

## MEDIA RELEASE

1 August 2023



# Companions on the principals' journey

Catholic school principals who took part in an accompaniment program aimed at renewing and sustaining their leadership and professional wellbeing gained more confidence in their leadership decisions and enriched their faith, new research shows.

Brisbane Catholic Education's Mamre program invited principals to participate in a unique leadership experience modelled on accompaniment. The program was inspired by Andrei Rublev's famous icon *The Trinity*, which depicts the three Angels visiting Abraham at the Oak of Mamre in Genesis 18:1.

Mamre was developed in consultation with educational leadership experts from Australian Catholic University (ACU), who were mindful of the increasing stressors being placed on principals. These challenges were outlined in the 2021 Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey, and included an increase in bullying, threats of violence, and verbal harassment towards principals.

Participants in the Mamre program attended a two-day formation experience for professional learning and met approximately three times per term with a companion, typically a more experienced principal, throughout 2022.

An evaluation of the program by Professor Br David Hall, Associate Professor William Sultmann, and Dr Janeen Lamb, all from ACU's La Salle Academy, found Mamre positively improved the vitality of Catholic school principals by placing spiritual wellbeing and professional reflection at the forefront.

"There are so many different forms of support available to the principal, from supervisor, the spiritual director, to the coach, the counsellor, the mentor," Professor Hall said.

"But the companion-leader relationship that occurs in this accompaniment model is a mutual transformation, of people sharing a discernment of the spirit to be both transformed.

"Mamre identifies that spiritual wellbeing is not something separate to everything else we do."

Accompaniment, as distinct from other support systems, is "informed by the Spirit, vocational in nature and collegial in practice". Associate Professor Sultmann said this model provided a safe and non-judgemental space for Catholic school principals to integrate faith with their leadership duties.

"Like a number of other professions, such as caring professions, principals who stay in the roles do so because it's a vocation," Associate Professor Sultmann said.

"Mamre helps principals in the vocational strength of what they do through a leadership experience grounded in faith and expressed in a relationship of service.

"Many other forms of dialogue and support systems focuses on professional skill, but we know from leadership literature, it's not just what you do and how well you do it, but who you are."

Retired principal Nigel Bird said in his three decades as a Catholic school leader, the formation experience coordinated for Mamre was "the best professional development I've had in my entire leadership career".

“I didn’t leave with another 25 jobs to do, I wasn’t gifted with facts and figures, it was about me and my spiritual journey,” Mr Bird said.

Mr Bird said unlike mentors, who offer guidance on issues related to the administrative duties of a principal, accompaniment “wasn’t about providing you with any answers”.

“This was about sitting and contemplating about the decisions that you have been making in your day-to-day life, and making connections to your faith,” Mr Bird said.

“I really enjoyed that idea of having somebody to talk to, from a faith point of view, that wasn’t there to give answers, wasn’t there to direct me to what I should be doing, there was no judgement. I felt my own spiritual growth.

“It didn’t take away the fact that I still had the compliance, and legislation, and budgets, or the day-to-day practical needs, but I felt I was a much more well-rounded person, a well-rounded principal.”

**Professor Br David Hall and Associate Professor William Sultmann are available for interviews.**

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