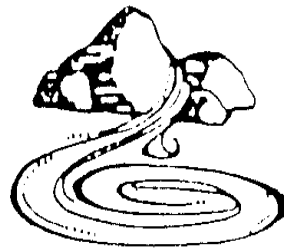


REVIEW REPORT

Jan Barnett rsj
External Reviewer

CHRISTIAN FORMATION AND MINISTRY COURSE



***TENISON WOODS
EDUCATION CENTRE***

Sisters of St Joseph
New England Highway
Lochinvar NSW 2321

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section 1: Review Report	5
Introduction	7
Process	7
Some Initial Observations	8
Three Major Recommendations	9
Focus Areas	10
Course Components	10
Formational Nature	12
Practicum	14
Contribution to Parish and Diocese	15
Possible Future Directions	17
Summary of Recommendations	18
Conclusion	19
Section 2: Base Reports	21
2.1. Base Report 1: Participants' Objective Survey Results	23
Introduction	23
Participants' Profile	24
Course Experience Questionnaire Results	31
Course Objectives Survey Results	35
Participants' Reflective Responses: Summary	39
2.3. Base Report 2: Staff Review	47

2.4. Base Report 3: Practicum Team Review	51
2.5. Base Report 4: Meeting with Bishop	53
2.6. Base Report 5: Parish Responses	55
2.7. Base Report 6: Spiritual Directors' Responses	59
2.8. Base Report 7: Focus Group Summary	61
Section 3: Appendices	63
3.1. Terms of Reference	65
3.2. Invitation to Participants	67
3.3. Course Participants' Survey	69
A: Participant Profile Form	69
B: Course Experience Questionnaire	71
C: Objectives Survey Form	73
D: Reflective Responses Form	75
3.4. Detailed Compilation of Participants' Reflective Responses	77
Question 1	77
Question 2	80
Question 3	83
Question 4	88
Question 5	93
Question 6	98
Question 7	101
Question 8	105
3.5. Outline of Staff Gatherings	109
3.6. Minutes of Focus Group Meeting	111

SECTION 1
REVIEW REPORT

**CHRISTIAN FORMATION
AND MINISTRY COURSE
LOCHINVAR**

JULY 2005

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, the Congregational Leadership of the Sisters of St Joseph, Lochinvar, through the Board of the Tenison Woods Education Centre, commissioned a review of the Christian Formation and Ministry Course.

This three-year course, offered by the Sisters in collaboration with the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, is in its eighth year of operation.

The Review Team, appointed by the Board, comprised

- **Mary Ringstad** – Convenor and Board Member
- **Jan Barnett** – External Reviewer
- **Michael O'Connor** – Board Member
- **Lidy Waanders** – Board Member and Past Participant
- **Moira Gordon** – Past Participant and Academic
- **Rhonda Bobako** – Past Participant

In her role as External Reviewer, **Jan Barnett rsj**, was responsible to conduct the review, compile the *Review Report* including recommendations, and to present the report to the Board.

PROCESS

The process, approved by the Board, consisted of a number of procedures.

1. **Meetings with staff – individually and as a group**
2. **Written surveys of past participants**
3. **Meeting with bishop**
4. **Survey of parishes**
5. **Meeting with the practicum supervisors**
6. **Survey of spiritual directors**
7. **Meeting with representative focus group**

Prior to the Review, a sub-committee of the Board met to discuss goals and general parameters, and to develop the review process. Specialised knowledge and skills were sought from a number of people.

SOME INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

1. Evaluations appeared to be honest, constructively critical, and committed to the ongoing improvement of a program perceived as having made a significant contribution to the adult faith education in the Maitland-Newcastle Diocese.
2. There were strong similarities in both orientation and content among:
 - present and past participants
 - full-time and part-time lecturers' reflections and evaluations
 - the reflections of the bishop
 - the views of focus group participants
 - the experiences of the practicum team members
3. As part of the review process, facilitated discussions took place with the staff, the bishop, a focus group representing all those involved in the program, and the practicum team members. These enriched the written evaluation process, clarifying and expanding the agenda in a number of areas.
4. The **Christian Formation and Ministry** Team is clearly committed to both course content and formation, and is accommodating and responsive to the needs of both individuals and parishes. This course, as a central focus of adult faith and meaning in Maitland-Newcastle, carries in a very real way the current realities and challenges in the diocese.
5. In establishing and continuing this ministry, the Sisters of St Joseph have provided a valuable resource for the diocese, not readily available in many other areas.
6. A number of parishes appear to have had minimal or no involvement in the course.

7. Within current realities, specific ongoing aims were acknowledged:
- To tap into the growing number of Catholics who are increasingly alienated from traditional religious and spiritual thinking
 - To initiate formation that acknowledges new and developing paradigms around spirituality
 - To provide an appropriate range of spiritual formation models that speak to the life experiences of participants

THREE MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS HAVE EMERGED FROM THE REVIEW:

- 1. To continue to offer and critique what is clearly a highly valued course;**
- 2. To break the nexus between the Christian Formation Course and the Practicum in its current form;**
- 3. To initiate focussed discussions with the diocese to discern future possibilities.**

A further but less significant recommendation related to a reconsideration of the accreditation procedures, so that progression into tertiary accredited courses and articulation into other programs of study and training might be facilitated for graduates of this course.

