

**IDENTITY AND MISSION
WORTH SCHOOL'S JOURNEY THUS FAR
AN OUTLINE CASE STUDY
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When asked to deliver an address at this conference on the subject matter of "Identity and Mission", I was flattered by the prospect and a sense of self-satisfaction suddenly came over me at having been asked. I then discovered who else was speaking at the conference and suddenly I felt extremely unnerved. The reason is because the rest of the speakers at this conference are clearly men of stature, intellect and undeniable expertise in their field. Regrettably, as an HMC Head Master, I am only used to giving the impression of being someone of stature, intellect and expertise! I suspect the bluff has been called on this occasion and so I throw myself upon your mercy and, beg forgiveness for my impending inadequacy.

What I aim to do this morning is to try and outline how we at Worth School have come to re-articulate our Identity and Mission, why we have done this and then try to explain some of the ways we have supported colleagues in developing our identity and mission. Please note that I am not standing here today with a ready-made set of answers that can be taken and put into any school context and nor do I present what we do as an object lesson of how things should be done. I can only present what we have done in the hope that it might encourage others to try something similar in their schools and to know that if we can do this so can any other school.

It really is a pity that I cannot stand here and say to you "I am a Dalek" because if I could, this would make my address so much easier and clear cut. Dalek's are pretty straight forward creatures who have a very clear, distinctive identity and mission. Whenever one is presented to you in polite society, they always begin by telling you "I am a Dalek" quickly followed by "Exterminate!" As one dimensional creatures they have a very clear "Identity" and their overall "Mission" is absolutely clear to them and to everyone else.

Daleks are of course fictional and we, philosophical semantics aside, are real. Unlike Daleks we as individuals are multi-faceted and complex. We, as schools, are complex communities that have a rich diversity of

abilities, aptitudes, emotions and characters all living alongside one another and trying to get on as best we can. One dimensional, therefore, we are not.

Consequently, as Heads of schools, when asked the questions "*What is your school's Identity?*" and "*What is your school's Mission?*" somehow I very much doubt we are going to give a clear and straightforward, direct or succinct response and if we do I don't think it will necessarily go a long way in clarifying matters for others.

We can try the punchy strap line approach such as (and these are real ones which I have seen) "*We are a school that nurtures the whole child*" which is always nice to know because we would not want a child's left leg or right arm to be forgotten about; or we could go for something like "*We are a school that encourages children to find themselves and be inspired.*" Equally lovely I suppose but I have never thought it very challenging for children to find themselves. After all, all they have to do is look in a mirror and there they are! Also once they have found themselves they seem very rarely inspired by the discovery. Some can also say "We are a Benedictine school or an Ignatian school, or a Salesian school" or some other charism which is absolutely appropriate but what does that really mean and exactly how does that fit in with the idea of being a Catholic school? Even using the term "We are a Catholic school" is wonderful but again what does it mean? How are such terms to be understood?

Clearly strap lines and brief statements of identity and mission have their place and they have a degree of importance and value but on their own they are pretty meaningless. Such declarations have to be able to stand up to two further basic questions "*What does that mean?*" and "*How is it reflected in what we actually do?*"

For schools, there are of course other complications in answering these questions. Ask any of our colleagues the basic questions "*What is our school's Identity?*" and "*What is our school's Mission?*" apart from the strong possibility that they will look at you blankly and wonder whether you have flipped even more than usual, you are likely to get a variety of responses that will encompass things such as we are a place of teaching and learning; we are here to give high levels of pastoral care; we promote global citizenship; we are about the teaching of skills and

imparting knowledge; we prepare the young for the world of work or university; and I have also heard, we prepare children for the real world, as if schools, adolescence and what we do were not actually a part of reality. All too often replies to these questions are given in educational speak which is generally utilitarian, functional and secular. This is unsurprising because we are educationalist and we are wired up to think like this and in the main to speak like this.

Now before anyone starts to imagine that my take on any of these responses is a cynical or unappreciative one let me assure you that it is not. I would be horrified if any of my colleagues didn't say these things. Of course schools are about teaching and learning, achievement, personal, social, moral and emotional development. Of course they are about music, sport, art, drama, pastoral care and preparing the young for what lies ahead. Our schools should be living examples of the liberal education that western civilization has come to know and appreciate and they should encompass as many facets of life and intellectual understanding as possible with methodologies of educating people based on the application of mind, body and spirit. Our Catholic schools must be lively and vibrant examples of liberal intellectual learning where the young are encouraged to reason, to question and to emote.

