



"God at the centre of my life/of all things"

# A Framework for Student Faith Formation in Catholic Schools







## FOREWORD

I welcome this valuable material, *A Framework for Student Faith Formation in Catholic Schools*, published by the National Catholic Education Commission.

This guide aspires to enliven dialogue to enhance the faith formation of students in our contemporary Australian contexts in line with the goals of Catholic Education.<sup>1</sup> These goals challenge school communities to:

- be places of encounter and deepening relationship with God in Christ
- be places where the pursuit of wisdom and truth is encouraged by a supportive academic culture
- bring faith, culture, and life into harmony for the students they meet.

Faith Formation complements Religious Education, and this guide is an important companion to the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) publication, *A Framing Paper: Religious Education in Australian Catholic Schools*, published in 2018.

I commend this guide to all involved in educational and catechetical ministries to discern ways to participate in the Church's evangelising mission more effectively, so that every student may 'more deeply come to know that they are loved by God' (Vision Statement, *A Framework for Student Faith Formation in Catholic Schools*).

The NCEC Faith Formation and Religious Education Standing Committee composed the paper. I thank them for this important and outstanding piece of work.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

**Most Reverend Anthony Fisher OP**  
Chair, Bishops Commission for Catholic Education

# OVERVIEW

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Before commencing teaching RE, after an absence of many years, I happened to bump into my former RE teacher... she said to me, “Do me a favour - don’t give them a small God. Give them a God big enough to deal with anything”. And then COVID struck, and I thought, “I’d better give them a big God.”

(Teacher, NSW)

# PREFACE

The National Catholic Education Commission publishes this document to reflect upon the faith formation of students in Australian Catholic schools.

The document is intended for staff of Catholic schools and to complement existing local frameworks. While important for leaders in Catholic school systems, Religious Education coordinators and Religious Education teachers, this document can speak to all staff, given they play a critical role in the faith formation of students. Recognising the intrinsic value of the partnership between parents and the school this document ideally would be accessible to parents and carers of the students. In light of the partnership between the school and the wider parish, this document is shared with priests, lay leaders and catechists.

*A Framework for Student Faith Formation in Catholic Schools* is a contribution to the discussion about faith formation of students and Religious Education processes

in contemporary Australian contexts. It is intended to be considered in conjunction with [A Framework for Mission in Catholic Education \(2017\)](#) which focuses on staff formation, and the [Framing Paper for Religious Education in Catholic Schools \(2018\)](#).

The framework offers a vision and a set of elements for student faith formation together with examples of approaches. This work draws upon:

- reflection on contemporary contexts and research
- a Christian understanding of the human person
- the teaching of the Church including the recent *Directory for Catechesis* edition (2020), and importantly
- a dialogue with student voice which was sought in the process of developing this document.

The NCEC believes engagement with the many pertinent issues will be beneficial to the refinement of approaches to the faith formation of students.



"Where do I see God?"  
Ella, 7, Victoria

# INTRODUCTION

The desire for God is written in the human heart because the human person is created by God and for God.

*Catechism of the Catholic Church #27*

From our earliest moments, every person lives within the gracious offer of God's life and love.<sup>1</sup> Building upon the love of parents, caregivers and families and in partnership with the Church, the Catholic school shares the privilege and responsibility of making this offer evident for every student with a range of formative and educative experiences in line with the goals of Catholic Education. God's offer of life is an invitation to a new creation in relationship with God, others and all creation. In supporting students to respond with the gift of faith, the Catholic school is called to participate in the evangelising mission of the Church and support children and young people to grow in religious self-understanding, spirituality and participation in the community of faith.

The *Mpwartne (Alice Springs) Declaration* encourages all young Australians to be confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners and active and informed members of the community. It recognises the spiritual dimension of formation: "Education plays a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians".<sup>2</sup> For Catholic schools, when faith is brought into dialogue with life through opportunities for formation, formation can be the means to personal transformation, a call to missionary discipleship and a source of wisdom. Students can become active contributors to a faith community, to Australian society and as global citizens.

There are many facets to faith formation in the life of the school including wellbeing programs, opportunities for prayer, catechesis, pedagogical practices, curricula, retreats, camps and school celebrations.

Given it's student faith formation and we're not adults yet and we don't have to have everything figured out, I think it would be really interesting to include the perspectives of people who are still figuring out faith.

Shan, 17, WA

Catholic schools and the Church face challenges in providing faith formation that is effective:

- What does authentic faith formation look like in a secularised culture that values individual pursuit?
- How is faith formation effective in a culture in which traditions are less influential than in decades past?
- How do schools with students of various religious backgrounds engage in faith formation in ways which honour religious freedom for all students?
- The Church speaks of the family as "the domestic Church"<sup>3</sup> and parents have the primary responsibility for their children's education in faith. With many families having little connection with the life of the parish community, what are the new opportunities for schools to support and partner with parents and caregivers in faith formation?
- How does the school partner with the local church community, which itself is often facing challenges with renewal and with welcoming children, young people and families?

This framework is part of a shared endeavour across the country to address these questions.

I mean, if the student is engaged then you are more likely to get a better response out of them so they are more likely to connect.

Joshua, 17, NSW

They should put a church at school.

Sarah, 7, QLD

I have that strong faith around me it has pushed me to believe in God. It has impacted me.

