Faith Formation of Staff in Australian Catholic Schooling: a Preliminary Stimulus Paper
[W]e must remember that teachers and educators fulfil a specific Christian vocation and share an equally specific participation in the mission of the Church, to the extent that “it depends chiefly on them whether the Catholic school achieves its purpose”.
(Catholic Schools on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, 19 and Gravissimum Educationis, 25)

Catholic educators need a “formation of the heart”: they need to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirits to others, so that their educational commitment becomes a consequence deriving from their faith, a faith which becomes active through love (cf. Gal 5:6)
(Educating Together in Catholic Schools, 25, cf Deus Caritas Est, 31)

My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an “extra” or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing.
(Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, 273)

Faith Formation: a strategic priority

Faith Formation is the strategy of highest priority in the NCEC Faith Formation and Religious Education Work Plan endorsed by the NCEC and the BCCE in 2015. The strategy sets out to promote shared understandings of policies, strategies and resources for formation for mission of leaders and staff. A key part is an ‘audit’ of formation programs for school leaders and school and system staff across Australia. This preliminary paper is a summary of key findings of this examination and appraisal of frameworks and programs. It is a precursor of a document with deeper analysis and appendices that provide a range of case studies of successful practice in faith formation.

This paper cannot provide formal evaluation of the impact of these programs or the quality of the andragogy, reflective processes or content. However, it can report factually on nature of programs, their stated intentions and how systems or authorities report their reception and efficacy. In so doing the paper makes a broad appraisal of formation by considering programs in light of the ‘understanding of faith formation’ found in the work plan.

The main sources of the data on faith formation in this paper include formal documentation of approaches and programs by school systems or authorities (including strategic plans and annual reports), conversations with a range of leaders and networks responsible for faith formation, and analysis of the 2015 faith formation leaders’ national gathering pro-forma responses provided by 22 dioceses and seven RI/PJP groups. For the sake of brevity this paper uses the term ‘educational bodies’ when referring to them in general.

According to the work plan the Standing Committee will “evaluate the data in order to refine the purposes and characteristics of quality staff formation and identify strategies that are highly valued and effective”. This paper provides an initial basis for the Standing Committee’s task.

In practical terms the task examines three broad areas:

1. the common threads in formation programs
2. the strategies and types of programs offered
3. how leaders assess program effectiveness and aspects about which leaders are most enthusiastic.
An understanding of Faith Formation

The work plan proposes a holistic Christ-centred understanding of faith formation. It is the norm for the examination and appraisal of faith formation in this paper. Without unnecessarily complicating the broad areas for examination, it is important to note the range of factors that have been taken into consideration that arise out of this normative understanding of faith formation. All these factors may not found in any one program but their presence is desirable among all the offerings of an educational body. These are expressed as questions in the following table. This paper does not address these questions one by one but employs them as a whole as a basis for examination and appraisal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of the NCEC ‘Understanding of Faith Formation’</th>
<th>Some corresponding factual questions to consider across a suite of formation programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is Christ-centred:</td>
<td>Are the framework and content explicitly Christological, scripturally rich and ecclesially grounded?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• it articulates the life death and resurrection of Jesus and his Gospel as a revelation of the Father’s love for us and the way to true freedom as it is proclaimed and lived in the contemporary Catholic Church</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is a process that is</td>
<td>Is it purposeful, strategic, developmental and sequential?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• intentional</td>
<td>Are ‘formation of the heart’ and the practice of prayer central?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ongoing</td>
<td>Is there differentiation according to individual needs and roles? Does it set out to build communal identity and culture?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• reflective</td>
<td>Is it invitational, experiential and relevant, building on participants’ personal story and everyday reality?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It focuses on the growth of</td>
<td>Is there an affective focus on a person’s faith journey and discipleship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• individuals, and</td>
<td>Is there substantive theological content?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• communities</td>
<td>Are personal vocation and mission sensibilities promoted?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is from</td>
<td>Does it seek to develop the willingness, confidence and capacities of participants to serve the evangelising mission of Catholic school education?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• their lived experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is growth in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• spiritual awareness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• theological understanding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• vocational motivation, and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• capabilities for mission and service in the world.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are the framework and content explicitly Christological, scripturally rich and ecclesially grounded?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it purposeful, strategic, developmental and sequential?</td>
<td>Are ‘formation of the heart’ and the practice of prayer central?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there differentiation according to individual needs and roles? Does it set out to build communal identity and culture?</td>
<td>Is it invitational, experiential and relevant, building on participants’ personal story and everyday reality?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there an affective focus on a person’s faith journey and discipleship?</td>
<td>Is there substantive theological content?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are personal vocation and mission sensibilities promoted?</td>
<td>Does it seek to develop the willingness, confidence and capacities of participants to serve the evangelising mission of Catholic school education?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strategic Intent and Frameworks for Faith Formation