Schools are about all these things and much more. However, let us remind ourselves of the church's views on education as articulated by Pope Benedict in one of his addresses when he visited the UK in 2010 but which is also echoed in many documents produced by the Congregation for Catholic Education. Pope Benedict stated very clearly,

“..the task of the teacher [school] is not simply to provide information or to provide training skills intended to deliver some economic benefit to society; education is not and must never be considered as purely utilitarian”

A Catholic school must first and foremost be a school that encourages its community to come into contact with God and help instil within each person the realisation that he or she has an active relationship with God. It is about nurturing the relationship with the Divine so that young men and women can discern their vocation in life and have the confidence to live a fulfilled and active Christian life.

Again as Pope Benedict reminded us,

“ education is about forming the human person, equipping him or her to live life to the full. In short it is about imparting wisdom. And true wisdom is inseparable from knowledge of the Creator, for both we and our words are in his hands, as are all understanding and skill in crafts.”

As a result simply having the normal type of educational, utilitarian and secular types of responses to the questions about identity and mission is, I would suggest, insufficient for a Catholic school. If all we can articulate about ourselves is a mild variation of what any other non-Catholic or secular school can say about themselves, then it begs the question why we should exist as Catholic schools and why we allow ourselves to think we are different or indeed take the title “Catholic”.

So how did Worth go about formulating an understanding of its Identity and Mission?

Just before I started at Worth my then Abbot Fr Christopher Jamison and I, were having an in-depth strategic meeting at a well-known fine dining establishment nearby when, over a glass of very good Gerwurztrauminer, Fr Christopher said to me;

“Remember that you are the lay spiritual head of this school community”.

Now I suspect this didn't quite have the same degree of shock as being told you have just been elected Pope but these words made me stop, think and almost prevented me from enjoying the rest of my meal.

Those words which are so very true, were terrifying at the time and even now, some six and half years later, they still leave me with a sense of awe and inadequacy. Those words imply a level of responsibility which is greater and beyond that normally expected of most Heads.

Clearly what was said was right and being so obvious, one might be tempted to think that it could almost go without saying but this would be a mistake. We as Heads of Catholic schools need to remind ourselves that we are not just the senior professional educationalists in our schools but we are also spiritual leaders and that our responsibilities go

well beyond the boundaries of normal headship. As leaders of our Catholic schools we need to be confident about what we stand for and to be able to articulate our philosophy and beliefs with clarity to our communities and to those who are considering joining them. If we as the leaders of our schools cannot articulate, justify, defend and enhance the distinctive ethos and values of our Catholic schools, then there is little hope of the school being able to do so on its own and there is an even smaller chance that our schools will be able to deliver on the ground what Catholic schools should be doing.

From the start it was very clear to me that Identity and Mission were important and central to what we are and to what we should be doing. Knowing how to articulate these things and then lead others to achieve them, however, is a more tricky set of issues.

Developing a greater understanding of these things required a great deal of time to research, to read, to reflect and to discuss with my colleagues, the monastic community, members of the leadership team and governors what this all meant. It soon became obvious that it required the entire school community to be engaged in asking the questions “*What is our Identity?*” and “*What is our Mission?*” and to establish these questions as part of a continuous dialogue that helps to evolve clarity and understanding about what we are and what we want to do and achieve.

Opportunities for dialogue, discussion and time for reflection were set up at every level so that all those involved in the education of our students were able to develop possible ideas and responses that went beyond those normally delivered. Such opportunities enabled us to begin thinking about what we are and what we do with a perspective which is much broader, deeper and greater than what we previously had and at the centre of which is the recognition that there is a creator God from whom all things come.

There grew a realisation that our main aims as a Catholic school were to engage our pupils in knowing and developing their relationship with God, to discern their vocation in life and to become active and believing Christians. Part of this explicit realisation and articulation, as opposed to the assumed implicit one we had developed, was the recognition that our Identity and Mission as a Catholic school, was to enable

evangelisation, formation, discernment and commitment to the living out of an active Christian life.

This realisation was not only restricted to my colleagues already employed at the school but it also began to feature as part of the questions asked when interviewing prospective teachers. It became necessary to ensure that at interview those we appointed had either some understanding about what we were or, were at least sufficiently open-minded to the bigger picture of what we are trying to achieve and what they were being asked to participate in. Interestingly this has not frightened away good applicants but has rather made the ones appointed more interested and committed to being at the school.