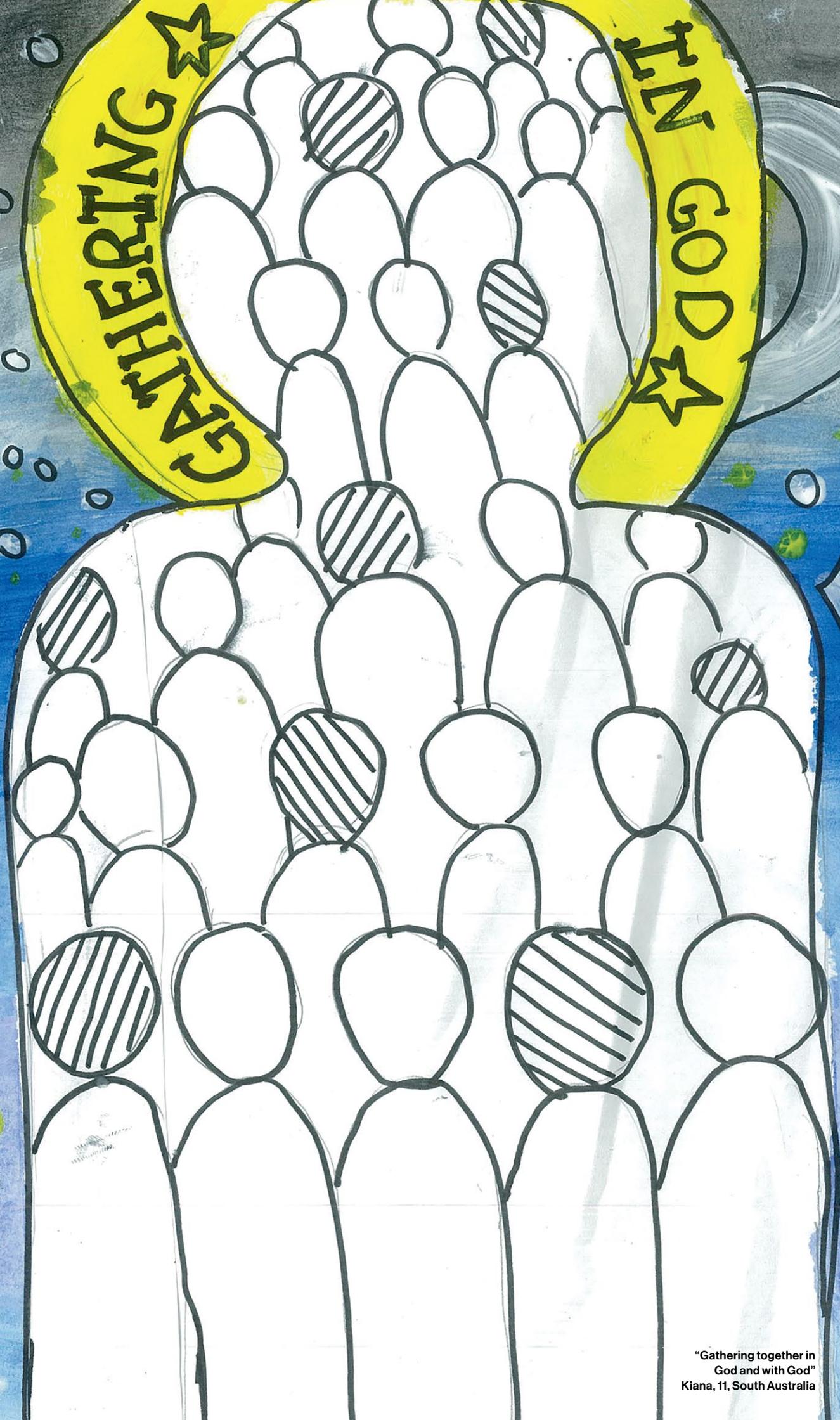
Aleeta, 17, NSW

How do you get to know Jesus or God outside the school?

Deputy principal, QLD

GATHERING ☆

IN GOD ☆



# A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN PERSON

The desire for God is written in the human heart because the human person is created by God and for God.<sup>4</sup> The starting point for a Christian understanding is that every human being is a person made in the image and likeness of God;<sup>5</sup> hence human nature is essentially good. This is assured indisputably by the Incarnation, wherein the mystery of the Word made flesh, the true meaning of the human person, becomes clear.<sup>6</sup> “The divine became human so that the human could become divine.”<sup>7</sup>

The divine image is never lost, even by sin and the misuse of human freedom. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, humanity is restored and the grace of salvation is offered to all men and women. As a result, a Christian anthropology is shaped by hope in the mercy of God. No human person is ever self-sufficient but above all in relation to God, we are always in need of God’s grace. The human person transformed by grace is animated by the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. In the Christian understanding, the human person is a moral agent, an “acting subject”<sup>8</sup> initiating and responsible for one’s own actions and capable of repentance for sin and ongoing conversion in response to God’s mercy. A Christian theological anthropology rejects any notion of the person as a mere victim of fate. At the same time, as a mirror of the Trinity, the human person is essentially relational, finds God in and through others, and has an obligation to work for justice for all in the human community and to “care for our common home”.<sup>9</sup>

In this it opposes excessive individualism. The Christian understanding sees life as a gift from God that should be affirmed and defended for its essential dignity, and lived joyfully and hopefully in the promise of life with God for all eternity.<sup>10</sup>



“I see God”  
Alysha, 7, Victoria

At the end of the day, we are all either children of God or we are all just people... kind of like there’s not really much difference.

Emily, 17, Western Australia

# EXPLORING THE LANGUAGE OF FORMATION

This framework uses the term 'faith formation' as aligned with *A Framework for Formation for Mission in Catholic Education*:

**Faith formation is a process to deepen the relationship with God, a free relationship based on love and for love. With children particularly, faith formation invites them to grow in understanding and experience that they are unconditionally loved by God. In nurturing faith, we accompany children and young people on a Christ-centred, intentional, ongoing and reflective process that focuses on the growth of individuals and communities from their lived experiences, in spiritual awareness, theological understanding, vocational motivation and capabilities for mission and service in the Church and the world.<sup>11</sup>**

## Formation of the whole person

Faith formation is integrated within the formation of the whole person who lives in community. Catholic schools are committed to the development of students, since in Christ human persons find their ultimate model. Faith formation is not an “add-on” or just one component of the formation process. For this reason, faith formation is at the heart of the mission of the Catholic school. Faith formation is a mysterious process; it can be perplexing, multifaceted and difficult to evaluate. Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

An important goal of the Catholic school is that its education program is intentionally directed at the growth of the student.<sup>12</sup> Catholic school educators respond to a privileged sacred call to ignite a culture of learning in community where learners move towards their own human flourishing - a movement towards Christ. For in this flourishing there is the possibility of transformation where students increasingly come to know God, themselves and one another, and are transformed by the Spirit in love and for love. The Catholic school encourages the growth of students in the fullness of their humanity – intellectually, physically, socially, emotionally, morally, aesthetically and spiritually.<sup>13</sup> This holistic formation enables students to live in and engage with their present and future world with faith, hope and love.

In this way Catholic education is a privileged part of the life-long formation of the whole person.

In my daily interaction with students and staff I aim to live out our school's mission, to live, to love and to grow in Christ.

Religious Education Coordinator,  
Northern Territory



“Inner Realm”  
Thai, Year 12, Victoria

When students have a sense of their faith or a sense of God it can give meaning in how they live today.

Religious Education Coordinator, NT

## Faith formation connects with:

- **The evangelising mission of the Church**

It is from its Catholic identity that the school derives its role as part of the evangelising mission of the Church.<sup>14</sup> Evangelisation is proclaiming and living the Good News of Jesus Christ and is the foremost duty of the baptised and is the task of the entire Church. By word and witness it introduces (or re-introduces) to people, in a variety of contexts, the saving power of Jesus' call to ongoing conversion and relationship with God. The Catholic school is called to participate in this mission in partnership with the wider parish and the local church.

- **Religious Life of Schools**

The totality of school life aims to give witness to and support students on the path towards a personal integration of faith and life. The religious life of the school has various inter-related components: its Catholic identity, charism and culture, the sacramental and liturgical life of the community, artwork, icons and symbols, engagement in social justice, classroom learning and teaching of religion. These are part of an overall curriculum imbued with a contemporary Catholic world view and a focus on Christ that is evident in all that the school community does.



“Living with a Courageous Heart”  
Years 7-12, Mount St Joseph  
Girls' College, Altona

- **Religious Education**

Religious Education is the curriculum area at the heart of Catholic schools.

The faith formation of students in Catholic schools operates in partnership with and complements Religious Education.

**Religious Education in Australian Catholic schools develops students' knowledge and understandings of Christianity in the light of Jesus and the Gospel, and its unfolding story and diversity within contemporary Australian and global society. It expands students' spiritual awareness and religious identity, fostering their capacities and skills of discerning, interpreting, thinking critically, seeking truth and meaning making. It challenges and inspires their service to others and engagement in the Church and the world.<sup>15</sup>**

- **Parents and Families**

In the Catholic school the privilege of formation in faith is undertaken in partnership with parents and families. Parents are called to be the first teachers in faith of their children and assist them to come to grow in the love of God and example of Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup> It is within the family that children are nurtured and formed. This partnership offers opportunities to engage with and support families in the faith formation of their children and young people.

