

Report to the Mission Assembly

The format of this report is framed by the six priorities identified for Marists in Australia by the last Mission Assembly in 2012:

- Living out our vocational lives as Marists
- Co-Responsibility
- Ministry, with an emphasis on expertise in the evangelisation of youth, and audacity in initiatives
- Formation, especially for leadership and succession planning
- Solidarity
- Young Marists

The report also makes reference to the calls of the Marist International Mission Assembly in Nairobi in 2014 for Marists to be known as mystics and prophets in communion.



1.0 Living out our vocational lives as Marists

1.1 The most frequently stated purpose for establishing Marist Schools Australia in 2010 was to provide a structured means for forming, sustaining and associating Marist educators. The foundational premise was this: “Marist education” is best understood as “what Marists do in education”, and *how* and *why* they do it. As long as there are people who continue to identify as *Marist* in their personal spirituality, in their professional practice, and in their sense of Christian community – and if there is integrity and depth in this self-identification – then we will continue to have authentic Marist schools. The structures, priorities and resourcing of MSA in the six years since, and especially in these last three years, have been shaped by this premise. The two most oft-repeated terms used at gatherings and meetings in the last three years – especially of Principals – has been that our priorities are “growing committed Marist life” and “building Marist capacity”.



1.2 Since 2012, MSA has moved out of its establishment phase and has become quite well-known and accepted in the landscape of Australian Catholic education. From one perspective this has been simply the re-branding and re-positioning of Marist schools as a collective entity within and across the dioceses and Catholic authorities of the country. There is a validity and importance in doing that: so that the Marist way will be seen by all stakeholders in Catholic education as a viable,

creative and contemporary player in the sector, not only in its past but, more significantly, for its future. By and large, we can be satisfied with the effectiveness of how that is happening. In some dioceses and with some Bishops, the word “Marist” still means “Marist Brothers”, but this is changing. From another and deeper perspective, however, the new name and structure is helping to nurture, in an effective and inclusive way, the self-identity and sense of co-responsibility of those who lead and share in Marist educational ministry. For our future in education to be viable, we need a critical mass of people in each educational ministry who have a deep sense of what it means to be Marist as a chosen path of Christian discipleship and a way of evangelising young people, to have ongoing formation in that, and to feel a real sense of bonding with others who are Marist.

1.3 Formation has therefore continued to be the number one priority for MSA. The suite of



programmes, courses and experiences has continued to grow and to be enriched, and the take-up of these across Marist schools continues to expand. One effective means for giving strategic shape to this is the now well-established practice of an annual review-and-planning meeting in each school involving at least the Principal, the Regional Director and a member of the MLF – the focus of which is that school’s needs in Marist formation and its engagement with MSA programmes. In most schools this operates well; in a few it is less than what might be hoped. The most salient factor is always the Principal – the degree to which a Principal understands and prioritises his or her role

as a Marist, and as the leader of a faith community that is shaped by Marist spirituality and Marist educational principles. One measure of this is currently being undertaken through a joint research project with ACU which is looking at how Marist Principals understand and undertake spiritual leadership. The results of this will be available in 2016. Another research project that will help to inform this is that being developed in conjunction with the Faculty of Theology at *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*, Belgium, as part its ‘Enhancing Catholic Identity’ project. This will be continued in 2016 by Br Fons van Rooij.

1.4 As each year passes, it becomes more and more obvious that there is integration across the three areas of Marist governance/professional services, Marist formation, and Marist association. One particular initiative that has been taken since 2012 has been to bring the Director of Formation, Tony Clarke, onto the MSA Leadership Team – as a full member of that team, not simply to liaise with it on formation matters. This has facilitated the integration of the activities of the MLF team and the efforts of the Directors of each of the three Regions. The integration of the Marist Association Pastoral Team has been less effectively done, although significant gains have been made on this front in 2015 and more is planned for 2016. There are also strategic efforts to integrate the work and foci of the MAPT and the MLFT, so that a single formation strategy is in place.