The websites of most educational bodies publish their strategic directions and annual reports. The formation of staff in their schools has paramount place in their strategic intent and reporting. In fact more than 90% of web-published strategic plans and annual reports detail their priority or strategies for formation. This overt focus is the result of a steady shift over the last 15 years to greater strategic intent in staff formation and extension of system responsibilities beyond the provision of professional learning. It is complemented by the increasing number of educational bodies that include ‘formation’ in the position title of certain staff.

There is widespread evidence from most educational bodies that faith formation programs are built around understandings generally consistent with the table above. Many educational bodies have a suite of formation programs without necessarily publishing a conceptual underpinning but their intentions and characteristics generally are evident in their literature. Some bodies have published formal ‘frameworks’ for staff formation. Characteristics of these frameworks include defining statements of its purpose and characteristics, often underpinned by a dynamic model for formation. From the point of view of this study a framework enables one to confirm more readily the aspects of formation in the table above. Frameworks such as Brisbane, Sydney, Townsville, Good Samaritan Education, Edmund Rice Education Australia and foundational documentation from South Australia, Wollongong, Mercy Partners, Mary Aikenhead Ministries all demonstrate such an integrated expression of Catholic formation. The models or paradigms that underpin them are explicitly Catholic, holistic, experiential and reflective, for example:

- My Story, Our Story, The Story with ‘head, heart and hands’
- Being Human, Being Disciple, Being Church
- Christ: Prayer (Knowing the Story), Community Entering the Story), Mission (Shaping the Story)

The Participants in Faith Formation

There is a wide range of programs targeted at staff at significant points in their ministry of Catholic education. There also is a general expectation that all teaching staff undertake some formation annually. Analysis of the responses to the 2015 national gathering and research and discussions in other forums indicate that it is established practice among the vast majority of educational bodies to provide for specific programs for school principals, for those with delegated responsibility for leadership of mission and/or religious education (eg, RECs, APRE, APRIM, Director of Mission), other senior leaders or leadership teams, teachers in general and early career teachers/teachers new to the body. Furthermore, diocesan bodies generally provide formation for CEO/CSO staff and RI/PJP bodies to board members.

On the other hand, mention of specific formation for ‘aspiring leaders’ or ‘middle leaders’ (such those responsible for a secondary subject faculty or pastoral responsibility for a year group) was less evident. This is significant since middle leaders carry so much of the operational aspects of curriculum and pastoral care and presumably are the group from which the next generation of school leaders will emerge.

The table on the following page demonstrates this analysis in percentage terms.
### Target Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Group</th>
<th>Formation by a diocese (%)</th>
<th>Formation by RI/PJP (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=22</td>
<td>N=7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals (specifically)</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others leaders/leadership teams</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REC/mission leaders or equivalent</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspiring Leaders</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Leaders</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early career/new teachers</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board members</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO/CSO Staff</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further analysis indicates significant differentiation within target groups, especially principals (eg, induction and formation of new principals, experienced principals etc.) and to a lesser extent this is the case with teachers as well.

The table is not exhaustive. In some cases the target group is a school. For example, Wollongong has programs in which schools enrol and commit to a critical mass of staff undertaking a three year program. There also is a wide range of other participant groups that are named by a minority of educational bodies, such as support staff, counsellors, aboriginal educational assistants, and business managers. It should also be noted that there are programs in which parents, catechists and/or parishioners participate.