- **Spirituality**

In and through faith formation, we seek to nurture the spirituality of children and young people. Spirituality is about attending to the Mystery at the core of reality and how one lives one's life. For Christians it involves contemplation on this human yearning for God who is revealed in Jesus and is a way of being in the world inspired by the Holy Spirit. In *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis says to young people: “I hope that you will be serious enough about yourselves to make an effort to grow spiritually.”<sup>17</sup>

# THE CONTEXTS AND REALITIES FOR STUDENT FAITH FORMATION

## Australian contexts

For over 60,000 years Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have had a profound connection to country and possess a deep sense of the sacred.<sup>18</sup> This spirituality is apt in a time when people are increasingly aware that they are an integral part of creation, included in it and called to care for the earth.<sup>19</sup> The tradition of this spirituality - connected to land, people and law - forms the cultural and spiritual history of Australia. Australia's more recent Christian heritage must not just sit beside this context; it must encounter, learn from and engage with this story.<sup>20</sup>

Australian contemporary culture continues to grow and become more diverse, pluralistic and secular. Increasingly, Australian and other western societies experience an erosion of tradition and authority in religion and society and a diminished ability for one generation to pass on traditions to the next.<sup>21</sup> While increasing pluralisation and secularisation in the world can lead to experiences of indifference and, at other times, foster hostility towards religion, such shifts call for an openness to the movement and presence of the Holy Spirit and the importance of dialogue with the world.<sup>22</sup> For some, this is an exciting evolution, adding to the richness of Australian culture, and for others, a challenge, and a sense of loss is experienced as what was once known and understood has been transformed. In addition, there is a contemporary culture that focuses on the pursuit of individual meaning making and autonomy which can create a shift in the way sense is made of the world.

## Student contexts and realities

"Every student is in some respect like all others, like some others and like no other."<sup>23</sup> Students in Catholic schools are influenced by their families, cultures, peers, social and traditional media, the technological revolution and wider society including its consumer culture. They are as diverse as are the influences that make up our communities and come with a variety of life experiences, motivations, expectations and aspirations. Students live in a variety of 'worlds' which influence growth and provide context for

interpreting life experiences, developing new concepts and shaping values and identity.<sup>24</sup> The range of views students would hear in these worlds and from their peers would often be at odds with what the school would be proposing to them. Furthermore, they come from families with a variety of religious backgrounds and experience; some families have strong spiritual roots and customs, and others have little or none.<sup>25</sup>

These contexts are realities that cannot be ignored. They offer challenges and opportunities to Australian Catholic schools as they strive to offer rich faith formation that is responsive to the circumstances of the students and their families. In the words of Pope Francis: "Today's vast and rapid cultural changes demand that we constantly seek ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language which brings out their abiding newness."<sup>26</sup>

"We are not living in an era of change, but a change of era."

(Pope Francis, 2015).



The following information presents some of the challenges that face children and young people.

# CHILDHOOD, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE



**4 in 5** children aged 0-2 were regularly read to or told stories by a parent.  
2017

The National attendance rate for year 5 was **93%**.  
2018



**20.5%** of Catholic primary school students received adjustments to participate in education because of disability.  
2020

**3 out of 5** children spent time taking care of siblings at least once a week.  
2020



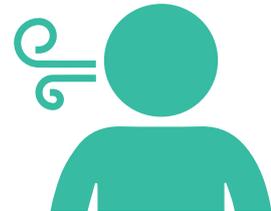
**75%** of families became closer since COVID-19.  
2020

**11%** of households with children were jobless families.  
2019



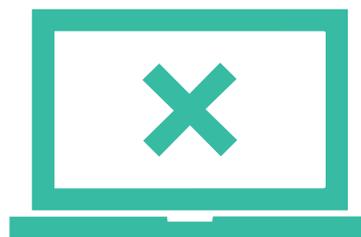
Remote and very remote **Indigenous** families are most likely to be living in overcrowded housing.  
2016

**1/3 of 10-13** year olds are worried about the environment.  
2018



Among children **5-14**, asthma was the leading cause of disease burden followed by mental health.  
2018

**2/3** of children aged 0-14 participate in organised physical activities outside school at least once per fortnight.  
2018



The average age for first time exposure to pornography was **12**.  
2018

**44%** of children between 0-2 had between 25-100 children's books at home.  
2017



**3.3%**  
of Catholic school students identify as **Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.**

27

**1 in 7** children and adolescents **aged 4-17 years** experienced **mental health** issues in the 12 months prior to 2017.

28

Almost **27.7%** of Catholic schools students live **outside major metropolitan areas** including majority indigenous schools, boarding schools and sole-provider schools.

29

**Females aged 15-19** were **7 times more likely** than the average population to have been the victim of sexual assault.

30

About **1 in 490** young people were in **juvenile justice supervision** on an average day in 2017-2018.

31

# BIG ISSUES



**40%** Equity & discrimination

COVID-19

**39%**



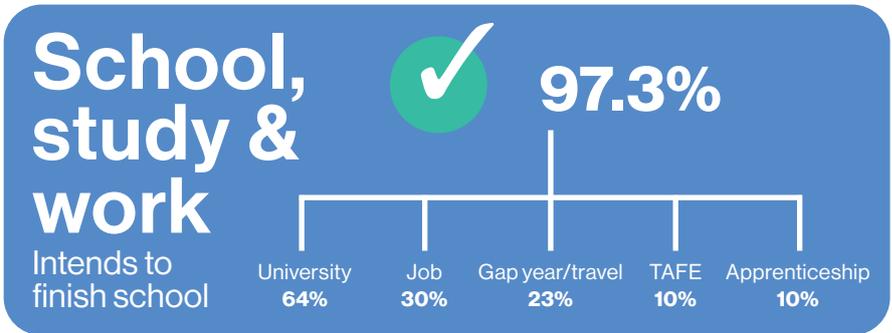
**31%** Mental health

Environment

**30%**



32



33

In a survey of 2018 young people, **6% females** and **4% of males** identified as non-heterosexual.

34

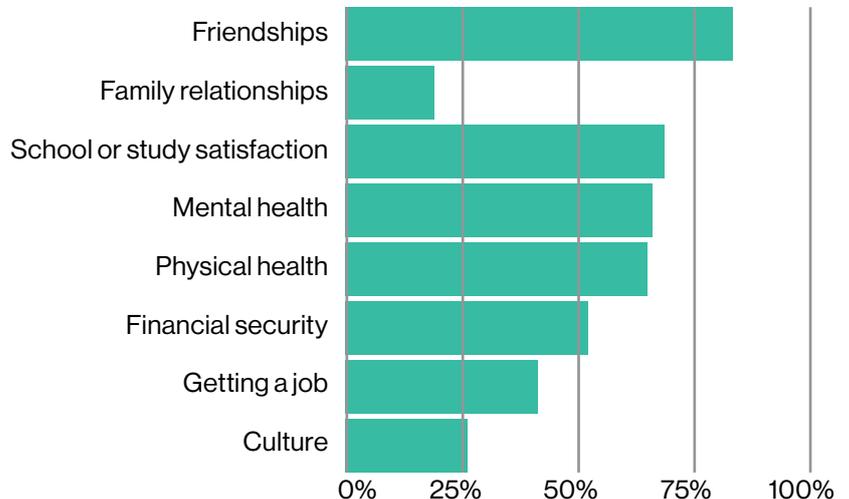
Suicide represented **31% of all deaths** in young people aged **15-17** in 2020.

35

**24% of homeless people** were **aged 12-24** in August 2016.

36

## Valued by 15-19 year olds<sup>37</sup>



(unless otherwise identified data around young people captures the age group 15-24)



## Early years

“At this age it is a matter of *first evangelisation and proclamation of the faith in an eminently educational form*, attentive to developing a sense of trust, of gratuitousness, of self-giving, of invocation and participation, as a human condition onto which grafted the salvific power of the faith” (DfC, 2020, n. 239).

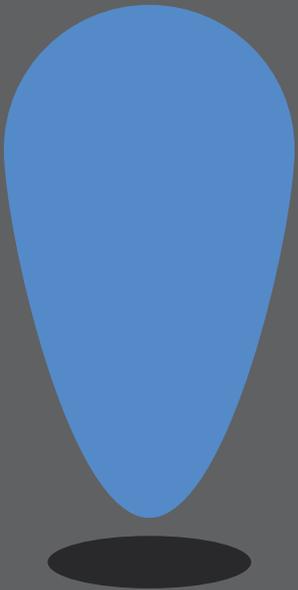
“The early years of life are a period of rapid growth and development as children form their language, social, emotional and physical skills, and undergo significant cognitive development. These years provide the foundation for learning throughout school and beyond. The key to children’s earliest learning throughout school and beyond. The key to children’s earliest learning and development is the quality and depth of interaction they experience; between adult and child and between child and child.” (*Mpwartne Declaration*, 2019, 7).



