

Chapter 20

Developing staff spirituality: A key component of the identity of religious schools

Complementing the earlier discussion of spirituality and education (Chapters 8, 9, 10, 18 and 19), this chapter looks at the role of school staff in creating an appropriate environment of spirituality that is beneficial for themselves and students, as well as consistent with the traditional mission of Catholic education.¹ This task is central to the specifically religious character of the church school as a learning community, and thus important for its identity. Many of the issues raised are relevant to other types of religious schools.

20.1 Clarifying the identity and mission of Catholic schools

It is not uncommon to find that questions about ethos, identity and Catholicity are considered at staff development seminars. No one is likely to deny their importance. But what is said by visiting speakers and participating staff often remains unconvincing. While heads may nod in agreement, staff are reluctant to acknowledge that they feel uncomfortable with the discussion without being able to articulate why. The theory does not seem to make sufficient contact with the reality of school life as they experience it; the language may be too idealistic or too 'pious'. Members of staff may not feel it is their place to press for greater relevance in addressing the issues.

For most of their history, staffed by members of religious orders, Catholic schools had a built-in religious identity. With this era now gone, the specifically religious character of the school requires more conscious construction.

A concern about identity is a common symptom of difficulties experienced by institutions trying to adapt to change. Usually, an understanding of change and creative responses lag behind the way ordinary practice manages to adapt to the new situation. Part of the process of adaptation involves *putting the practice into theory*. This has happened in the articulation of the mission of Catholic schools, which have increasingly become more diverse as regards the religious affiliation of staff and students.

It therefore remains an important task to continually clarify the identity and mission of the Catholic school in a pluralist community. It needs to be done in a way that is realistic, that has the professional support of teachers, and the acceptance of students and parents. As a publicly funded school, there is also a responsibility to the Australian community to have a rationale that is appropriate, honouring both its religious and its public commitments.

20.2 Spirituality in practice within the school community

As part of their contract to teach in a Catholic school, staff are expected to give professional support to the school's ethos. This means public participation in school liturgies and prayers, affirmation of the values that underpin the school's operation,

and acceptance of the various ways in which religion enters into the life and curriculum of the school. Staff endorse the school's *spirituality infrastructure*.

But there is something of a step from this professional responsibility to the idea of developing staff spirituality. For staff, as for many secularised students (see Chapters 8 and 9), the word 'spirituality' is ambiguous, and they are unsure of the *personal implications* in the idea of staff spirituality – it may conjure up a range of feelings both positive and negative. Hence it needs to be handled carefully in an inviting and not an intimidating way.

While there are few members of religious orders still teaching in Catholic schools, the congregations often try to ensure that their history and distinctive style of Catholic schooling continues on in their institutions. The words 'charism of the religious founder' are often used to convey this meaning. As regards staff spirituality, care is needed in the translation of religious order traditions so that they are relevant to the staff.

20.3 Personal and corporate spirituality

A constructive approach to enhancing staff spirituality that takes into account the tentativeness that some staff feel about this topic begins by differentiating between 'corporate' and 'personal' spirituality.

While personal spirituality is the pattern of thinking and spiritual practice chosen by the individual, corporate spirituality refers to the patterns of prayer, liturgy, and public references to religion and spiritual matters that are organised for community participation; it is designed to nourish personal spirituality as well as to state the religious aspirations of the school as a type of community of faith sponsored by the Catholic Church. Corporate staff spirituality is evident when teachers share willingly in particular spiritual exercises that express their sense of partnership in serving the needs of students and fellow staff members. This will overlap to some extent with, and draw on, their personal spirituality; however, the latter remains basically private and is usually outside the scope of general disclosure.

It is important to acknowledge this distinction because it respects the freedom that is crucial for personal spirituality, while highlighting the need for staff involvement in, and professional support for, the school's corporate religious practices. These are structured to serve as resources that we hope will nourish the individual spirituality of students and staff.

The ambiguous (and at times negative) response of staff when spirituality is being discussed often has to do with a perception that the school is trying to change them personally, rather than involving them professionally in building up the school's spiritual resources. Engagement at the professional level is the appropriate strategy because all staff have a responsibility to contribute positively to the social and spiritual environment of the school just as much as for other aspects of school life such as pastoral care and discipline. First, this means public endorsement of the school's corporate religious practice. Take for example the sacrament of Reconciliation, about which there is much uncertainty in the wider Catholic community. No matter what a teacher's own stance is on this question, he or she has a responsibility to support the school's efforts to give its students encouraging *access* to this sacrament. What long-term place any element of Catholic religious practice will have in a young person's spirituality cannot be determined by teachers or the school.

However, the school needs to give their students an adequate introduction to the basic practices of the tradition – and in particular, a positive experience of liturgy, sacraments and prayer. Generally, Catholic schools do an excellent job in the celebration of Eucharist and Reconciliation. The decline of overall Catholic religious practice needs explanation in terms of other factors – the schools are not the problem.

If the school is an authentic learning community, then its corporate spirituality should not only be geared to help the students but also to enhance the personal spirituality of teachers. This means the construction of activities that are intended specifically for the benefit of staff.