An issue that requires further scrutiny is how many teachers and other staff participate in these programs. Programs focusing on individuals in particular roles tend to have high participation. Increasing expectations of accreditation create a culture of involvement. On the other hand formation offerings are invitational and the majority of teaching staff are under less obligation to take part in formal programs outside their school and feedback suggests that many do not.

There are formal accreditation policies and programs differentiated according to role. Accreditation as a teacher of religious education is a long standing and pervasive expectation, characterised more by formal study programs but now complemented increasingly by formative dimensions. Accreditation to teach in a Catholic school has a long standing in Western Australia and Victoria. The more recent five level accreditation in NSW/ACT is strongly underpinned by formation, especially at the level of beginning staff and teachers, and participation in formation is expected for currency of accreditation at all levels.
Modes of Faith Formation

Educational bodies report a range of modes of faith formation. The vast majority of them use the word ‘retreat’ in their faith formation descriptions. ‘Retreat’ identifies the name of the event or the processes used within a ‘conference’ or ongoing set of structured meetings. Other common approaches are programs that have a number of interrelated meetings across a period of time and sessions of one day or several hours’ duration. RI/PJP bodies are more likely to offer pilgrimages, especially for leaders, generally associated with their foundation, charism and history, as well as immersion experiences (overseas and Australia) associated with their ministries. Diocesan pilgrimages for younger staff to World Youth Day are under reported in the table below because the data was gathered in 2015.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode of Formation</th>
<th>Formation by a diocese (%)</th>
<th>Formation by RI/PJP (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=22</td>
<td>N=7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retreat (name of event)</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retreat style (processes named)</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference (name of event)</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program with regular, ongoing meetings</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formation session (one day or session)</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilgrimage</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Immersion</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many educational bodies have significant expectations about and forms of subsidy for formal postgraduate qualifications in religious education and theology for a range of staff. Some educational bodies include these tertiary courses within ‘formation’ but most do not. This is a pointer to their operational understanding of formation as holistic, experiential and affective dimensions. Their documentation makes greater reference to reflective processes and affective outcomes than to specific content knowledge. Prayer, Scripture, personal faith journey, group facilitation, community meals, quiet time and space feature prominently.

Assessment of the Effectiveness of Faith Formation

Responses about the impact of these faith formation initiatives generally are very positive. It should be noted that this is self-reported feedback based participant evaluations, the demand for the programs, and the perception of leaders of faith formation about the impact on their system. There is particular satisfaction with the perceived outcomes of programs for school leaders; for the development of structured, differentiated programs across a system; and for the apparent positive impact on schools. Enhanced ‘Catholic Identity’ is identified by some, especially those associated with the Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project. Those providing pilgrimages and immersions are very positive about their impact. While a number acknowledge that they have limited documented evidence, the enthusiasm for what has been achieved is very evident and should not be underestimated.

There is insufficient formal research on the formation needs of individuals and the effectiveness of formation programs. The Christian Research Association has undertaken research for some bodies and Dr Jill Gowdie wrote a doctoral thesis on participants’ reflections of Brisbane’s ‘Catching Fire’ project. The most significant research will be the CEWA survey of 4000 staff undertaken in 2015 seeking to understand how faith formation of staff in Catholic education can be nurtured.
Common Threads in Faith Formation

- Multi-targeted and multi-layered faith formation for leaders and staff is provided by every educational body examined in this paper.
- The vast majority provide opportunities for principals, other leaders, RECs or equivalent as well as invitational offerings for general staff.
- Faith formation documentation exhibits to varying degrees the features identified in the Standing Committee’s ‘understanding of faith formation’, namely:
  - The focus, content and reflective processes are identifiably Catholic (without necessarily using the term, ‘Christ-centred’).
  - Programs are not ad-hoc; they are purposeful; in some cases it may not be clear how some one-off sessions fit a bigger picture. There is widespread specific references to reflective practice, prayer and the use of scripture and language akin to ‘formation of the heart’.
  - The growth of individuals in their spiritual journey is a strong component, but documentation is uneven in terms of the growth of community or shared identity.
  - Participants’ lived experiences, personal story and professional realities feature strongly.
  - Growth in spiritual awareness is the most evident of the four domains in the final phrase. Terminology akin to ‘vocational motivation’ is the least evident for the most part but is stronger in formation of early career teachers. The language of mission is more likely to be used by RI/PJP groups with the term ‘identity’ being more likely in diocesan documentation.
- The use of the term ‘retreat’ to identify an event is pervasive.
- It is unclear how many general teaching staff take up optional experiences for formation.
- The documentation generally is positive about the importance of faith formation, the feedback from participants and the impact of the programs.
- There is very limited independent research on the impact of the programs.