## Primary years

We adopt the perspective that educates [them] gradually, according to [their] capacities, to be active participants inside and outside the community. (DfC, n. 242).

“Primary school is a key stage for children as they enhance their communication skills, establish and grow peer relationships, and have a growing understanding of their place in the world. This period of significant change and growth also sees children develop resilience and adaptability and strategies to manage themselves in different situations.” (*Mpwartne Declaration*, 2019, 8).



## Secondary years

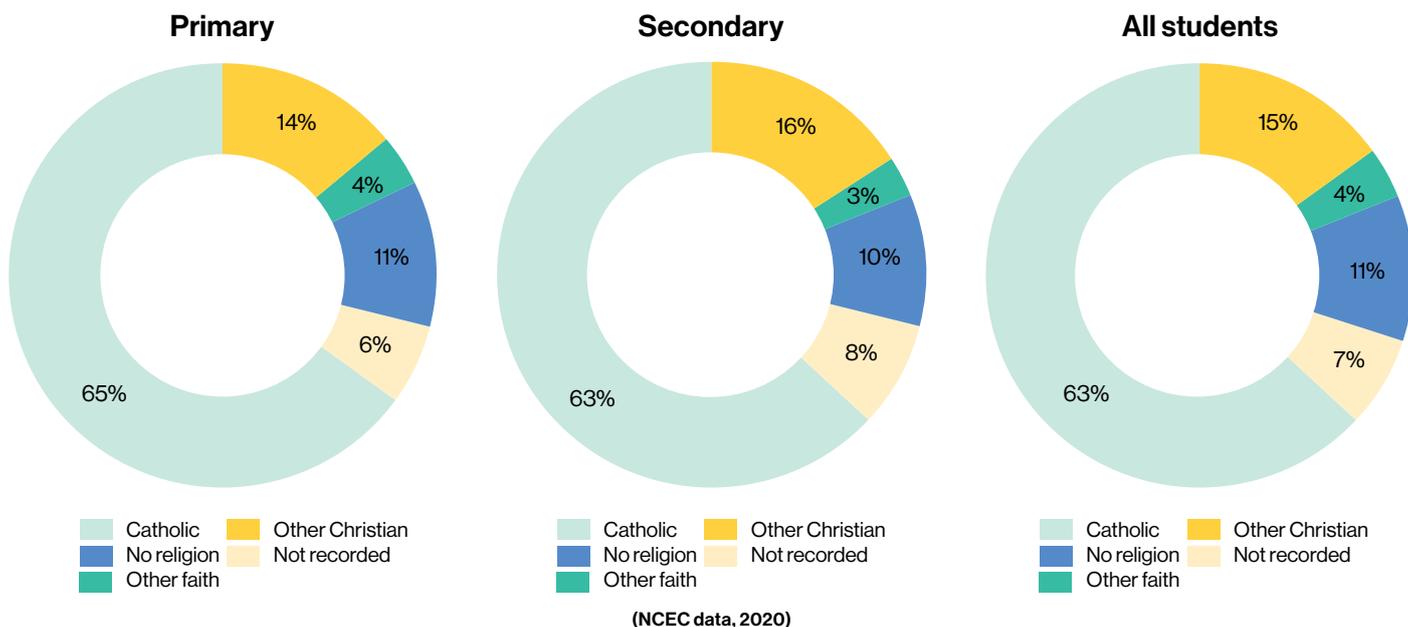
“In their journey of faith, adolescents need to have convinced and compelling witness by their side” (DfC n. 248).

Secondary school can be broken into two categories. Students in the middle years are finding “a sense of self and require investment in their emotional wellbeing and a voice in and influence over their learning. It is also a time when they are at the greatest risk of disengagement from learning. Through directly addressing each student’s range of needs, schools must focus on enhancing motivation and engagement” (*Mpwartne Declaration*, 2019, 8). “The senior years of schooling are a critical transition point for young people – emotionally, socially and educationally. These years should provide all students with... high quality advice, support and experiences to make informed choices about their future and smooth the initial transition to further education, training or meaningful employment” (*Mpwartne Declaration*, 2019, 9).



Some of the religious contexts in which teachers, children and young people encounter one another in Catholic schools are illustrated in the following data from the NCEC and from the *Putting Life Together*<sup>38</sup> surveys.

### AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS STUDENT RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION



Secondary Students' Responses to 'Knowing Jesus helps make me a better person' and 'Religious faith helps shape how I live my life' (Table 1)

|                      | Knowing Jesus helps make me a better person | Religious faith helps shape how I live my life |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Definitely true      | 23%   | 15%  |
| Probably true        | 20%   | 13%  |
| Not sure, don't know | 24%   | 21%  |
| Probably not true    | 11%   | 18%  |
| Definitely not true  | 22%   | 33%  |

Source: *Putting Life Together Surveys, 2011-2018.*

Mean Scores on a Scale of 1 to 10 of Students' Rating of Various Influences on their Thinking about Life, and Percentage Scoring the Influence Strongly (Table 2)

| Influence                                | Mean Rating on a Scale 1 to 10 | Percentage Indicating They are Strongly Influenced |
|--|--------------------------------|--|
| Family                                   | 8.5                            | 78%  |
| Friends                                  | 8.3                            | 76%  |
| What is learnt at school                 | 7.2                            | 53%  |
| Reading book                             | 6.4                            | 39%  |
| School camps and retreats                | 5.9                            | 33%  |
| Teachers                                 | 5.8                            | 28%  |
| Leadership programs and opportunities    | 5.5                            | 30%  |
| Community and social justice programs    | 4.8                            | 21%  |
| Religious education                      | 4.8                            | 22%  |
| Church                                   | 4.4                            | 23%  |
| School liturgies and services of worship | 4.2                            | 16%  |

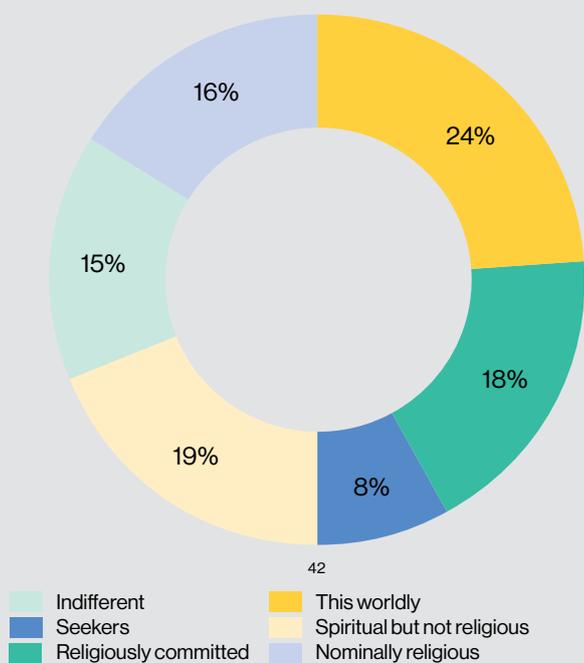
Source: *Putting Life Together Surveys, 2011-2018.*

Significant research was completed in 2009 about the spiritual and faith stances of young Australians, showing 42% identified with a religious tradition, and 17% reported no relationship with God, while the remaining 41% retained a sense of spirituality.<sup>39</sup> This research is foundational to current understandings but raises the question - is this still the case?