FOCUS AREAS

FOCUS AREA I: COURSE COMPONENTS OFFERED BY THE CHRISTIAN FORMATION AND MINISTRY COURSE

- A range of course components has been offered and led by staff, covering
 - *Scripture*
 - *Theology*
 - *Church*
 - *Liturgy and Sacraments*
 - *Ministry*
 - *Retreats*

AGREED AREAS OF STRENGTH

- Content and delivery of course components have been thorough, carefully researched, collaborative and of impressive quality.
- The course is systematic at its core, with a deliberate focus on structure and schematic development.
- Teaching materials and activities have been effective, professional, and responsive to the needs of students.
- The opportunity for participants to grapple intellectually with their faith has been a consistent and significant aspect of the course
- The course encourages mutuality in the teaching/learning process, witnessing to the recognition that participants and presenters are both teachers and learners.

- The face-to-face, communal dimension of the course provides experiences not possible in distance or on-line education.
- The voluntary nature of the course results in a demonstrable and strong commitment by both participants and presenters.
- This course is seen by many participants to be leading the way for other programs in the diocese. It is regarded as being at the forefront of initiatives, both within the diocese and beyond.
- The resources provided to support the course (handbook, reading materials, technological assistance, professional advice) have been helpful and of a high standard.

A significant number of individuals have taken advantage of the course components offered. The course has provided clear and valuable support to many people in their spiritual journeys, and has been named as a significant milestone in their growth and faith development.

AREAS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND DEVELOPMENT

- All respondents expressed concern that the demand for the **Christian Formation and Ministry Course** has decreased in recent years.
- An effective balance between input and process is an ongoing challenge for a course, which aims to present breadth and depth of content within a process that honours mutuality.
- Respondents emphasised the importance of continuing to search for, and develop, effective adult faith education opportunities and models, which promote Christian formation, life and ministry in the contemporary ecclesial community:

- acknowledging new and developing paradigms around spirituality and formation,
- providing an appropriate range of models that speak to the diverse life experiences of participants,
- maintaining relevant and up-to-date course components (content, formational emphasis, faith adult education processes, complementarity of courses),
- recognising the danger of creating false expectations among participants, given the reality of life in imperfect and vulnerable parish and Church communities;
- engaging in deliberate futures planning (keeping in mind diminishing numbers, ageing, limited availability of course presenters);

FOCUS AREA 2: FORMATIONAL NATURE OF THE COURSE

AGREED AREAS OF STRENGTH

- The formational character of the course is one of its most valued features. It demonstrates clearly that formation is a lifelong process, in which questioning, doubt, reflection and knowledge lead to ongoing self-awareness, conversion and a call to discipleship.
- The course provides particular inspiration and challenge in its formational aspects and in the experience of *communio* it provides. Participants and staff speak of their coming to know God, scripture, community, Church, sacraments and liturgy from new and experiential perspectives. This has been assisted by the reflective nature of the assignments.
- The course has developed strong community-building networks. The group becomes in microcosm the Church that is taught and explored, modelling the *communio*, formation, worship and reflection presented in the courses.

- It provides ongoing opportunities to engage in self-reflection and critique in a safe environment
 - raising questions and doubts encountered on the journey
 - inviting one's personal responses to the gospel
 - examining life decisions in the light of new insights
 - analysing Church and societal structures.

- It includes opportunities for prayer, reflection, retreat and spiritual direction.

- The dissemination of information regarding spiritual formation opportunities has been valuable.

- Those who have taken advantage of the offer of assistance in the planning of retreat days have appreciated the commitment and involvement of the Team.

AREAS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND DEVELOPMENT

- Respondents spoke of two specific challenges in the area of formational development:
 - difficulties in reconciling the 'ideal world' of the course to the 'real world' of parish and diocesan life.

 - The disappointment expressed by some that not many graduates of the course have undertaken formal ministry roles, either in parishes or within the diocese. They see this course as a specific preparation for formal pastoral ministry. The reality however is that most participants engage in the course for personal enrichment and communal support.

FOCUS AREA 3: THE PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE

AGREED AREAS OF STRENGTH

- The **Practicum** experience enables participants to put into practice the theology learnt in the **Christian Formation and Ministry Course**.
- In providing practical experience in pastoral ministry, the **Practicum** both prepares participants for formal ministry and affords opportunities for personal enrichment.
- It provides opportunities for those individuals already involved in formal pastoral ministry to depth both their knowledge and their experience.
- It promotes self-reflection on ministry experiences.
- It incorporates opportunities for faith-sharing and prayer.
- It generally attracts a group of similarly committed individuals, who have already formed strong communal bonds within the **Christian Formation and Ministry Course**.

AREAS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND DEVELOPMENT

- Parish priests have differing expectations of pastoral ministers. For participants from parishes with no opportunities for pastoral involvement, the difficulties in obtaining pastoral experience in other parishes can be unduly challenging.
- There is a danger of overloading parishes that are willing to be involved in the **Practicum** experience.