Next Steps in the Work Plan

After the 2015 national gathering of leaders of faith formation the Standing Committee recommended further steps in the examination and appraisal of faith formation. Among these are the refinement the inquiry tool to delve more widely and deeply into the purposes, process and impact of formation programs across Australia; the establishment of a digital platform for the ongoing sharing of programs; and the development of guidelines for the evaluation of formation programs. All these will be completed in 2016 and will result in a statement on principles and good practice in faith formation. The positive spirit of collaboration will be sustained through the hosting of another national gathering of leaders of faith formation and a NCEC Conference workshop on faith formation in Perth in June 2016.

This paper concludes by noting that Catholic school education arguably is the major avenue for lay ministry in the Australian Church. The data points to the likelihood that the staff of Catholic schools and systems benefit from some of the most valuable faith formation opportunities for Australian Catholics. The ongoing challenges of sustainability and improvement remain but the current situation offers great hope for the mission of Australian Catholic schooling.
Appendix

This appendix contains three case studies of faith formation initiatives built around formation frameworks that are congruent with the NCEC’s ‘Understanding of Faith Formation.

Case Study 1 is from Brisbane Catholic Education. It outlines how a large school system with well-established formation programs responded strategically to a loss of momentum for faith formation among some schools.

Case Study 2 is from Catholic Education, Diocese of Wollongong, a medium sized school system that drew on some of Brisbane’s work. The case study explains the effects of a school committing to specific program, the Lamplighter Spiritual Formation Leadership program.

Case Study 3 is from Good Samaritan Education, a diocesan collegial public juridic person that conducts ten colleges. It outlines one of its formation initiatives, immersion experiences that link staff to the mission and ministry of the Good Samaritan Benedictine tradition.
The BCE approach to spiritual formation seeks to join the meaning making of personal narrative and the mission shaping of the Christian meta-narrative in a way that maintains the integrity with both. The system-wide approach to spiritual formation is outlined in the Framework document (*Catching Fire*) Model and Matrix, underpinned by well researched design principles and implemented in a ‘whole community’ focus through formation programs, resources and strategies.

The staff formation programs undertaken by a cross section of staff in each school community which commits to *Catching Fire*, explore the BCE Spiritual Formation Framework’s three theological dimensions in a developmental and sequential way through distinct programs, each targeting different groupings of staff within the participating community. Thus, the participating schools committing as a Catching Fire community over three years are expected to engage in FOUR ways:

1. **The Formation Framework:**
   Familiarising all staff with the approach and shared language.

2. **Planning and Goal Setting:**
   Ensuring that planning and goal setting occur for individual staff members and the whole staff, linked to school and systemic annual goal setting and strategic renewal planning.

3. **General Systemic Initiatives and Resources:**
   Using the range of systemic resources provided to all schools.

4. **Catching Fire Staff Formation Programs:**
   Sponsoring particular staff to participate in the three staff formation programs.
The three distinct Catching Fire programs are each connected to vocation and context:

**Guiding Lights** (9 days over 3 years) – for principals and school leadership

**Keepers of the Flame** (8 days over 3 years) – for experienced teachers

**Spirit Fire** (10 days over 3 years) – for ‘initiators’ within the school community

In addition, the Facilitators Formation program (4 days over one year) develops the skills and attitudes associated with being a facilitator of formation within one’s own school.