More recent research shows that 34% of Gen Z (born between 1997-2012) believe in God with 46% identifying as Christian and a further 13% with spiritual beliefs, but no religious identification. The second highest proportion of those practicing their religion is also Gen Z.<sup>40</sup>

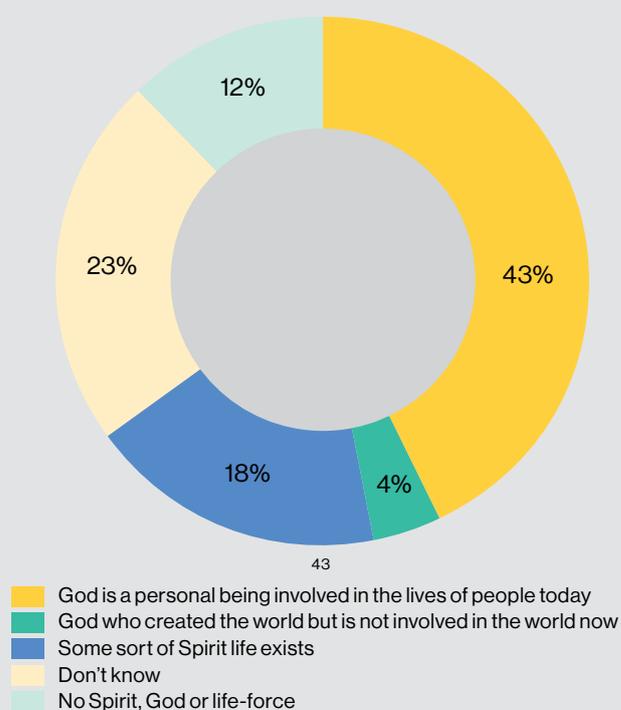
Other recent research identifies in Australian students various "spirituality 'types' which 'move beyond conventional understandings of religious or nonreligious identity'"<sup>41</sup> as illustrated in the following graph.

**TYPES OF SPIRITUALITY**



This research also indicates how these students responded to questions about their belief in God as illustrated in this graph.

**BELIEF IN GOD**



## Staff reflection activity

Create a forum for a conversation about the culture and context in your school and community and look specifically at the exact data of your school in terms of religious and cultural backgrounds.

The following questions might help you break this open:

- What are the cultural backgrounds our students come from?
- What are the stories that our students bring with them?
- What socio-cultural events, stories and issues impact our students and the ways in which they learn and engage with the world?
- How do we make connections between our school story and the worlds of our students?
- What are some of the challenges and opportunities related to the spirituality and faith of students?

## Young people and Church<sup>44</sup>

For many young people the Church may be perceived as part of the Australian social landscape. However, many are not directly involved with Church life and find the Church does not influence their thinking about life and faith. In some communities, particularly those with recently arrived Australians, there are younger people who identify and connect strongly with the Church.

In order for the Church to engage with young people, it needs to meet them where they are at. As Pope Francis has noted, it is important to recognise that young people are the Church - they are not waiting to become the Church; therefore it is important that a listening posture is adopted towards young people.<sup>45</sup> The Church community – inclusive of parishes, schools and families – is challenged to consider how it goes about this recognition and listening, that with the grace of God, it “seeks, encounters and welcomes [young] people in their concrete life situations”.<sup>46</sup>

**“You are the ones who hold the future!”<sup>47</sup>**

## Education<sup>48</sup>

Like many aspects of society, education is experiencing significant change and schools are challenged to “prepare young people to thrive in a time of rapid social and technological change, and complex environmental, social and economic challenges.”<sup>49</sup> In this context Catholic schools engage with families and students, in the spiritual development of children and young people within an holistic education that the *Mpartne Declaration* seeks.

**“No less than other schools does the Catholic school pursue cultural goals and the human formation of youth. But its proper function is to create for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit.”<sup>50</sup>**

## Children, young people, spirituality and faith

Children are often seen as on their way to adulthood. The temptation is to see childhood as a phase to grow through and when considered alongside spirituality, as an incomplete phase. In considering faith development, stages have been captured by many in different modes, none of which captures fully the openness of childhood and youth.<sup>51</sup> Such frameworks can tend to present a constructivist approach to faith. Conceptions with such distinct separation of the two, when both are concerned with the interior and exterior, creates an unnecessary rupture between spirituality and religion.<sup>52</sup> However, conceptual frameworks and development processes can help us to understand and acknowledge that the faith and spirituality of young people can be developed and are just as significant as those of adults, but these frameworks will always have limitations and inadequacies that do not acknowledge both individual experience and agency, as well as the movement of the Holy Spirit in each individual's life.<sup>53</sup> “Childhood itself has a direct relationship with God. It touches on the absolute divinity of God not only as maturity, adulthood and the later phases of life touch upon this, but rather in a special way of its own.”<sup>54</sup>

In light of this, questions for continuing inquiry in our Australian contemporary context include:

- How do children and young people grow in faith?
- What are the characteristics and phases unique or common in the processes of growing faith?
- What understandings of faith development do Catholic educators need in order to accompany children and young people?



**“Prayer”**  
Isabel, 7, Victoria

## Students in Catholic schools

Students in Catholic schools bring a diversity of religious backgrounds, experiences and understandings - a treasure which brings richness and challenges to school communities.

Catholic schools welcome:

- those who are Catholic or other Christian learners for whom their faith formation is shared with their families and parishes
- those who are Catholic or from other Christian traditions for whom the Catholic school is their only regular connection with a Christian community. For these students, the Catholic school community may be a place of primary proclamation and for others, new evangelisation
- those from other religious traditions whereby the experience of a Catholic school community may deepen their own faith
- those learners with no religious affiliation for whom the Catholic school community can be a place of first proclamation.<sup>55</sup>

Many students in our school are not Catholic and not coming from a family who support or practice faith.

Teacher, NSW



### Staff reflection activity

In your school or class, map the proportion of students who make up these categories?

Take time to consider and discuss what their varying formation needs may be.

- What different formation needs exist?
- How does your school currently respond to these needs?
- What are the challenges and opportunities?



### Student activity

Adapt the following, taking into consideration the age and context of students while respecting the privacy and dignity of students. This activity could also be a staff activity with staff imagining their cohort and taking on the roles of students.

With your class, invite students to undertake a standing poll in order to create a dialogue about the different perspectives that students perceive are present in the school community. You might like to look at religious affiliation and cultural backgrounds. This activity could lead to a dialogue about what are the factors that influence, shape and form children and young people, particularly in relation to religious belief and practice.

With older students it may be possible to have a physical Venn diagram map (a 2D version of a values line). This could enable students to imagine themselves as being a 'typical student'. With a class with high levels of trust and respect, it could be a task where students freely engage with their own views.

This could include:

- I have difficulty and doubts about faith and belief in God
- Religious belief is part of my cultural heritage and I am not sure how it fits with my life
- I see myself as a spiritual person
- I believe in God, the divine or a sacred reality
- I believe in God and actively try to show this in the way I live
- I am a searcher
- I think I am an atheist
- ...

# A VISION: COMMITMENT TO THE FAITH FORMATION OF STUDENTS

At the core of their mission, Catholic schools have something beautiful to share: the person of Jesus.<sup>56</sup> They participate in the evangelising mission of the Church to proclaim the Good News and make present Jesus Christ in the lives of people and the world.<sup>57</sup> Graced by God in this mission with children and young people, school communities are called to engage in this task of faith formation mindful of the particular culture and contexts

of their students and families that have been broadly described above.