20.4 Enhancing corporate staff spirituality

Before examining matters that influence the development of corporate staff spirituality, some of the characteristic views of teachers are listed. An article on the spirituality of school administrators reported the following:²

- The term ‘spirituality’ is not common in the vocabulary of lay teachers (though this is changing).
- Spirituality is rooted in reality.
- Spirituality is exhibited in the quality of relationships between people.
- Spirituality is exhibited in the service of others, particularly in work, school or family settings.
- Spirituality is difficult to define for lay people who do not engage in significant discussion of the term.

These show a pragmatic approach to spirituality and a realistic grasp of the difficulties in implementing programs and structures in a setting that does not readily adapt to a contemplative lifestyle; the sort of withdrawal that one tends to associate with spirituality is not attuned to the routine, bells and movement of bodies typical of any school.

So what is needed first is a redefinition of spirituality as it applies to those teaching in schools. Attempts to promote a corporate spirituality suitable for teachers needs to give attention to developing among the staff a climate that helps foster a sense of spiritual identity. This can be assisted by the following:

- an informed and caring leadership
- staff sharing in the decision-making process within the school
- individual teachers feeling acknowledged and valued as members of staff
- staff having empathy with, and giving professional support to, the stated aims of the school
- staff actively contributing to the realisation of the school’s aims
- periodic staff prayer or paraliturgies with the emphasis on shared professional commitments rather than on personal beliefs
- the celebration of significant events together (special school events and attainments, individual and group contributions and achievements, as well as some social events like birthdays and the birth of a child)
- special professional development opportunities that are designed for the personal benefit of staff (complementing the focus on enhancing students’ spirituality).

20.5 Empathy with and professional support for the stated aims of the school

The ideal of having good corporate staff spirituality is implicit in the aims and purposes of Catholic schools. However, the significant changes in the school's role over the last thirty years have naturally influenced expectations of staff spirituality. Before the Second Vatican Council, the role of the Catholic school was clearly defined and it seemed to be understood unambiguously – even though there were some exceptions. There were striking cultural differences; for example, it was unlikely that Italian Catholics in Australia would have made much sense of the Australian Catholic experience as seen through Irish eyes.

At that time, the main purpose of Catholic schools was the handing on of the Catholic faith. What was offered was a tightly defined spiritual and educational package. While its religious purposes have remained the same, social change and the differences in Catholicism since the Council have necessitated revisions of the purposes and rationale for Catholic schooling and religious education (8.2 and Chapter 16).

Mission or vision statements and similar documents have been written by schools and diocesan authorities to articulate the evolving aims of Catholic schools. These statements identify the philosophy and aspirations of those involved in the school community and as such are valuable. However, one aspect that is important, but usually absent, is an acknowledgment of the difficulties that achieving such aims will entail. This does not imply cynicism, but states the obvious and acknowledges the failures that accompany all human endeavours. It is refreshing to see that writers of mission statements also have their feet on the ground. A good example of this is evident in one Jesuit mission statement which noted that 'obstacles are numerous, well-documented and uniformly discouraging'. But it remained important for the mission statement to embody the ideal.

Despite the difficulties in developing a good mission statement, a school staff can realistically strive to achieve what all can agree is a common and laudable task. When the role of the Catholic school is no longer so easily defined as it once was, the philosophy that underpins the school's existence needs to be periodically revised and articulated anew.

While the line of argument that 'we are different from public schools' needs to be handled carefully and with restraint to avoid self-righteous rhetoric, the real differences, particularly in relation to the role of religion in the life and curriculum of the school, need to be spelled out clearly and realistically. If not, then the school runs into ambiguity over its *raison d'être*.

20.6 Periodic staff prayer and liturgies/paraliturgies

There are problems associated with having a regular time for staff prayer and liturgies. For many staff, before school or after school are difficult times. In an already crammed timetable, when are these prayerful times going to be slotted in? Furthermore, not all staff may feel comfortable with or wish to participate in regular liturgy and prayer. Some members of staff are not Catholic – should they be included or excluded? When staff liturgies and prayer groups are organised out of school time they are often poorly attended. Should something so central as the development of corporate staff spirituality take priority over other important commitments?

What are the likely responses to the argument that attendance at staff liturgy and prayer might be made compulsory – a mandatory part of the job, like the supervision of a sport or an extracurricular activity? Possible but hardly viable. It is unlikely that this form of coercion would bring about the sort of spiritual enhancement that a school would want for its staff and it would be likely to stifle the sort of personal climate that is essential for a healthy corporate spirituality.

If there is to be time set aside for staff prayer then the activity must be well planned and relevant. To be relevant, prayers and readings must have some readily accessible meaning for those who are participating. It is not good enough to have a reading that is so distant from the experience and interests of teachers as to make it irrelevant; or a reading that sounds impersonal, and that has little application to the common mission of those assembled.

