



SPECIAL CHARACTER FACT SHEET

A collaborative school–parish approach to evangelisation

A resource for parishes and schools from the NZ Catholic Bishops Conference

In June 2003 the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference approved a revised set of criteria for determining the preference of enrolment in New Zealand Catholic Schools.

Previously, in determining preference, the Bishop’s agent had to decide whether the “parent(s) had a particular or general philosophical or religious connection with the special character of the school”. The introduction of the revised definition of preference established 5 specific criteria which outlined a state or set of circumstances for which a student could be eligible for preference of enrolment. All of these criteria are based on the following premises:

Premise 1: Baptism, or a well founded hope of Baptism, should be regarded as the norm in the granting of preference. Baptism may be a future event as a result of attending a Catholic School.

Premise 2: Catholic Schools are an integral part of the evangelising mission of the Church.

Premise 3: The “family” will actively support the child in his/her faith formation and the practices of the Catholic Church.

It is important to note that the eligibility for preference of enrolment is based on factual conditions relating to the status of the person’s connection to the Catholic Church, not on the state of their faith practices.

The Bishop’s agent, through the granting of preference, activates the opportunities for evangelisation and re-evangelisation to occur. What follows from this, in terms of nurturing and supporting the faith formation of the child and family, is integral to the continuing life of the Church. The reality for many families today is that their connection to and experience of the Church is through the school faith community.

By definition:

the Catholic School ... is essentially the parish community assisting its parents/caregivers to provide for the faith formation of their children ... in a collaborative relationship.

Reference: NZCEO National Catholic Special Character Evaluation for Development Document

The parish is not principally a structure, a territory, or a building, but rather, “the family of God, a fellowship afire with a unifying spirit, “a familial and welcoming home”, the “community of the faithful”. Plainly and simply, the parish is founded on a theological reality, because it is a Eucharistic community (Christifidelis Laici, No. 26).

In many ways the Catholic school and the Catholic parish are separate entities but they have **a collaborative task in evangelisation**, respecting differences and responsibilities but working with the same children for the Kingdom. Schools educate and evangelise the parishioners of the future (and present) as well as bringing newcomers and “returning” Catholics into the parish family.

Certain implications and responsibilities naturally arise for both school and parish personnel.

Fundamentally at the core of the issue are questions such as:

- What are we trying to achieve? What is our vision?
- What to do? What is our mission?
- Who is to do it?

- How do we do it?
- How will we know that what we are doing is working?

All of this presupposes a full willingness, understanding and commitment to a common vision and philosophy of active evangelisation by all school and parish personnel involved. In realising this vision a collaborative approach is required which relies heavily on the personalities of the people involved, their skills, talents and availability.

Successful co-operation depends on leadership, mutual respect, recognition of respective rights and responsibilities, clear, constructive communication, and focusing on common goals. These are well outlined in *Parish Priests and New Zealand Catholic Schools* – a document from the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference for the guidance of priests, Boards of Trustees, principals, and DRSs in Catholic schools.

It is important to acknowledge and affirm the great and inspiring initiatives already occurring around the country, examples of which are used in this resource. This reflects great personal commitment and passion which sustains and builds wonderful faith communities and is deeply appreciated.

This resource offers a framework and strategies to further support communities in the evangelisation of children and adults.

Vision and mission

The school, at the heart of the parish community, is the active agent for evangelisation (and re-evangelisation) whereby every facet of school life assists the parents/caregivers to provide for the faith formation of their children ... in a collaborative partnership.

What then does this evangelisation look like?

In the simplest of terms, evangelisation is “the act of bringing people closer to God” through Gospel promulgation of the Good News.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of 8 Dec. 1975,(1) on evangelisation in the modern world, rightly stressed that evangelisation – which has the aim of bringing the Good News to the whole of humanity, so that all may live by it - is a rich, complex and dynamic reality, made up of elements, or one could say moments, that are essential and different from each other and that must all be kept in view simultaneously.

Catechesi Tradendae, John Paul II

Catechesis is one of those moments ...in the whole process of evangelisation.