1.5 The great majority of the members of the Marist Association are drawn from the 5,000 staff of Marist schools, and others directly associated with these schools. There is a healthiness in this, since mission is why we Marists exist and the principal area of ministry for Marists in

Australia is the network of 53 Marist schools. It is likely that the take-up of Association membership in the next triennium will be the most telling litmus test for the depth of Marist self-identity in each MSA member school and the degree to which its Principal is explicitly nurturing Marist spirituality and Marist educational practice within the school community, and identifying a wider sense of Marist identity beyond it.

2.0 Co-responsibility

2.1 Co-responsibility for Marist life and mission has a decades-long history in each Marist school, as well as at the level of the Province. Almost two generations of Marist educators have known no other reality. It is a long time since there was a Brothers-only or even a Brothers-dominant leadership team in a Marist school, or on an educational commission or council of the Province. With the establishment of Marist Schools Australia, this was a taken-as-given premise for how councils, committees and teams have been established.

2.2 The years 2012-2015 have seen the consolidation of the governance and leadership structures for MSA: the three MSA Regional Councils (each with its own Finance Committee); the functioning of the MSA Leadership Team (the National Director, the three Directors of Regions, and the Director of Formation; and the role of the Mission Council which has increasingly taken on oversight of the MSA-governed schools. In practice, governance responsibilities are in the hands of each Regional Director who is advised by a Regional Council, each of which has a high level of educational and administrative expertise. The Regional Directors have become the key people in the leadership, capacity-building, discharge of governance responsibilities of Marist Schools Australia, and its linking with other Church authorities. Significant investment is made in these three people. It is they who are the primary points of connection with school principals and leadership teams; it is they who are involved in the selection process for Marist principals and others in leadership; who take a pro-active role in the strategic directions and review of schools and those who lead them; who build relationships with those in diocesan leadership and other Catholic authorities; who bring together the various arms of Marist ministry that are connected with schools. In the future they will play a key role in fostering the vitality of the life of the Association. As the Association takes over from the Province the canonical and civil governance of our school ministries, these three people will be key agents of the Association. Quite importantly, and in line with the whole conceptual underpinning of the Association, they do this not as employees of the Association but as members of the Association.

2.3 The Formation Team, additionally, works in a high co-responsibly way with lay and brother members working easily and naturally, under the leadership of Tony Clarke, a Marist who is a lay person and Association member.



- 2.4 The Principals of our MSA-governed schools are well aware that during the next triennium they will transition from being schools conducted by the Marist Brothers to schools which will be conducted by the Marist Association. They, and the Principals of all Marist schools, have been encouraged to be pro-active in fostering the membership of the Association at the local level – not only to give people a means for developing their Christian discipleship by means of Marist spirituality and community, but also to ensure that good Marist people who should be joining the Association are in fact doing so, in order that the Association has the right people in it, and can choose from among them those who can lead Marist life and mission more broadly.



3.0 Ministry, with an emphasis on evangelisation of youth, and audacity in initiatives

- 3.1 In the context of the Australian Catholic school, the work of evangelisation of youth is, of course, central. Although some dioceses are concerned about the ways that some Catholic schools are positioning themselves with respect to evangelisation, this is not a concern that is typically expressed about Australian Marist schools. It largely depends, nonetheless, on the degree to which the educators in schools are themselves captured by the gospel of Jesus and are active in the church community. Like other Catholic schools, Marist schools have a challenge here, and an increasing one. Many schools have been fortunate in recruiting faith-filled and church-connected younger staff – and have prioritised this. Indeed, these schools report a malaise more in their middle-aged staff than their younger staff. The MSA formation programmes offered by the MLF team have been increasingly sensitive to this need and have enhanced the explicitly spiritual and evangelical elements of all programmes, notably the signature programme which has been re-cast as “Footsteps, Making Jesus Christ Known and Loved.”
- 3.2 A major initiative of the last three years was to organise an evangelisation conference, which was well attended and highly rated. It was prompted by the call of the Brothers’ General Chapter that Marists should be known for their expertise in the evangelisation of youth. If we are to be known for anything, it should be that. The Conference aimed at capacity-building in evangelisation of youth. In 2016, there the major emphases of the programmes will be on fostering the prayer-life of staff, and a style of contemplative, Christ-centred prayer.
- 3.3 One of the most audacious initiatives of MSA in the last three years has been the establishment of Marist College Bendigo, the first mainstream Catholic school operated by a religious institute to be established in Australia since 1968. (Interestingly, in that year it was the Marist who established Marist College Canberra and St Joseph’s College Mitchell Park!). Under the dynamic leadership of Darren McGregor, a vibrant Marist educational community is developing. At the same time, we are well advanced in planning with the Archdiocese of Brisbane for the establishment of a new Marist school there, probably in 2018. Both schools are in the neediest parts of the cities in which they are located. We are also set to establish a primary school as part of St Gregory’s College in 2018. Some initial discussions have been held with four other dioceses.

