for incumbents to undertake higher degrees and maintain currency. At the organisational level, some systems noted moves to redesign the role of REC and APRE. This included adopting shared or team-based approaches to developing the religious dimension of the school where for example, particular staff took responsibility for coordinating classroom religious education, some for organising liturgies and formation, and others for community liaison and/or sacramental programs.

Succession Planning for Principals and System Executive

The impending retirements of experienced leaders at school and system level and questions about where the next generation of principals and system executive would come from were highlighted as concerns by several dioceses. Issues of ‘leadership succession’ related to the appointment of

leaders with the capabilities to develop and implement an educational vision consistent with the diocesan context, and were noted as particularly significant for country dioceses faced with the need to attract talented and committed leaders to rural and remote settings.

Approaches by dioceses for dealing with leadership succession issues centred upon ways to identify and support the development of aspiring leaders from 'within the system'. These 'home-grown' initiatives were described as involving structured opportunities for mentoring and coaching of aspiring and neophyte leaders, supported by a leadership framework and formalised accreditation system that clearly articulates and relates the levels of qualification and experience to various leadership roles and responsibilities. Investment by systems in sponsoring professional learning, particularly in the areas of religious education and theology, was seen as an important feature of effective succession planning.

Professional Standards and Development for Leadership

The need for clearly articulated and sequenced professional standards for those in positions of religious leadership was highlighted. These standards should support the ongoing formation and professional development of leaders through close association with accreditation systems and support programs which include a focus on theological education, spiritual growth and the nurturing of personal commitment and professional capabilities.

Developing a framework to meet these needs was viewed as requiring the practical commitment and collaboration of a range of stakeholders at school and system levels and by tertiary providers and research agencies. Key elements of such a framework would include

- learning experiences which have a balance of personal and professional growth dimensions
- retreats and sabbatical experiences focussed on development of the leader in the religious domain
- sequenced units of study leading to formal graduate and postgraduate qualifications
- levels of accreditation which are based on qualifications and successful experience, assessed through appropriate and validated performance standards
- evidence and capacity for sharing of expertise and other resources across schools, dioceses and sectors – including leadership development work taking place at the national level through MCEETYA and *Teaching Australia*.

The purpose in developing leaders in the religious domain might best be summarised, in the response of one diocesan office, as

To nurture Christian spirituality as a personal relationship with Christ, and to see professional growth as a response to the invitation of the Gospel for fullness of life (Jn 10:10).

Parish-School Relationships and Expectations

Changing expectations of principals in the absence of resident parish priests and the evolving nature of parish-school relationships were cited by several dioceses as significant emerging issues for school and system leaders. The capacity of principals to deal with the complexity of parish life and assume pastoral leadership responsibilities for the wider community were seen as problematic.

Further, there were concerns from Catholic education offices about how best to engage in dialogue with parishes and other diocesan authorities regarding the changing relationship, roles and responsibilities of the school vis a vis the parish. Particular issues related to the development and delivery of sacramental programs, and the broader expectations of bishops towards religious education and the practice of the faith.

In response, several diocesan offices viewed this changing context as an opportunity for new forms of ministry and parish-school partnership to emerge. The development of new models was seen to involve reconsideration of traditional models of school and parish leadership, support for leadership formation through professional learning networks (for example those which may involve young teachers and/or school staff and parish-based teams), promotion of new approaches to sacramental programs, and new forms of resource sharing and financial contribution among schools and parishes.

Parent Expectations and Engagement

Increasing numbers of 'un-Churched' families, encroaching middle upper class clientele, and the growing consumerist culture were seen by some dioceses as changing traditional expectations and relationships between parents, and school and system leaders.

These changing circumstances were recognised as providing challenges and opportunities for leaders in Catholic education to 're-evangelise' school and diocesan communities and to re-affirm the Church's preferential option for the poor. The confidence of parents in the quality (and their choice) of Catholic schools was viewed as an untapped resource and a sign of hope for those in leadership positions.

Catholic School Identity and Mission

Issues about nature and purpose of Catholic schools were raised by diocesan offices, indicating that there is an unresolved debate over the identity and mission of Catholic schools. This was evident in the following questions:

- What does it mean for a school to be ‘Catholic’?
- Who is welcome? Who is present?

Such questions were seen to have implications for (i) enrolment policy (ii) employment policy (iii) organisation and governance (iv) funding (v) educational programs (vi) evaluating school effectiveness, and (vii) strategies for promoting school improvement.

There were associated calls to continue to clarify and promote the meaning and mission of Catholic schools in the contemporary context. Authentic Catholic schools were characterised by a strong emphasis on religious education, governance and organisational structures aligned with Church traditions and teachings, inclusive processes and relationships, and a focus on the total development of the young person. Religious Education is viewed an area of study and as a feature of school life which permeates the school curriculum, professional learning of teachers, parent and community engagement, and outreach activities.

Leaders in the religious domain therefore need to appreciate the multifaceted nature of authentic Catholic schools, as well as promote their identity and mission in serving the common good to the community, and to governments and related agencies and organisations.

Religious Education, Curriculum Change and Accountabilities

The form and status of religious education as an area of study was viewed as an emerging issue in the contemporary context of national and state/territory curriculum directions and the increasing compliance requirements of Catholic schools and education systems to the Australian Government funding regulations.

Several dioceses commented that the quest for space and recognition of religious education in the curriculum needed to be taken up in the face of increasing demands and accountabilities for national curriculum consistency and testing in literacy, numeracy and other areas, combined with the imposition of Australian Government prescriptions for the reporting of student achievement. These issues highlighted the need for Catholic schools and education systems to develop and clearly articulate their perspective and approach to curriculum, assessment and reporting.

On the other hand, the current priority given to Values Education by the Australian Government is viewed as a promising means to demonstrate the 'value-added' dimensions of Catholic schools in contributing to the development of a compassionate and cohesive Australian society.

Reference

Edmund Campion, Irish Religion in Australia, Australasian Catholic Record 55 (1978), 4-16.