**Evangelising does not mean occupying a given territory, but rather eliciting spiritual processes in the lives of persons so that the faith may become rooted and significant. The evangelisation of culture requires getting to the heart of culture itself (DfC, n.43).**

Within this understanding on Catholic schools' participation in the Church's evangelising mission, this paper offers the following vision for the faith formation of children and young people who are in Catholic schools:

Catholic schools are committed to the faith formation of all students which:

- speaks to the desire for God at the heart of our humanity<sup>58</sup>
- acknowledges and respects the child and young person as a person in whom the Holy Spirit is already present and as a person with an existing spirituality and agency
- embraces the richness of the Catholic Tradition in respectful dialogue with people's lives, culture and creation
- invites and leads students to a deepening encounter and relationship with God through Jesus Christ and in the Spirit while respecting the religious identity of students from other faiths
- inspires and empowers students to be witnesses to the Gospel individually and in community to live virtuous and ethical lives<sup>59</sup> serving the Reign of God.

As the Holy Spirit enables schools to work towards this vision as part of the provision of excellent education that integrates faith, life and culture, schools look forward to students who:

- more deeply come to know that they are loved by God
- give witness to Christ
- value their spiritual dimension and spirituality
- express 'faith in action' by involvement in charity, social justice and integral ecology.
- engage in new, deeper and renewed participation in Catholic Eucharistic communities or, for those with other religious affiliation, meaningful participation in other faith communities.

Working with students in the classroom, being aware of the varying cultures and being able to get the students to openly talk and discuss their faith and/or spirituality is rewarding.

(Religious Education Coordinator,  
Northern Territory)

# ELEMENTS OF STUDENT FAITH FORMATION

Drawing from the living tradition of the Church, the following elements have been identified, all of which are important to any genuinely Catholic approach to faith formation. They are offered to school communities, education systems and the broader Church community as a basis for formulating, delivering and evaluating the faith formation of students according to the vision that is described in the previous section.

## Respectful of experience and voice

Faith formation is respectful, experiential and relevant, building on students' personal story, everyday reality and lived experiences.<sup>60</sup> Student voice is sought in the formulation, practice and evaluation of formation.

## Integrated in the formation of the whole person

The faith formation of students is integrated within the formation of the whole person. Formation is based on a holistic Christian understanding of being human, and involves 'head, heart and hands' in nurturing a person's wellbeing and relationships with self, others, God and creation.

## Enabling witness and encounter with Jesus

Formation has as its core God for whom the human heart desires. It invites a deepening encounter with the person of Jesus. Formation witnesses to the life of the Trinity, the Paschal mystery and God's relationship with humankind and all of creation.<sup>61</sup>

## Invitational

Faith formation respects the dignity and human freedom of the child and young person. It always respects that faith is a free response to God's invitation; it is proposed and not imposed.

## Individual and communal

Faith formation is a communal experience and it focuses on the growth of both individuals and communities.

## Relational and accompanying

Faith formation is grounded in and honours relationships. It occurs in the encounter between people and is modelled on the way Jesus related to others. Faith formation involves accompaniment by peers and adults who are formed and supported in this ministry.<sup>62</sup>

## Integrated with family and parish

Faith formation processes respect, involve and support parents and families in their primary responsibility for sharing faith with their children, and are undertaken in appropriate collaboration with parish communities and the broader Church.

## Drawing upon a rich Catholic tradition

Faith formation draws upon the richness and charisms of the spiritual traditions and teaching within the living Catholic Tradition. It is explicitly Christological, scripturally rich<sup>63</sup> and ecclesially grounded.

## Dialogical and inclusive

Faith formation is respectful of the religious backgrounds of all students within a school culture of dialogue. While centred on Christian faith, faith formation does not seek to proselytise students of other faiths.

## Religious and spiritual

Faith formation seeks to nurture each person's spirituality and invites its expression through new, deepening and renewed moments of religious commitment and discipleship in faith communities.

## Discerning and vocational

Formation cultivates students' personal vocation to participate in God's mission of love in the world. It assists the discernment of vocation, connection with the Catholic tradition and responsiveness to mission.

## Justice and service oriented

Faith formation occurs in the experience and participation in works of justice, charity and mercy, especially when explicit connection is made with the Gospel. This formation is inclusive of ecological conversion.

## Differentiated and ongoing

Faith formation processes and activities are differentiated according to individual and community needs and includes implicit and explicit formational experiences. Faith formation is developmental and ongoing, occurring both within and beyond the local context.

## Intentional and planned

Effective faith formation occurs through the ongoing discernment and strategic planning of leaders in the local school context and in partnership with the sector and the broader Church.



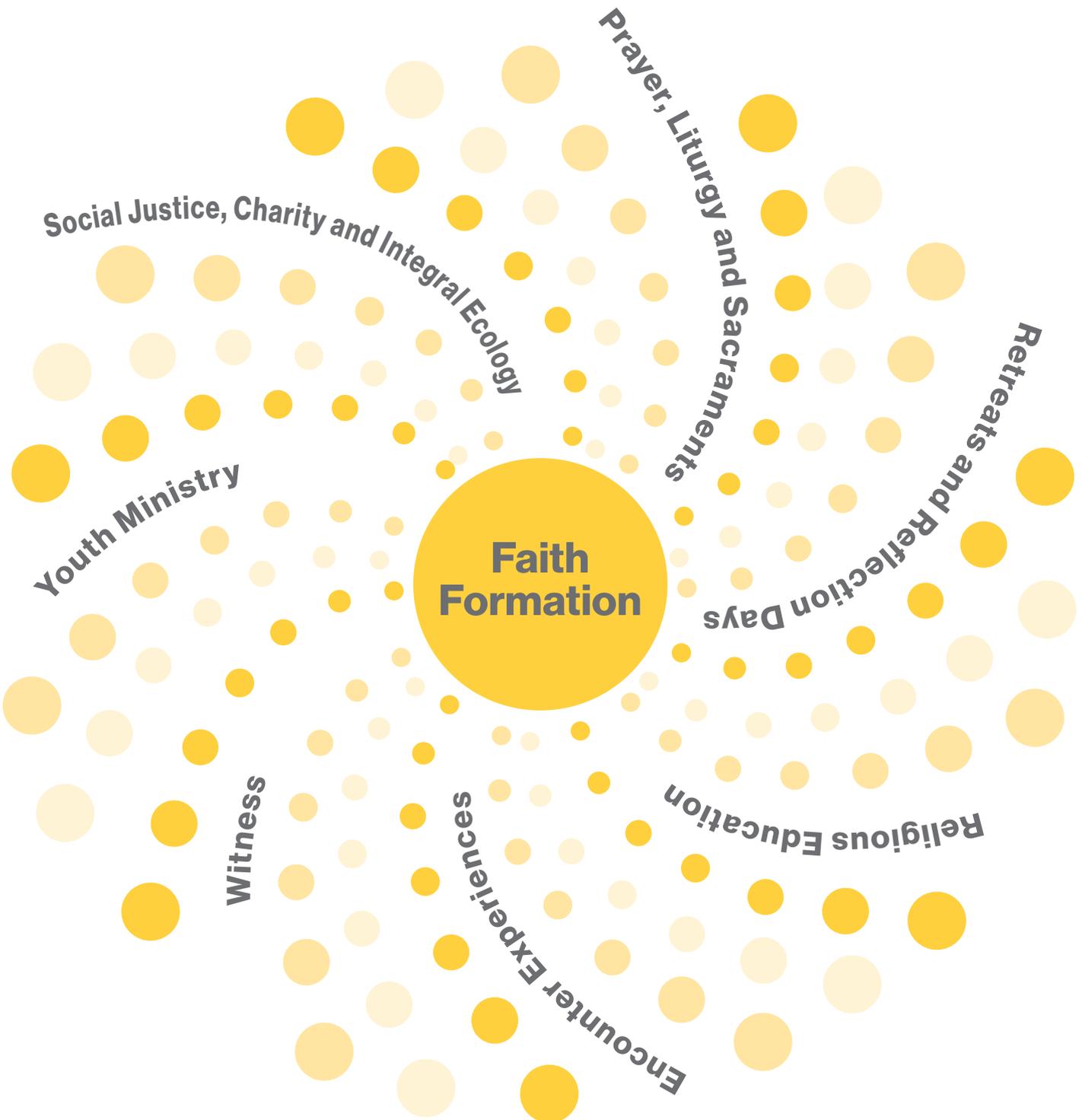
### Reflection activity

In considering your school improvement process rate your school 1 – 5 on these key elements: 1 = not evident, 2 = low, 3 = somewhat evident, 4 = working well, 5 = an exemplar to other school communities.

