

Offering spiritual direction to teachers could transform Catholic school communities

Catholic schools have become a more diverse workforce, prompting many learning communities to introduce meaningful formation opportunities that enable all teachers to participate in enhancing the mission of the Catholic school.

Leading religious education scholar Associate Professor Michael T. Buchanan says a growing number of schools across the globe are supporting the formation of their teachers by drawing on the expertise of those skilled in spiritual direction.

Associate Professor Buchanan, who is a former teacher of 20 years and the National Head of School of Theology at Australian Catholic University (ACU), says spiritual direction can be an effective, non-threatening option for all staff members including those who do not identify as Catholic, but are committed to working in Catholic schools.

“Thirty per cent of the people in Catholic schools across Australia don’t identify as Catholic,” Associate Professor Buchanan said.

“They have a right to be formed and if we are truly a Catholic school or a Catholic institution or a Catholic faith-based community, we have a responsibility to support all members of the school community in their formation, as the teachers’ contributions to the school also shapes the Catholic identity of the school.

“Drawing on the skills of spiritual direction would allow an approach to formation that enables a teacher make sense of who they are, as a person dedicated to a vocation and the practice of being a teacher in a Catholic school.”

Associate Professor Buchanan said most teachers at a Catholic school considered their profession to be a vocation.

“Their vocation is education, the education of the next generation of people, the formation of young people through education of what it means to be human,” he said.

“When you're involved in a ministry or a vocation or a profession as challenging as teaching, you are constantly giving of yourself to others, and you need to be nourished and you need to be supported.”

Associate Professor Buchanan said formation opportunities in schools tended to be one-off annual days or week-long retreat experiences. He believes that employing professionals with skills in spiritual direction could provide more consistent ongoing support to teachers whose educational endeavours are the cornerstone of a Catholic school’s ability to achieve its mission.

“A spiritual director is not there to evangelise, though that's not to say that evangelisation may not happen, but their primary role is to journey with each individual teacher, to help them to reflect upon and connect up their professional commitment and experiences with their own sense of vocation and sense of humility,” he said.

No more lay teachers: a brief history

Associate Professor Buchanan said there was a time in colonial Australian history where a lay person’s vocation to teach in a Catholic school was largely ignored.

Lay teachers populated and headed Catholic schools in Australia during the early colonial period but from 1872 their involvement began to decline significantly.

The introduction of the *Education Act 1872* in colonial Victoria, which legislated free, secular, and compulsory education for children of the colony – and spurred similar legislation in the neighbouring colonies - saw the demise of many denominational schools throughout the colonies because there was no longer government funding to pay the salaries of teachers.

The survival of Catholic schools depended on waves of professed religious sisters and brothers whose service to educating colonial children established the foundations for today's Catholic schooling systems throughout Australia.

For nearly one hundred years religious sisters and brothers and priests fronted the classrooms in Catholic schools. On rare occasions a lay teacher might have been employed but they were generally excluded from leadership responsibilities. The exclusivity of religious and clerical life contributed to a mindset where many regarded them as “spiritually superior” to lay teachers.

“If it wasn't for the waves of religious sisters and brothers who came to the colonies and to a newly federated country, we wouldn't have the strong Catholic education systems that we have today, and we need to honour that, but at the same time, we really need to look at what impact that had on the psyche of lay teachers,” Associate Professor Buchanan said.

The Second Vatican Council saw another drastic shift in Catholic schools, marked by the unprecedented mass exodus of consecrated religious men and women from education to take up other ministries or to leave all together. At the same time Australia's population was increasing rapidly due to the influx of post-war immigration.

“Catholic schools across the country were suddenly in need of lay teachers to teach all grades including Religious Education,” Associate Professor Buchanan said.

Ongoing support for lay teaching staff

In the decades following the Council, teachers who were members of a parish were prioritised for vacant teaching jobs. By the end of the twentieth century, teaching and leadership roles in Catholic schools was almost exclusively occupied by the laity.

Associate Professor Buchanan said the demand for lay teachers, paired with the slow but consistent decline in religious affiliation, saw a growth in the number of qualified teachers from diverse backgrounds and faith traditions teaching in Catholic schools. This has promoted widespread attempts to offer meaningful formation for the mission of teaching in a Catholic school for all staff.

“Now is the time to start thinking about the potential for individualised ongoing formation opportunities for teachers committed to teaching in Catholic schools,” Associate Professor Buchanan said.

He believes every staff member deserves individualised ongoing formation “because it is their contribution to teaching that enhances the mission of Catholic school, which is at the service of the students and their families, the Church and the wider community”.

“Schools need an expert in education and spiritual direction who can accompany teachers in their professional or vocational journey,” Associate Professor Buchanan said.

“The formation of all teachers requires ongoing individual attention from an expert who can focus on the teachers themselves as the key resource in their own formation.

“It is possible for Catholic school leaders to identify experienced educators who could shift careers to focus on the formation of teachers for Catholic schools and to train as spiritual directors, with many institutions including ACU now offering a Master or Graduate Diploma in Spiritual Direction.”

Associate Professor Michael T. Buchanan is available for interview

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