Reflection and articulation about our Identity and Mission have also become part of the basic DNA of every working group or discussion forum that exists so that everything we do or wish to develop can be related back to what we are and what we are trying to achieve. In this way we have begun to develop a natural self-review and development principle that aims to work from our understanding of Identity and Mission as opposed to simply just fulfilling set tasks and adopting change in a more random and less clearly defined manner.

Now you might suppose that for a school like Worth it would be relatively easy for us to answer the questions “What is your Identity?” and “What is your Mission?” but this proved not to be the case. It is also worth noting that when we began reviewing our Identity and Mission this was at the same time that we were engaged in transforming the school from an all boys’ school into a co-educational community and as such there was already an agenda for significant review, planning, re-modelling and reshaping that was going on. Examining our Identity and Mission, therefore, was a perfectly natural and necessary thing to do within the context of what we were trying to achieve.

At the start of our review process there was a clear understanding across all levels of the school community that we were a Benedictine school and that the presence of the monastery and the monastic community were an essential part of our community way of life and our engagement with a life of worship, faith and spiritual nurturing. Our key Benedictine values were well understood, regularly articulated and were published in all classrooms and in our major publications. The values of community

living were very well established not just in theory but very much in practice; relationships between pupils and adults was very strong; the school chaplaincy was doing excellent work and there was a great deal of active work going on to support faith development and spiritual well-being. Basically there was a lot of very good work going on, and there still is, and this work plays a powerful role in engaging our pupils, staff and parents.

A genuine and active Christian community accessible to all and engaging the vast majority was already in existence at the beginning of our review period. We were not starting from point zero. Catholics, other Christians and those of other religions or none, were willingly taking part in what the school was offering and there was a strong and genuine engagement by the vast majority which remains in place to this day.

Worth was (and I hasten to add continues to be) very obviously a Benedictine school, with a Benedictine charism. There was and is a very strong sense of community and a terrific sense of belonging. A great deal of emphasis and deliberate effort had been put into this, largely as a result of an earlier decision to move from religious to lay leadership, and to ensure that the Benedictine traditions of the school survived into the future. In this the school had been very successful.

And yet what was equally evident was that in achieving this level of success what had become less emphasised was our understanding and our articulation of our Catholicity. The emphasis had been so much on securing and strengthening our Benedictine roots and character that we had become less overt and less explicit in vocalising the fact that we were a Catholic school. Our Identity was clearly that of a Benedictine School and our Mission was clearly to live and be educated by means of our charism.

Early on in the review period, however, it became clear that whilst this was important, it was insufficient. After all Worth did not exist separately nor in isolation from the greater Catholic Church, its teachings and its pastoral mission. We needed to remind ourselves that we were part of something much bigger than just ourselves and that we needed to be firmly and unequivocally identified as a Catholic School with a Benedictine tradition. Furthermore, as we challenged ourselves to think about what we were doing and why we were doing it, we

recognised that there was a strong need to articulate and structure not just an educational philosophy for Worth but a philosophy that was based on the principles of supporting and delivering a Catholic education.

In other words, as a school we didn't just want to be a Benedictine school with all that is implied by being one, but we wanted to ensure that in being so we were clear about our being a Catholic school. We needed to reaffirm our understanding and commitment to be part of the ecclesial mission of the greater Catholic church. We needed to be clear in our understanding about what a Catholic education is and how we should be challenging and nurturing the intellectual, practical and spiritual education of our students with this in mind.

The leadership team was the initial focus with regards to reformulating our understanding and articulation. This was achieved by providing days of reflection, extensive reading, attending conferences, engaging in discussion with our other Benedictine schools and utilising various opportunities for our own education. Basically we had to create time to think and to reflect, to openly discuss with one another and to learn from one another, and in a very busy school and with many different issues being juggled this proved difficult but it was worth it. Time away from school was important.

What came out of this was the beginnings of a refresh awareness and a new way of thinking and articulating. The leadership team began to think differently about all matters and started the process of always ensuring that new developments and alterations to our existing methodologies and practices referred back to our Identity and our Mission. The outcome was to stimulate a new degree of fresh thinking, vitality and energy which has generated a great deal of creativity and positive action and from which has also come about a more joined up form of thinking.