Give 2 or 3 examples of how the principles of formation are embedded in practices in your school community.

# EXAMPLES OF STUDENT FAITH FORMATION

Meaningful faith formation incorporates the principles articulated in the previous section. Faith formation occurs in and through various experiences across the life of the school. These experiences can be mapped in the following inter-related categories and examples are provided in the online version of this framework.



- **Prayer, Liturgy and Sacraments** are integral to community life in Catholic schools. They provide important opportunities for individual communal faith formation of students, staff and families.
- Catholic school communities have for many years engaged students and staff in **retreat** experiences to deepen their relationship with God. Making space for extended time for reflection enables and invites participants to listen deeply to the movement of the Spirit.
- The **Religious Education** learning area complements faith formation and so provides opportunities for students to freely respond to the invitation to faith and prayer that they encounter through their learning.
- Engagement in **social justice, charity and integral ecology** provides students with an encounter of the Gospel in action. This faith formation enables a connection with the Catholic tradition and responsiveness to mission, particularly to those in poor, unjust and marginalised circumstances.
- By accompanying young people, **youth ministry** is an important avenue for faith formation. The Catholic school provides a relational space where many forms of youth ministry, including that of the teacher, can take place. Youth ministry honours student voice and offers unique witness to faith.
- Students can often encounter invitation to deepening faith through immersion experiences, pilgrimages, assemblies, forums and festivals, amongst others. These **encounter experiences** are powerful when they are intentional and ongoing.
- Children and young people can be enlivened in faith by the **witness** of those around them to the person of Christ and the love of God. All members of the school community are called to this privileged presence in their everyday relationships.

*For more examples of student faith formation, explore the online version of this document on the [NCEC website](#).*



## Activity

Consider each of the categories of formation offered in the diagram and then explored through the examples

- More broadly – what principles of formation would you normally see in each category?
- Within your own school or community formation programs, where do you see them fitting in relationship to the diagram? What principles are evident in these programs?
- In relationship to each of the examples given, what principles would you see might be highlighted within that example?

*"God is the light in the darkness"*  
Georgina, Year 4, Victoria

The following examples of student faith formation are drawn from the diverse experiences across our country, illustrate the many and varied ways in which we approach faith formation for the variety of children and young people that we meet in Catholic schools. The examples given demonstrate the principles for faith formation of children and young people. They reflect a range across diocesan, congregational and separately governed schools. This collection is not exhaustive.

## Prayer, Liturgy and Sacramental Life

*Examples include...*

### **Sacramental programs and Teenage RCIA**

In most school communities, this will be centred around the parish and in partnership with families.

### **Eucharist and Prayer**

Students are given opportunities and guided through ways to contribute to the planning of liturgies and prayer services; they participate in the writing of prayers, offering scripture reflections, creating suitable environments and leading music.

Often students attend large school masses which do not allow the type of participation which can be formative. Where schools have access to ordained chaplains the 'class' mass can be more effective.

Some schools with a shared charism have their senior student leaders meet together, as part of their formation to write the prayer that enlivens each of their school communities for the year. Such a model would also be possible for groups of diocesan schools.

"I remember the story about a woman who had 10 coins and she lost one and she goes out of her way to find that one coin and that makes me feel like I understand God more. I think that story represents that if there is a group of people and one person is lost the rest of the people will try to find that person. In God's case if God loses one lamb, he'll spend a whole day trying to find them."

(Martha and Matthew, 11, NSW).

## Religious Education

*Examples include...*

### **Exploration of Scripture**

Learners in Religious Education make connections between Scripture and life experience.<sup>64</sup>

### **Godly Play**

Children have an innate sense of the presence of God. Godly Play is both a personal and communal experience based on the principles of Montessori and enables children to explore their faith through story, wonder and play, which encourages the nurturing of their own spirituality.

In RE lessons we listen to Scripture stories about what Jesus said, like a parable, and we work on it to get to know it.

(Laura, 12, Vic).

Whenever we do religion lessons we learn about God.

Adelaide, 7, QLD

## Retreats and reflection days

*Examples include...*

Retreat and reflection days are more than bonding experiences. They are opportunities for students to explore their faith and their own faith journeys.

## Social Justice, Charity and Integral Ecology

*Examples include...*

### Mini Vinnies

[Mini Vinnies](#) encourages and empowers primary school age students to advocate within their school and local community by putting their values into action. They learn about social justice issues, develop leadership skills and engage with the wider St Vincent de Paul Society.

### Mercy Girls in Action

The goal of the [Mercy Action Program](#) is to involve students in activities that give immediate and practical support to disadvantaged groups and in this we are inspired by the words of Catherine McAuley, founder of the Sisters of Mercy who said: “The poor need help today, not next week.”

A variety of Mercy Groups operate. The activities offer age-appropriate avenues to explore the works of Mercy and encourage both head and heart engagement.

### Caritas and Project Compassion and Just Leadership days

Through [Caritas](#) and [Project Compassion](#), all are encouraged to understand the needs of others.

Caritas support [Just Leadership Days](#) which aim to:

- Identify local, national and global issues of justice.
- Actively engage students in a process that helps them recognise they have the resources, the power and the responsibility to work for change.
- Identify what constitutes good leadership and why it's important to be a leader in this domain.
- Explore the qualities of leadership through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching.

### Christian Service learning

Christian service learning is a key component of many student formation programs. Schools endeavour to provide opportunities for service learning at home, in the parish, in the local community and through a range of Catholic agencies. Such programs endeavour to actively support and coordinate these initiatives, such programs are often a point of connection with the charism of their founders.



“Sacred Land”  
Mia, Year 6, Victoria

## Encounter experiences

Examples include...

### World Youth Day Pilgrimages

World Youth Day encourages participation of young people in an encounter centred on Jesus Christ. This event is an opportunity to personally experience the universality of the Catholic Church, and to share in hope with other young people a commitment to Christ in their lives. There are opportunities for prayer and Sacraments in the event itself as well as pilgrimage prior to the week-long festival and often, retreat afterwards. Students are supported by a chaplain and leaders.

### Australian Catholic Youth Festival (ACYF)

- Prior to the [ACYF](#) experience, schools are coordinated by school clusters to have formation with guest speakers; spiritual formation and preparation on the youth festival experience.

- ACYF is an experience in which young people come together to share faith and celebrate the vitality of the Catholic Church in Australia. There are opportunities to meet with Church leaders, participate in the Sacraments, and discover how each person is called to be a disciple.
- Post ACYF, schools are gathered in clusters for follow-up sessions of the experience. Students provide input into how they have taken the ACYF experience back to their school and Parish communities.

### Tasmania Catholic Youth Festival

A more local model of the above experiences with guest presenters, praise and worship, workshops, catechesis, youth activities, and an expo of Archdiocesan agencies, service and communities which connect young people to the wider Catholic community.

## Youth ministry

Examples include...