4.0 Formation, especially for leadership and succession-planning

4.1 The absolute priority for formation, especially of leaders, has been highlighted above. There is nothing that occupies our time and energy more.

4.2 A central emphasis for our formation strategies at the moment is its rootedness in faith and in Christ. A lurking pitfall in charismatic traditions such as ours is the emergence of a kind of cultism around the founder and/or aspects of the founding story. As inspirational as these can be, they are only windows into something more profound. It is for this reason that we have re-shaped most of our programmes, courses, retreats, conferences and pilgrimages to ensure a Christo-centric focus and an evangelising rationale. These are all key ways for us to build Marist capacity, especially in the next generation of leaders. We feel that it is essential that we form them as Marists in the way that Marcellin would have formed them: with a deep love of Jesus, an “at-homeness” in prayer, a love of the Eucharist and a deep familiarity with the Word of God. The call for Marists to be mystics is one that calls us all to attend to our inner journeys. It was this thinking that shaped the pitch and focus of the highly valued 2015 MSA Biennial Conference in July where 180 Marist leaders and future leaders spent two days in a contemplative and scholarly exploration of the Gospel of John – so foundational to the Marist spirituality we have inherited from St Marcellin.

4.3 A specific initiative that has been taken in the last three-years is to foster the theological literacy of senior and middle leaders. A policy has been developed around this, and a timetable for all MSA-governed schools to align with it. It will see formal post-graduate credentials in theology as the norm for all leaders. MSA is also in liaison with KUL Belgium for the development of sabbatical opportunities in theology for senior and middle leaders,

and also members of Regional Councils and MSA teams. Principals are being encouraged to use their enrichment leave for theological and scriptural study; recent examples have included study at different centres in the Holy Land and in the USA.

4.4 There is also a commitment to the ongoing formation and theological education for those responsible for formation. A number of them are being supported in post-graduate study in theology, and in other Marist opportunities.



5.0 Solidarity

5.1 A culture of solidarity, and education in solidarity, continue to be fostered in Marist schools. One key way that these are being pursued is through a close and collaborative relationship of individual schools with the Marist Solidarity team in Brisbane. This is growing. A direct link has been established with most Marist schools and a MSol team-member, Michael Coleman, specifically assigned to schools liaison. The MSol team typically assists with 50+ overseas immersions each year from MSA schools, provides educational resources for schools to raise funds for MSol projects, and works with with ex-students and staff who are attracted to participate in



opportunities offered by Marist Volunteers Australia (also part of the MSol office).

5.2 Marist Youth Ministry has for two years offered an “alternate schoolies” experience in the Philippines for Marist Year 12 graduates.

5.3 Every Marist school, and many exceptionally so, provide financial relief to families in need, are pro-active in including students with learning and emotional needs and from disadvantaged situations (particularly from remote-area indigenous communities, and refugee families), and have a range of social justice programmes that seek to sensitise and educate students. It is a distinguishing feature of our schools.

5.4 The role of Advocacy Officer (now Brother Paul Hough) is being developed. Its tri-faceted focus (indigenous youth, unemployed youth, and asylum-seeking youth) is aimed at advocating within the Marist community. A network of school liaison people is being developed, but this is in its early stages.