**Strategic Intention in Building Capacity**

The strategic purpose in engaging a number of staff from the same school in the three formation programs is to build a core of shared experiences, shared understanding and shared praxis in order to influence the wider culture in the school. Targeting a cross-section of staff that includes leadership, classroom teachers and support staff has the strategic intention of capitalising on the influence of leadership as well as generating broader staff ownership. In addition to this, on completing the three year program, particular staff are invited to complete a one year Facilitators’ Formation course to provide school-based animation of staff formation.

In this way, the strategic objective has been to grow capacity across the system among staff.

**The Challenge for the System**

While programs and very significant sustained impact on staff of the BCE approach is well documented, the strategic impact in influencing wider school culture has been uneven across the system. BCE has 12,000 staff and 139 schools. It is a system with many large projects and big strategy engagements with schools and has undergone a significant re-structure at the same time as the rollout of this system strategy. In this mix, the strategic traction within schools lost momentum. In smaller dioceses where the BCE whole community approach has been adopted, the impact has been deep because all school communities have been able to be engaged relatively quickly and monitored more easily.

**The Response to the System**

Dr Jill Gowdie, the Principal Education Officer outlines the response:

In responding to the challenge we find here in Brisbane, we are prototyping the animation of the staff formation strategy program in two schools. One is an ecumenical Prep to Year 12 college on the coast and the other a large inner city primary school The principals of both these schools have been involved in the programs before and one now co-facilitates one of our leadership formation programs. They know the transformational impact of the programs and are keen to ensure a change of culture in their new schools. In conjunction with an external animator who is a former BCE team member we are tailoring the program to each school in order to sharpen the impact and better build on the skill, experience and energy of the participants. This is going very, very well. As we continue, we will use the strategy in these two schools as a prototype for the emerging graduates of the Facilitator Formation program as well as area supervisors to work with their school clusters, again seeking to widen ownership and continue to build capacity across the system.
Case Study 2: Catholic Education Diocese of Wollongong
Schools committing to Staff Spiritual Formation

Prior to 2009 Wollongong Catholic schools had solid experiences of week-long programs for staff spiritual formation, firstly in collaboration with other dioceses and later through its own highly regarded programs. However, among other things, secondary schools and male teachers were under-represented among participants. Calls for further renewal came from Principals. There was extensive ‘ground-up’ consultation across the school system along with research into good practice which led to the adoption of key ideas from Brisbane. From 2010 programs were implemented according to what school staffs had requested.

The Lighting the Way Spiritual Formation Framework (2011) aligns the four movements of the diocesan Religious Education program’s Emmaus paradigm with the Catching Fire nine formation capacities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Making Sense</th>
<th>Presence</th>
<th>Prayer</th>
<th>Journey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gaining Access</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Principle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebration</td>
<td>Ritual</td>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding</td>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Fidelity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Lamplighter Spiritual Formation Leadership Program

This program is one of a number of successful and continuing programs that emanate from the Lighting the Way Spiritual Formation Framework. The Lamplighter program runs in conjunction with the Shining Lights program. Schools commit to both programs for a period of three years.¹

The Lamplighter program has a two-fold focus: to offer personal spiritual formation and to develop skills for mission within school communities. The key objective is that schools are led and staffed by individuals who are committed to the mission of Catholic education and continue to develop strong Catholic Identity within their communities.

¹ The Shining Lights Program is a three-year program where three teachers from a school attend a series of two-day overnight retreats. In effect there are seven people from each school entering into formation that are then sharing that experience. A third and important program is the Alight for the World Early Career Program that is a four year program for teachers in their first years of teaching.
The Principal and three members of staff with the potential to be leaders of in-school staff formation form a core team. This team attends nine days of formation over three years: four days in the first year, three in the second and a two-day overnight retreat in the third. Each Formation Day is based on a different Formation Capacity that sits within the Spiritual Formation Framework. The Formation days are based on prayer and scripture, each day building on the day before. Teams acquire skills and resources to form staff in their place of work based on the model: ‘Information leads to Formation which leads to Transformation’.