Staff prayers need to be brief and should reflect the concerns and needs of the school community and its reasons for celebrating – things like:

- prayer for a difficult or troubled student (no names need be mentioned)
- prayer for a class that may be having a difficult time
- prayers that reflect on the specific and demanding role of the educator
- prayers for members of staff and their families
- prayers that reflect on the passage of time and seasons, which are all too often ignored or taken for granted
- prayers that are inclusive and make all members of staff, no matter what their religious affiliation, feel comfortable and accepted
- useful readings from biographies or other texts, and not just from the scriptures.

Often the experience of staff prayer has been of the rubber stamp variety, lacking in authenticity – something that should be seen to be done because ‘we are a Catholic school’. Either that or a painful striving for deep relevance with a clutter of candles and symbols punctuated with ‘deep and meaningful’ pauses; most of these experiences reveal more about the specific personal needs of the presenter than any consideration of the sensitivities of others. Staff prayer should not be dominated by any particular person (Religious Education Coordinator, the ‘last’ member of a religious order on staff, or someone who thinks he or she has a monopoly on spirituality). There is a danger that as the number of personnel from religious orders in Catholic schools dwindles, some of the remaining religious feel a need to prove that they still have a ‘special charisma’ (read ‘superiority’) in spiritual matters. Another problem is ‘honeymoon spirituality’ where presenters are so attached to their own idiosyncratic spiritual experience that they naively believe everyone else should share it and they try to make others endure the same experience, with the expectation that they emote on cue. Presenters always need to be respectful of the emotional or prayerful responses of participants and should avoid any potential manipulation, leaving people as free as possible while retaining the sense of corporate prayer.

When there are a number of people together whose personal spiritualities and prayer lives are varied, it is better to present a service that is simple and matter-of-fact, leaving participants free to have their own private reflection together with simple public responses, rather than one that is too specific in its objectives – for example avoiding exercises in ‘emotional engineering’ where participants are encouraged to feel joyous or grateful. In suggesting simplicity and respect, this is not advocating

institutionalised boredom or suffocation of the imagination. What is advocated is prayerful relevance and sanity.

20.7 When is it appropriate to pray as a staff?

1. The *beginning of staff meetings* should be one focal point for staff prayer. A few minutes spent in prayer can bring a sense of purpose and serenity to the proceedings. The long drawn out spectacular shows or personal performances are unlikely to be as effective.
2. *Staff spirituality days* and *retreats* devoted to furthering an understanding of the role and purposes of Catholic education; another topic for such days can be the place of prayer in the life of individuals. The choice of venue and speakers are crucial for the success of these events; both should be vetted carefully. These topics are delicate and must be handled sensitively; staff can easily be alienated if speakers are too dogmatic, or too 'pie in the sky' and 'everything around us is *lovely*'.

20.8 Teachers in Catholic schools as spiritual leaders

One of the activities that occupies a great deal of children's time is watching adults. School students do it all the time. They get to know what each teacher is like both as a professional and as a person. As a class, they replay teachers' idiosyncrasies to perfection. In role plays and end-of-year concerts the characteristics of teachers have often been played back to an appreciative, discerning audience.

Students see teachers as leaders even though they may not always be able to articulate this. They may learn more from the way teachers treat them than from what the school tries to teach about spirituality, prayerfulness, good behaviour and appropriate manners. Young people will first learn about spirituality and prayerfulness through their personal interaction with parents and significant others.

This is in keeping with the Gospel of John:

Anyone who says 'I love God' and hates other people, is a liar, since a person who does not love the others they can see, cannot love God, who is invisible ... anyone who loves God must also love others. (John 4:20-1)

These words also appropriately identify the most fundamental element in a healthy staff spirituality. More than anything else, there must exist a commitment to care for each other's wellbeing. However, life experience tells individuals that it is easier to care for some than it is to care for others. No statements like the above, inviolate as they are, can turn dislike into like – besides, is it part of the teacher's brief to *like* all other staff? What is required is liking with the head and not necessarily with the heart. School staff who genuinely respect the dignity of others do not circulate gossip, backstab or sit in judgment of others. There is a distinction between constructive analysis or critique of teaching styles and comments that reflect negatively about a person's character and professional behaviour. It is within the context of a group of committed people working together, aware of tensions and disagreements, that the basis of respect and support needs to be established.

Teachers need to acknowledge that they have not chosen this or that particular person to work with, and that they may dislike particular staff members more or less strongly. Developing a sense of professional, educational Christian community does not mean that they have to like these people. But it does mean that they should be

accorded respect and gracious cooperation so that together the school staff can discharge its corporate responsibility to maintain an environment that is truly educational and personally affirming for students in particular, but also for staff. This sort of thinking is also relevant to the aim of developing a corporate spirituality. 'The effective teaching community embraces diversity: in opinions, in cultures, in ages, in viewpoints, in experiences, in beliefs, in expressions.'³

Notes

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- 1 An earlier version of the material in this chapter was published as ML Crawford & GM Rossiter 1993, *Developing staff spirituality, a key component in the identity of Catholic schools*.
 2. AJ Pistone. 1990, *The administrator as spiritual leader* (quoting the research findings of RM Hoatson).
 - 3 C Glynn 1990, *Not by manuals alone*.