- There is a perception that the **Practicum** can occur only in a particular parish setting. A broad range of ministries and diverse experiences could enrich the practicum experience.
- Some participants engage in the **Practicum** for personal enrichment and communal support rather than as specific preparation for formal pastoral ministry.
- A number of participants begin the **Practicum** with limited awareness of what pastoral ministry actually involves.
- There is sometimes an expectation by participants that practicum leaders will find positions for graduates.
- For people in full-time positions (both practicum leaders and participants) time constraints can create real pressures.
- Finding the resources (both human and financial) are difficult in a world of diminishing numbers and limited finances.

FOCUS AREA 4: CONTRIBUTION TO PARISH AND DIOCESE

AGREED AREAS OF STRENGTH

- **The Christian Formation and Ministry Course** promotes the spirit and principles of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan, providing personal, scriptural and theological formation, which enriches the faith life of the diocese.
- The course incorporates a significant component of the program of reform introduced into the diocese through the Diocesan Synod.

- The course has been offered in a range of geographically diverse centres throughout the diocese, enabling a wide range of individuals and parishes to participate.
- Graduates of the **Christian Formation and Ministry Course** play significant roles in parish and diocesan life. While not many participants have taken up formal ministry within the diocese, the presence of graduates in parishes inevitably enriches the life of the parish community, and affords a significant foundation from which future lay ministries can be nurtured and developed.
- Additional faith development courses, constructed and presented in collaboration with parishes, has been relevant, effective and professional.
- The priority given to the ongoing support of graduates involved in both formal and informal ministry, is clear, timely and professional.
- Liaison with Diocesan and Parish authorities, has promoted respect and trust, and facilitated effective relationships within the diocese.

AREAS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND DEVELOPMENT

- Respondents see a need for the **Christian Formation and Ministry** Team to become more proactive in its approach to parishes, if it is to develop a higher profile.
- The identification and targeting of prospective parish lay ministers, both in the course and across parishes, is seen as an essential challenge for the ongoing life of each parish.
- A leadership pathway for parish lay ministers is perceived as an issue, not only for individual parishes, but for the diocese in general.

- Not many appear to be aware that the diocese provides financial support for the program and, as well, allocates funds each year to assist parishes who wish to employ pastoral assistants, but do not have the financial means to do so.
- The diverse levels of support from parishes is a reality that calls for ongoing and formal communication structures.

POSSIBLE FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A summary of recommendations from this review cover three distinct but related areas:

1) THE COURSE ITSELF

2) THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE COURSE AND THE PRACTICUM

3) THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE COURSE AND OTHER ADULT FAITH EXPERIENCES IN THE DIOCESE

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

There is clearly a strong mandate to the **Christian Formation and Ministry** Team to maximise the opportunities provided by this review and to carry forward the articulated recommendations:

1. to continue to offer what is a highly valued program
2. to focus on two or three critical areas of content and planning, and engage in ongoing review of these throughout 2006 in the light of review reflections (in areas such as course relevance and length, delivery models and processes, prospective clientele)
3. to undertake deliberate strategies to promote the program through:
 - advertising and marketing
 - pre-course gathering of participants, diocesan representatives and parish priests (in order to introduce the program and explain expectations and parameters)
 - targeting of prospective participants
 - consideration of a user-pays concept for part of the course
4. to engage in a reconsideration of accreditation procedures, so that progression into tertiary accredited programs, as well as articulation into other programs of study, ministry and training might be facilitated for graduates of this course, at either diocesan or inter-diocesan levels.
5. to link into related programs in parishes and more broadly with other churches and religions, so that networks might be strengthened and a stronger profile established among related groups
6. to break the nexus between the **Christian Formation Course** and the **Practicum** in its present form, and (as part of the process) and draw up a timeline to bring this decision to closure

7. to initiate a meeting with key diocesan personnel to discuss the ongoing relationship of the course with planned faith development programs for the diocese
 - to discern emerging pastoral priorities.
 - to explore new possibilities and new partnerships within and beyond the diocese
 - to work together in the development of programs, which meet rapidly changing pastoral situations
 - to recommend the development of the Adult Faith Education Centre, within which all courses currently being offered can more effectively network and collaborate while maintaining appropriate autonomy.

CONCLUSION

As the **Christian Formation and Ministry Course** moves into the next phase of its development in the Maitland-Newcastle Diocese, all those involved in this program have reason to feel deeply satisfied with its effectiveness and development

Currently offered by the Sisters of St Joseph, this course is clearly intrinsic to adult faith development in the diocese, and is recognised as such by those in leadership, both in parishes and at the diocesan level. It is regarded as a model for other courses and formation experiences, within and beyond the diocese.

The team has brought to its ministry a deep level of intellect, expertise, vision and dedication. Team members' educational, administrative and analytical skills are well documented. The vision of the team, its professionalism, its willingness to invite critique and suggestions for improvement, and its commitment to adult faith education within the pivotal role of the **Christian Formation and Ministry Course**, augurs well for the future.