### Catholic Schools Youth Ministry International (CSYMI)

This model of faith formation consists of a retreat experience, a Religious Education curriculum component, senior youth ministry teams and connecting students into the broader Church community through the [CSYMI](#) and ACU Youth Academy. It is a phased model.

### Peer to Peer Ministry

This may be as simple as a strong mentoring program or as invitational as working with The National Evangelisation Team (NET).

Peer to peer ministry is often experienced through retreat and reflections days.

### Young Christian Students

[Young Christian Students](#) is a peer leadership approach utilising the see, judge, act method of taking action in student's lives.

### Gamechangers

"[Gamechangers](#) has a strong focus on journeying together while connecting with moments of change in students' lives. Students are invited to set out on a journey of faith and trust. As young Marists, they are embarking on the shared journey of our Christian story." (Gamechangers, Staff handbook, p. 5).

When youth speak to other youth about their experiences, they can encourage them to open up their hearts or their minds to something other, to God.

(Nadia, 17, WA)

## Witness

Examples include...

These can include:

- Youth Ministers
- Chaplains
- All Staff
- Peers

Witness is demonstrated when people proclaim the Gospel in living their lives and their faith, loving God. This lived witness draws others to relationship with Jesus.

### Make Jesus Real

[Make Jesus Real](#) focuses on Christ as the centre. Alongside parents, MJR strives to form the whole person in wisdom and truth, with a view to each child or young person's innate dignity.

Every single day if you walk out onto the oval you'll always see the spirit of Jesus.

(Rory, 12, Tas)



"God in all worlds"  
Rithiha, Year 5/6, Victoria

# CONCLUSION AND INVITATION

For two hundred years Catholic schools have continued their commitment to the faith formation of children and young people as an integral dimension to the provision of an excellent, holistic education. It is a commitment exercised in partnership with families and the local Church. Building on this rich tradition and in response to the changing social, ecclesial and educational contexts and challenges, this document has offered a vision and a set of elements for student faith formation in Catholic schools, together with examples of approaches. It is hoped that these can assist schools, in dialogue with the Catholic tradition, students' lived experiences and cultural contexts, to discern ways to more effectively participate in the Church's evangelising mission so that every student may "more deeply come to know that they are loved by God."<sup>65</sup>

The National Catholic Education Commission invites all those who share responsibility for formation within and in partnership with Catholic schools, to reflect on and share

this document as a resource for evaluation and ongoing renewal of approaches to the faith formation of students. The intentionality of this task has many implications for the school and education systems, and includes:

- parent and family partnerships, adult learning and formation
- staff formation (the NCEC document *Formation for Mission* is offered as a resource for this)
- strategic planning and discernment for student faith formation
- school leadership formation
- strategic partnerships – with the local Church, its agencies and each school's parish community.

As the Holy Spirit enables schools to work towards the vision for faith formation that this document offers, schools can look forward to students growing in their relationship with God and knowing that every person lives within the gracious offer of God's life and love.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

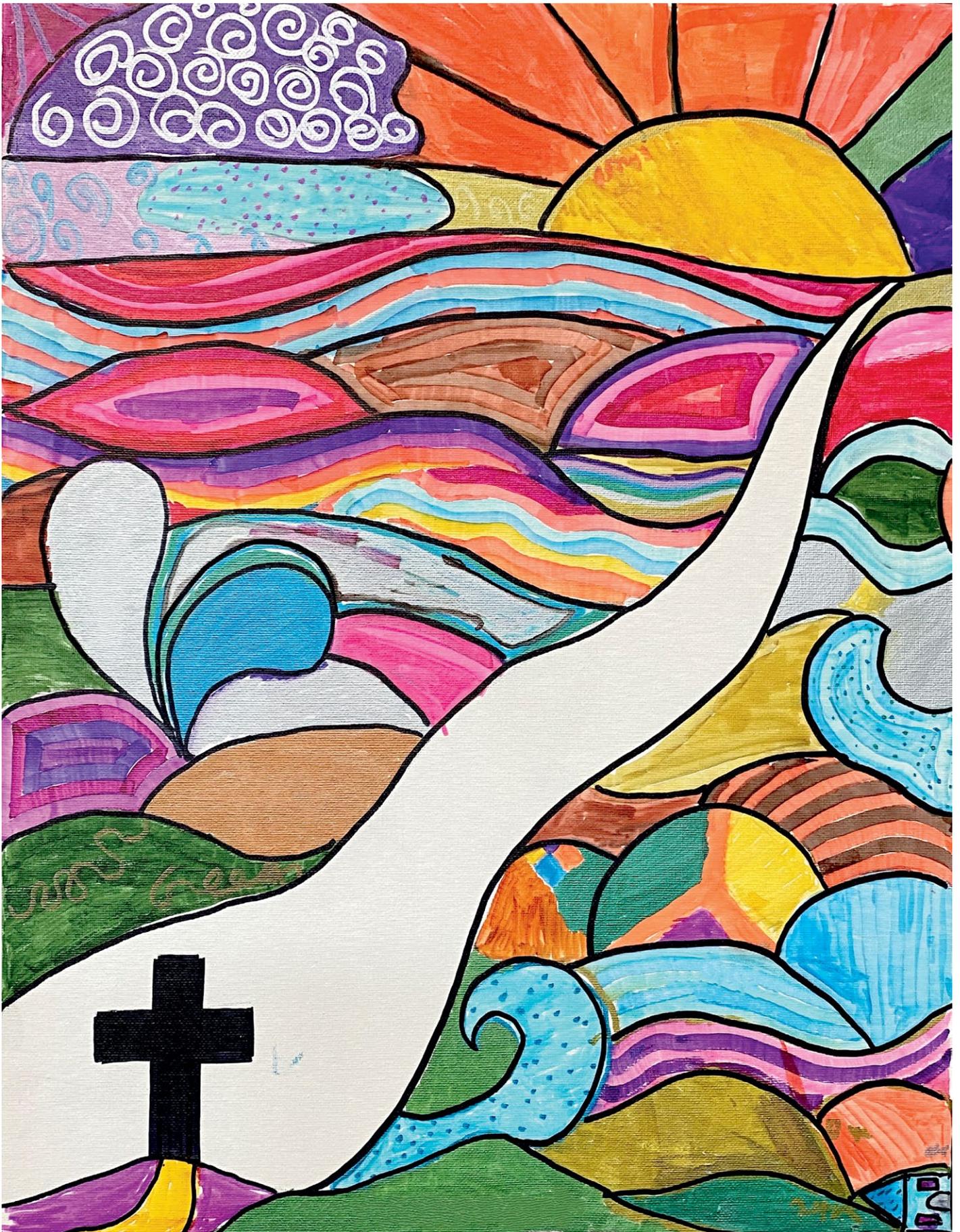
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Prepared for the NCEC by its Faith Formation and Religious Education Standing Committee.

Members at the time of writing: Sr Elizabeth Dodds RSC (NCEC Commissioner), Chair; Siobhan Allen (Catholic School Parents Australia); Laura Avery (NCEC Education Officer); Dr Anthony Cleary (NSW); Dr Christopher Cotter (WA); Dr Monica Dutton (Sisters of the Good Samaritan); Sally Egan (NCEC); Professor Br David Hall FMS (Marist Brothers); Peter Hamill (NCEC); Sr Geraldine Larkins RSJ (VIC); Patrick McGrath (ACT); Sr Catherine Mead RSJ (NT); Sharon O'Keefe (QLD); Dr Caroline Thompson (Mercy Partners); Martin Tobin (TAS) and Michael Vial (SA).

## ENDNOTES

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- 65 This reference is from this document's vision statement.



**"Faith in the Future"**  
Artwork by Year 5 & 6 students from  
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