At the same time, we went through the exact same process with the Governing Body and here again one saw a genuine impact on the way in which governors thought, planned and discussed. There was a genuine desire amongst governors to understand the identity and mission of the school in a way which went beyond the normal expectations of governance. They were able to remind themselves that they were not

only the guardians of a special school community but one which had a highly significant part to play in developing the relationship of its members with the Creator and supporting our students to discern their vocation in life and to be active and committed members of the church.

Time spent by the governors on developing this awareness, again by use of set discussion time, separate meetings and coming together other than just for normal governors' business, has had a significant and positive impact on the creative powers of governors and their desire to critically question and support what the school does. In their business deliberations Governors invariably come back to thinking about what is being proposed in relation to our identity and mission.

In essence there occurred a new and different way in which the governance and leadership of the school began to articulate its vision of what Worth is and what we are aiming to achieve. This was clearly manifested in the creation of a new way of planning strategically and drawing up the school's development plan. We moved away from the traditional five year Stalinist model with a beginning and obvious end to a more challenging and organic articulation of aims and aspirations based on the articulation of our Catholicity and our Benedictine tradition, and which reinforced the vision of the school to be place of evangelisation, formation and catechesis so that the young can begin to discern their vocation in life.

Once this level of consciousness was achieved with the leadership team and the governors, the question was how to achieve the same ends with our teaching and pastoral colleagues. This is still very much work in progress and is taking longer than I had assumed at the outset. The three main reasons for this are; (i) because it takes a great deal of time to manage the sensitivities that need to be considered; (ii) because the staff body is always changing and moving and so the task of educating and bringing on board one's colleagues needs to be seen as a continuous process in the same way that we would see general inset and training; and (iii) because like nearly all common rooms in our schools, the teaching staff are extremely hard working and dedicated to many aspects of school life so finding time to undertake this process of learning is difficult.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of the entire teaching staff was imperative because they are all party to delivering the school's mission and living out its identity. Being the school we wish to be and one that fulfils the mission that we wish to fulfil requires everyone that works at Worth to play their part. The identity and mission of the school as expressed in Catholic terms, cannot be delegated simply to the leadership team, the Governors, the RS department, the religious and the chaplains.

The church teaches us that every teacher in our schools has a responsibility to support our students in their spiritual and faith formation. If that is true then every teacher has to understand what a Catholic school is, what it is we are trying to achieve and how they as individuals are going to play their part in supporting and helping to realise the school's vision.

Consequently, unless we train our staff to understand this and unless we support them to do this, regardless of their denomination or their degree of faith, then as a school we will fail or at best have a very limited long term impact on our pupils. Equally, just as we would expect all colleagues to train professionally to deliver their subject disciplines and to be good reflective practitioners of their craft, so the same expectation must be made of colleagues if they are to support the formation of our pupils.

The message that was delivered to all teachers was that they, as individuals, must be party to the spiritual and faith formation of their pupils. That there was a need not just to think about how "We" the school support formation but how "I" as an individual teacher support formation. This is where it gets really difficult and why the pace at which you go about things may have to be carefully considered. The challenge that is being set requires people to come out of their professional comfort zones and to consider a perspective which is unfamiliar and potentially intimidating.

By challenging colleagues to come to terms with this realisation they could no longer just hold on to their understanding about the charism of being in a Benedictine school. They couldn't even hold on to the fact that they are here to teach maths or history or sports or whatever. Suddenly they were being asked to see their roles in a different and much more demanding way which is potentially unnerving.

The responses we received ranged from “Absolutely, I get it, no problem” to “But I am not Catholic” or “I don’t understand what this is about?” or “ I am not a believer”. For some the journey so far has been straightforward; for others it has led them to question why they should engage in this manner; and for a great many it has led to them wanting to know how they can engage in this manner. Without doubt, setting the expectation started a dynamic of change which has led to a greater degree of enquiry and reflection. One of the most pleasing outcomes which gives me great confidence in moving forwards, has been the willingness of the vast majority of colleagues to embrace the challenge and to want to know more. What we have not experienced is large pockets of negative resistance which I had originally feared.