5.5 Quite deliberately, each MSA fortnightly newsletter has a column provided by MSol. As well as the particular information that is shared, the inclusion of this column aims at indicating to all readers that solidarity is part-and-parcel of being a Marist school.

5.6 One particular solidarity project within MSA is the John Berne School in Sydney, now well into its second decade. The financial support provided directly by the Province is quite significant. Last year, the ongoing tenancy of the JBS at Lewisham was under threat. The Principal Brother Mark Paul and MSA Director Frank Malloy have been active in securing the future of the School – both at Lewisham and also financially.

6.0 Young Marists: Our Future

6.1 While the evangelising and educating ministry of Marist schools is inclusive of all young people, there are always those among them who seek to go further with their faith and with their identity as disciples of Jesus Christ in the Marist way. *Marist Youth Ministry* is the overall term we tend to use at the moment for the programmes that specifically serve this young people. The bulk of MYM programmes in the Province currently involve senior school students; a minority is associated with post-school young people and often enough to involve them in delivery of school-level activities and events.



6.2 Remar is the main school-based MYM programme supported at MSA-level. Over the last three years there has been a doubling of the Marist schools that have introduced this programme or, in three cases, re-introduced it. Last year, Brother Michael Callinan was asked to conduct a comprehensive review of the Remar programme, the recommendations of which have been taken forward this year by an ad hoc working party. The programme will now be nuanced and enhanced, made more flexible, and updated to include the language and priorities of recent Marist documents such as *Water from the Rock* and *Evangelisers in the Midst of Youth*. Additionally, a complementary school-based MYM programme that does not use the Remar name and can be more affordably delivered within existing school structures and resources will be piloted.



6.3 The MYM team and the Marist Vocations team continue to work with the MSA Regional Directors to deliver several other programmes and events for students from Marist schools: the Student Forums for Years 11 and 12; regional twilight and evening gatherings; the Student Leaders' Gatherings for each region; school visits. The networking and contact that occurs through such activities, along with the Remar regional and national gatherings, provide means and opportunity for young people to connect as Young Marists in various ways after leaving school. This realisation of aspiration, however, can often struggle to happen in the numbers that might be expected.



Conclusion

The network of Marist schools across the country continues to provide the main locus for Marists in ministry, for the task of evangelisation through education that we undertake in our Marist tradition. We can take heart that these schools have never been better led or resourced, that they are well managed and supported, and that they remain privileged and effective places for sharing in God's mission in our Marist way. They also provide the focus for much of the activity and community building among members and potential members of the Association. Three key challenges for the next triennium include:

- ***The transitioning of canonical and civil governance for Marist schools from the Marist Brothers to the Marist Association.*** While at one level this will be seamless and not greatly obvious – given that the ‘brand’ of Marist Schools Australia will remain unchanged – at other levels it represents a paradigm shift in how we understand ourselves and exercise responsibility for Marist ministries. It will be all Marists together, as an ecclesial family of the Church, who will have responsibility for the vitality and integrity of our schools as Marist schools, and indeed for the teams that support them and work with them: the MSA Leadership team, the MYM team, the MSol team, and the Business Services team.



- ***The continued fostering of those in school leadership, and future leaders, to be confident and authentic as Marist spiritual and community leaders.*** Whatever the hopes and dreams we may have at the level of the Association, they will need to be lived out locally. To a very large degree this will be a function of the capacity of local leadership, school principals key among this group. The Regional Directors will continue to play a critical role with principals on behalf of the Association.



- ***The nurturing of a critical mass of Association members in each school – the formation and development of these people as Marists.*** While the efforts of MSA will continue to be pitched at appropriately engaging levels to all people involved in school ministries – through the MLF team, the Regional Directors’ work, the various events, conferences and programmes – a key priority and focus during the establishment phase of the Association will be the development of a sufficiently large and suitably positioned group of Association members in each school to be a leaven of Marist spirituality and community. It will be important that there is a coordinated and integrated approach by the people who are offering this support and formation.