

Our unique mission under threat

Catholic schools are renowned for their educational excellence, but they also have a higher purpose in the promotion of the faith in their young people – a purpose challenged today by the ethics of the marketplace

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AS CATHOLIC EDUCATORS pursue their true mission and core purpose in schools, many are encountering a growing tension between national education policy and their intentions and aspiration for children and young people. As a result of a national consultation across all sectors of the educating community as how best to support school leaders in these challenging times, the Catholic Head Teachers' National Retreats came about.

Since it is clear that it is the spiritual ethos that provides the driving force for mission, the educational mission charity EducareM decided to provide a national retreat programme for head teachers and governors to replenish their spiritual strength. Such was the need that after just three years the programme reached maximum capacity. By the end of the third retreat, however, it had become clear that this was not enough to sustain mission, what with all the challenges and hard decisions facing Catholic leaders today.

As a result, the charity has set up the National School of Formation (NSF) to support the call for more effective and appropriate provision for head teachers and governors to realise the true mission of the Church in education. The NSF is a programme and vehicle to support the personal and spiritual development of leaders in education for the renewal of society; to explore ways of developing the vision and mission for Catholic education; and to be a powerful voice for Catholic educators in local and national forums.

The NSF began in 2016 with the first cohort of 30 serving head teachers and governors undertaking a year-long formation programme, focusing on the transformation of the person for the transformation of society. A further 50 people are set to begin the 2017-18 programme, which draws heavily on Scripture, the teaching of the Church (in particular, Catholic Social Teaching) and learning from experience.

Participants are exposed to transformational thinking by visiting projects across the United Kingdom and abroad to see for themselves how one person (often with limited resources) can bring about change in what appears to be a hopeless situation. This exposure has had a significant impact on the participants. The projects are not school-based but a response to the cry of the poor and those in the greatest need. After each visit there is a

To do

REMEMBER when you replace God with prosperity, you do so at a great cost and at the risk of spiritual poverty.

FOCUS on strategies for change and transformation in your staff and in your school.

WORK together to flourish as providers of an authentically Catholic model of education.

process of reflection which looks at what made this possible, often against all the odds.

It is this reflection that is so important today, offering a source of inspiration and courage to heads and governors as they try to ensure that our schools do not morph into businesses where mission is overtaken by financial decisions to be ever more slim, trim and economically impressive, while the education and formation of all within the school community is less about building the Kingdom and more about serving the economy.

The call of Pope Francis "to be revolutionaries, to swim against the tide" has challenged the NSF to consider how this can become a practical reality. What transpired from those who undertook the programme was the need for ongoing support in the form of a national network of Catholic head teachers and governors working together in the fields of formation and advocacy, providing such things as written materials and publications.

The final day of the formation programme focuses on strategies for change and transformation. Francis Campbell, former ambassador to the Holy See and now vice-chancellor of St Mary's University, and John Battle, previously an MP and a Minister in the last Labour Government, explored possible strategies for bringing about change both within the Government and the Church.

The vision, energy and commitment of this first group has been inspiring. The group recognised very quickly that nothing sustainable can be achieved alone. The mission of the Church in education is far reaching. Striving for academic excellence is a given. But for what, is the question we must never lose sight of. Out of the NSF has emerged the National Network with the first NSF graduates becoming the contact people for successive

participants. Their aim is to play to their strengths in supporting their local bishop and diocesan education teams while at the same time working locally and nationally to ensure that, whatever model of school organisation transpires, the true purpose and meaning of the Church's mission in education is never compromised. Already heads are clustering together to explore how they might contextualise the National Curriculum even further within the Gospel call to holiness and mission to build the Kingdom of God.

The themes of Catholic Social Teaching provide a rich resource for marinating the entire curriculum so that what our children experience is a very different orientation in their learning – one that kindles hope that things can be different. It just takes one person to kindle the spark of hope. As Pope Francis reminds us, "That individual can be you".

We must not compromise or assimilate into the prevailing business ethic that is beginning to seriously threaten the very purpose of our schools. The formation of all leaders and those in governance has never been more urgent. The Catholic community must not be afraid to be authentically who and what it is. We have a long and highly successful track record in this country as educational providers.

Once again there is a moment when the Catholic community can really make a difference for the nation's children by offering a model of education that goes far beyond anything on offer from the Government so far. The much talked about common good is not an add-on, nor can it be left to RE departments. Our task is to educate systematically and form our young people to challenge all that undermines the dignity and worthiness of each person.

Working together is essential if we are going to be able to flourish as providers of an authentically different model of education. We find ourselves having to balance government initiatives with a prophet-like obedience to the Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching, which must not be diluted. It is a challenge. It is not easy, but as Pope Francis reminds us, when we move forward together "hope begins when you have an 'us'. When there is an 'us' there is a revolution."

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