To help colleagues we have undertaken the following:

- we have provided presentations about what a Catholic school is and how it fits into the greater ecclesial mission of the church
- there have been presentations on how Worth fits into this and how colleagues, as individuals, can fit into this
- a booklet has been produced and distributed to all colleagues which clarifies these things for them so as to provide a point of reference and act as a stimulus for further debate and reflection.
- we have developed a written rationale of what a Catholic education is and we have shown how it can fit comfortably with our existing aims and methodologies for teaching and learning
- all staff have been given a USB key for general use and which has stored on it the beginnings of a library of references and articles relevant to what we are doing
- staff and pupils have worked together to reshape the nature and structure of our liturgical services, to bring about a greater sense of personal testimony, witness and engagement from the school community
- a staff chaplaincy has been set up specifically to enable colleagues to share their ideas and experiences, to provide mutual support in the form of prayer and to also help provide the important social element which binds people together
- a working group of “evangelists” has been set up. These are colleagues who are at the vanguard of this process and who have

expressed a willingness to lead its further development. This is very important because if we are to succeed in galvanising the energy and the further commitment of the teaching staff, the project needs to stop being seen as a leadership initiative and especially a Head's pet project, and it has to gain its own momentum from the Common Room

- we have established the intention of reviewing and restructuring the Key Stage 3 curriculum with a view to seeing how we might start introducing a more Catholic curriculum to our academic disciplines and other areas of school life
- we have been party to the setting up of a consortium involving other schools, namely our other Benedictine partner schools in the UK and Ireland, so as to provide a means of dialogue and the sharing of experiences with other colleagues
- all new staff take part in staff retreats to think about their role within the school and the identity and mission of the school – this forms part of the induction programme for all new staff and we provide a similar opportunity for existing staff. It is also interesting to note that since all this work started we have had four colleagues who have joined the church and we have two others in preparation for membership. Whether these things are connected I cannot be certain but I would like to think so
- the Religious Studies department is about to be rebranded as the Christian Theology department because on this occasion rebranding makes sense as it signifies much better the intellectual rigour and emphasis of what we are trying to achieve
- time for compulsory RE lessons has been extended and a new ARETE programme – (the name is derived from the Greek meaning excellence of any kind – being virtuous and living up to one's full potential) has been developed. This will involve all sixth form students being engaged with a more rigorous and intellectually demanding level of catechesis than we have previously had as well as setting the clear expectation that as young Christians in formation they must all engage in community service and give social meaning and articulation to their faith
- we have devised a pupil profile of what we would like our students to be. The aim is to share the profile with all departments and colleagues so they can begin to identify exactly

what we want them to nurture and how this feeds into the idea of supporting the formation of young Christians

- and finally, we have started to map out in matrix form, what we do within the RS curriculum, the work of the chaplaincy, the PSME curriculum and our liturgies, so as to identify the experiences we offer our pupils in these formal settings. This is beginning to help us think about the gaps in our provision whilst providing a means of creating a more cohesive and joined up approach

In conclusion, we started at Worth by asking two brief questions, “*What is our Identity?*” and “*What is our Mission?*” and, like the proverbial mustard seed (as opposed to Pandora’s Box), they have grown and unleashed a great deal of work, effort and application. The process has been and continues to be demanding and at times exhausting not least of which is because we are handling some complex issues and some challenging sensitivities. I have absolutely no idea what the final shape of things will look like but in a way I doubt whether this really matters because we are, after all, working with organic matter which will change shape and form over time. As with most things, it is the process and the journey taken which is significant in reaching the final destination.

However, the journey so far has been creative and rewarding. It has provided clarity in some areas and has sparked curiosity and debate in others. It is engaging the entire staff and it has produced a positive response in the main and has challenged colleagues to think about the bigger picture and to reassess what they do and why they do it.

Has the journey been worthwhile and is it worth continuing with? Yes most definitely because it is about our very DNA as a Catholic school. Do I recommend it to others, yes but always remember not to rush it, be patient and always have a special vintage bottle of Gerwurtztrauminer by your side for sustenance!

The Worth Student Profile

Worth Students will be:

- **DISCERNING** individuals formed by the teachings of the Catholic faith and participation in the sacraments

- **VERSED IN CATHOLIC & BENEDICTINE TRADITIONS** with a lively and articulate faith and a desire to share this through word and example
- **INTELLECTUALLY ROBUST** with genuine zeal for learning and enquiry, seeking to fulfil their God-given potential
- **PASSIONATE** in promoting, discussing and developing their faith
- **MENTALLY, SPIRITUALLY AND PHYSICALLY HEALTHY** individuals with a sense of their place in the world, beginning to discern their vocation in life
- **ACTIVE AND RESPONSIBLE** members of family, Church and wider society, faithfully living out their commitments to others
- **COMMITTED TO MAKING A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE TO THE WORLD** through courageous and compassionate leadership, living out the values of the Gospel and striving to grow in virtue