Some Evidence of Success

- It is significant to note that no advertising or communication has been made to schools since 2013 and programs are over-subscribed. In fact 89% of secondary schools have participated in Lamplighter/Shining Lights.
- There is a discernible change in whole-of-diocese culture about school responsibility for and commitment to staff spiritual formation.
- School annual spirituality days are planned for, not ad hoc. Documentation demonstrates that school teams increasingly run their own without calling for external resources. Likewise, regular staff prayer is more organised and purposeful.
- Several participants in the Lamplighter program have been appointed as Principals.
- Fifty percent of Principals now participate in accredited spiritual direction.
- Analysis of evaluation feedback from the same participants after day one of Lamplighter (in the first year) and the retreat of Days 8&9 (in the third year) demonstrates significant development in spiritual awareness and commitment to mission.
- Some schools have initiated a (nine-year) cycle of spirituality days built on the nine formation capacities.

Some Reasons for Lamplighter’s Effectiveness

The leaders of the program identify the following reasons for success:

- The vision of the Director of Schools shared by the Bishop
- Placing initially the responsibility for leadership, consultation, design, implementation and evaluation within the Office of the Director.
- Genuine consultation about staff needs along with research about good practice
- A framework that provides congruence and a shared language among leaders
- A degree of mutual obligation between system and school for program funding
- Modelling Lamplighter formation on ‘formation of the heart’ as the exemplar for participants’ leadership on formation with their school staff.
- The observation that most successful schools have been strategic and ‘have taken it slowly’ in order to embed real cultural change and commitment to formation.
Good Samaritan Education is responsible for ten colleges, each with a distinctive spirit that connects them to the local Church in which they are situated. The Good Samaritan Education formation framework rests on three pillars that are centred on Christ – Prayer, Community and Mission. It applies to all engaged in governance and teaching in Good Samaritan schools. There is a wide range of formation programs, one of which is staff immersion experiences. They are designed to link staff to the contemporary mission and ministry of the Good Samaritan Benedictine tradition in locations such as The Philippines, Kiribati, Timor Leste and Australian indigenous communities.

The structure and purpose of the immersion experiences are firmly grounded in Catholic identity, the Good Samaritan tradition, a theology of mission, education theory and the principles of adult learning. These design principles are represented in this diagram.

Immersions are not about doing, they are about being.

A ‘Listen, Learn, Live’ methodology has been developed to guide participants through a reflective process which uses foundational elements of the tradition to engage them in a personal response.
The Effectiveness of the Immersion Experiences

Among the findings from extensive evaluation and of doctoral research being undertaken on the impact of the GSE immersion experiences are the following:

• It provides participants with the opportunity to reflect on the place of the Church in their lives. The following snapshot of two teachers’ comments are representative:

  I feel unique in that I am not a deeply spiritual person. Raised a Catholic. I am probably a lapsed Catholic. I do not go to church every Sunday, and I had not, for a long time, but for me, it re-established that I am a Catholic... it just cemented it back for me (Chris, Timor-Leste 2011).

  It is about the Universal Church, and that if you are a Catholic organisation, then that is your first line. That is your mission. From a personal perspective, it reaffirmed my faith, and it reaffirmed the practice of the particular church, the role of the particular church in my life, and how it is important to be a member of that. I think the reality of Australia is that lots of people struggle with church, the particular, and the immersion reminds people of the relationship and of Jesus as model (Michelle, Philippines 2004).

• The formational preparation sessions, debriefing during and after the trip and the requirement for participants to initiate projects when they return to school are considered essential to the success of immersions.

• Participants report that they integrated their experience into their teaching or pastoral responsibilities and that they had a higher level of understanding and engagement with the mission life of the school and the wider Church, and with student retreats and social justice initiatives. They also reported that it changed them as teachers as they had developed more positive attitudes towards students.

• Data also revealed that those who moved into areas of increased responsibility or leadership were more likely to implement school improvement and mission initiatives.

• In the eleven years the GSE staff immersion program has been operational, over 130 individuals have participated in short term cross cultural immersion trips to one of five host communities in which the Sisters of the Good Samaritan are in active ministry. Over time, the cumulative effect is that some schools have had over 25 staff members who have participated in the program, providing a critical mass of staff formed and equipped for the mission of Catholic education.