The specific character of catechesis as distinct from the initial conversion, bringing proclamation of the Gospel, has the two fold objective of maturing the initial faith and of educating the true disciple of Christ by means of a deeper and more systematic knowledge of the person and the message of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Catechesi Tradendae. John Paul II (2)

Evangelisation thus exercises its full capacity when it achieves the most intimate relationship, or better still, a permanent and unbroken intercommunication between the WORD and the Sacraments.

Evangelii Nuntiandi, Paul VI(1)

The **Mission** might then read:

Our school-parish communities are Eucharistic communities, places of learning, hospitality, and common prayer, where the Gospel is proclaimed by witness and people are educated in such a way as to lead each to fully and truly live the sacraments and be people of the Good News.

Establishing foundations

The New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference has full confidence that the above mission can become a reality. It fully supports and endorses:

- The nature and importance of this mission.
- That the parish-school partnership is a significant agent for evangelisation and re-evangelisation for school families.

There are many possible ways to establish this at the parish-school level and the following are guidelines only. (The examples given are supplemented by many more in Fact-sheet: Fostering Parish-School Relationships)

1. Give the responsibility for co-ordination to specific people, “the drivers”

For example:

- A Ministry for Evangelisation could be set up in each school-parish situation. One person in the school and/or one person in the parish to be nominated as co-ordinator of this mission. This creates an explicit focus on evangelisation as opposed to just implicitly understood as part of the role of a Catholic School-Parish Community. Nothing enduring will occur without such a person.
- Another initiative is that the parish appoints a Pastoral Visitor for the school’s parents/families and the person in this position would be an ideal co-ordinator.

1. Recognise everyone’s role in Evangelisation

We are all part of the Evangelisation mission, each contributing in many informal ways. Recognise and affirm the collective mission of school-parish leaders in all capacities.

Effective evangelisation occurs when we are in touch with people’s lives and walk with them. Evangelisation needs to take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, use their language, their signs and symbols, answer the questions they ask, and have impact on their concrete life.

Evangelii Nuntiandi (63)

For example, this could be done through:

- A yearly public commissioning of your combined mission, witnessed by the school’s families within your own school-parish community environment
- A “People to People” blessing and commissioning in a way that reflects your community and individual needs, gifts and talents.

2. Make establishing connections within your community a priority

Most secondary schools and some primary schools have students from a number of parishes. Establishing and nurturing strong relationships with all of these parishes can be a complex exercise with mixed results. The same will apply to parishes which have young parishioners at a number of schools.

- Start with a session to involve key, creative people, to enhance the existing relationship, and explore possibilities for further co-operation. Focus the areas of practical co-operation on enhancing the life of the Church, and on general evangelisation for both children and adults.
- Schools could host a social gathering of all Parish Pastors and Leaders whose parishes contribute children to their school. A morning tea which involves all staff would be a good starting point and other opportunities could be developed from here.
- Encourage students to see the parish(es) as part of their school community rather than some extraneous body from outside of the school. Set expectations for the students, the Board of Trustees and teachers, and the parish, which will make this possible.
- Encourage your schools/parish to implement the “Our Family” programme (available through the diocesan offices).
- The school and parish organise, offer and promote a course for parents/caregivers new to Catholic schools covering the basic teachings of the Catholic Church and how the school-parish community can assist them in their role.
- At the time of enrolment families are welcomed into the school-parish community by way of a social introduction to PTFA and parish personnel.

3. Plan the network

Relationships can best be fostered through co-operative strategic planning which establishes networks, sets up communication programmes and arranges for reciprocal visits and other constructive interaction aimed at establishing strong, lasting links between all those involved. This needs to be proactively planned and implemented for it to be successful and can be achieved in many ways.

For example:

- Do some joint strategic planning, with Parish pastors and Leaders, school Board(s) of Trustees, senior management personnel and the PTFA. Include in the areas for discussion: communication networks and support structures, evangelisation programmes (especially for unchurched parents/caregivers), practical and social support structures that breathe life into evangelisation.
- Provide a visible partnership and seamlessness by co-ordinating school and parish activities and encourage co-operative participation.

4. Know your children and families

Knowledge of the children's/families' faith backgrounds is very important in determining and meeting the needs of your community.

Awareness of your people and their stories allows for personal invitation to occur, especially with respect to initiation in the Sacraments. This involves a warm, pastoral relationship and knowledge of family circumstances.

Some examples that could support this are:

- Develop a sacramental/faith background card to be filled out initially at the time of enrolment and added to during the time at school.
- Identifying under which of the criteria the child was eligible for preference is a good start. For example, if it is criteria 5.4 then the parish-school-family register needs to include the name of the "significant other" so as to involve them in the school's faith experiences as well.
- The Parish Priest or Parish Leader visits all the families or at the time of granting preference, and provides them with a leaflet on praying together as a family.
- Harness the "car park" phenomenon as parents/caregivers gather daily to drop off and collect children. This is an ideal opportunity to get to know people, make connections and build relationships. It could also be used for a more formal purpose such as a prayer reflection time or an opportunity for parents to find out more about the nature of a Catholic school.

5. Focus on the Eucharist

School and Parish communities are Eucharistic communities. Every opportunity to deepen the family/student's appreciation of and hunger for the Eucharist is to be grasped. A deep love of Eucharist will draw people further into faith communities and thus sustain and build them. Children actively involved in the Sunday Mass will in all probability draw parents into the Sunday Parish Mass. Equally parishioners can be involved in a school Mass.

Some examples of this are:

- Link each class with a parishioner(s) who will join them for Masses and assemblies, share prayer intentions, visit at special times of the year and pray for them at sacramental time.
- Encourage school/parish to implement the Seekers Programme.
- Another connecting initiative is to buddy a primary school pupil with a newly baptised baby/child with family to family mentoring and Faith support.
- "Faith the Practice". Schools certainly need to provide opportunities to "practise our faith"(3) but equally schools can be creative to "faith our practice".(3) It is about making faith connections to practices already occurring. One example is Pet Day and St Francis of Assisi, celebrating the wonder of Creation.
- Enable students to play a number of (well prepared) roles in school-parish Sunday Masses with an explicit focus on parents as well.
- Build up and foster "Blessing Rituals", people to people, using existing school and classroom opportunities.
- Establish combined parish/school service networks to assist families in emergencies and other difficult situations.
- Celebrate Saints Days/church festivals with food, music, games, gatherings, etc. Hospitality is a key gospel value and gatherings such as these provide great encouragement for people to participate.

6. Share good practice

Utilise the experience, talents and wisdom of others

- Seek out examples of good practice and ideas from your fellow colleagues, through Deaneries, Principals' groups, Pastoral Councils, NZCEO, Diocesan Offices particularly the Education Centres and Pastoral Services and associated personnel.
- The *Fact-sheet: Fostering Parish-School Relationships* offers further, practical steps and ideas that are being used in various parts of the country to foster productive relationships. These are collated from good practice already happening around the country and are in no particular order. They are possibilities which need to be considered in the light of your personnel and school-parish community needs. These are courtesy of the New Zealand Catholic Education Office Handbook for Boards of Trustees of New Zealand Catholic Schools 2007.

7. A message from the Bishops

The Mission, which we are all committed to and which unites us in collaboration, is exciting, challenging and inspiring. Active evangelisation is the essence of what we are called to do, as an "out-reaching church". It is a sacred responsibility explicit in the purpose of our Catholic Schools.

It is a task that is both richly rewarding and demanding. It is about "planting seeds", recognising opportunities, nurturing possibilities, transforming lives, rekindling fervour and the privilege of "walking with" as we each journey in our human quest for wholeness.

I have come so that you may have life and have it to the full.

John 10:10

It will always be a "work in progress" which requires commitment, courage, perseverance and great support. In the words attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero de El Salvador:

We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realising that. This enables us to do something and to do it well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

Please, at all stages and opportunities, connect with one other, link into our wider network, our schools and particularly our diocesan services. Diocesan services are here to assist you, to share the vision and the journey. It is about "we are the church", about collaboration, goodwill and combined partnership.

Share and encourage one another, become strong in your united mission and together "we can do it". "The task ahead of you is never greater than the force behind you."

✠ Denis Browne	Bishop of Hamilton and President, NZCBC
✠ John Dew	Archbishop of Wellington and Secretary, NZCBC
✠ Colin Campbell	Bishop of Dunedin
✠ Peter Cullinane	Bishop of Palmerston North
✠ Barry Jones	Bishop of Christchurch
✠ Patrick Dunn	Bishop of Auckland

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