

**Directions for Catholic Educational Leadership in the
21st Century
The Vision, Challenges and Reality**

**SUSTAINING CATHOLIC EDUCATIONAL LEADERS
#2847B**

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The quality of who they are as educators and ministers has always been critical to the influence Catholic educational leaders have upon the many people with whom they interact, - especially the young people in their care. This paper explores ways of balancing the many demands within the personal professional lives of those in Catholic educational leadership so that that influence is optimal. This is particularly pertinent for educational leaders in contemporary western societies where challenges relating to balanced lifestyle, life quality and values demand immediate attention for the future health of leaders and Catholic education itself.

This paper focuses on strategies at both organisational and personal level to sustain those who carry leadership roles within the ministry of Catholic education. The author brings to her reflection over 16 years' experience in leadership within Catholic schools, and direct knowledge of the pressures experienced by school leaders and others in leadership positions.

This paper is premised on Catholic educational leadership being essentially an exercise of ministry within Christian discipleship.

Introduction

Recent literature on leadership has appropriately taken up concepts relating to leadership for sustainability, leadership succession and the sustainability of leadership. (eg, Hargreaves & Fink) However, the personal aspects of sustaining leadership have been largely neglected. Yet the way we live, and particularly the work-life balance is a huge

factor in our health and happiness, in our relationships and our effectiveness in our professional lives. In a recent pastoral letter, Bishop Sanders has summarised succinctly some of the deleterious impact of Australia's current "culture of overwork" on family and other relationships, community life, religious participation, addiction, recreation and child welfare. (Saunders, p 2)

This paper offers a reflection around three related themes: Part A explores aspects of a balanced life; Part B nominates responsibilities of those in leadership roles with respect to their organisations; Part C considers a spirituality to sustain leaders in their ministry.

Part A: Aspects of a Balanced Life

There is a sobering context for this paper: ours is a time when people live under a lot of pressure. Australia, for example, is the third highest user of antidepressant medication in the world. Many people (or at least city people) seem to live a roller coaster balance of time even in their personal lives. Some days, it can seem like we are riding a heavily-burdened bicycle up a hill of wet cement; on another, it is as comfortable as balancing the same cycle, laden with precious cargo, as it hurtles down a rock-strewn path towards an invisible precipice.

I want to make it very clear that I am not approaching this topic from what might be called an "industrial" model, - a "woe is me" approach. Like most of you, I suspect, I enjoy being productive and engaged in creative projects, and working hard on what is of value is deeply satisfying.

The focus of this paper is the imperative for those in leadership roles in any aspect of Catholic education to

manage their roles strategically. Education is one of the most valuable and significant professional engagements and deserves our clearest attention. For some leaders, “managing their roles strategically” can mean a shift in perspective and conceptualisation of their role; there are some who resist making this shift. My comments here are only part of a much larger conversation around sustainability. While they are deliberately limited, I believe they are pertinent to sustaining Catholic educational leaders into the future.

What follows below are five principles which over the years I have discovered to help sustain my integrity within my roles in educational leadership.

1. The reality is not “a balance” but “balancing”

My starting point for this reflection is to stress that in this context “balance” is a verb far more than it is a noun. The challenge in any kind of full-time role outside the home, (especially, I suspect, for women) is an active state of *balancing*. Like the washing up, it is not done once for all, but is a constant process of focus and re-naming priorities and re-focus. If the role is one with responsibilities for extended availability, or less defined hours, then the balancing is even more active.

Since most of what I say will be drawn from my personal experience, it might be useful to share a little of my recent story which further explains some of my preoccupation with this topic.

I joined Catholic Education Office Parramatta in 1990 as Assistant Director, responsible for the oversight of schools and their leadership. My husband and I have three children,

and at that time our first daughter was aged 3 ½ and our twins were around 18 months. I have to admit there was a deliberate, but quite narrow, focus to my life in those years: family and the role. Balancing related to time and energy, - I lost count of the other “on-costs” of my role: the penalty rate \$1 a minute per child to collect children late from childcare!

I would like to offer a word of encouragement to anyone of you who presently has young children. Fifteen years, many deferred concerts and other innocent adult delights later, I now enjoy an expanded lifestyle. While I might speak from my perspective as a mother, the issues relating to a balanced life apply to all ages, male and female, with or without children.

Towards the end of 2005, I completed my duties at CEO Parramatta, after nearly nine years as Executive Director and after 16 years of the most privileged, satisfying and rewarding period of my professional life. I entered into what I like to call my “new way of working”, which is characterised by variety, short-term contracts and the development of new skillsets. It is probably no surprise to report that, while this is a very different way of working, it still requires strategic managing and balancing.

An essential tool for me early on became the regular pause to refocus the agenda. In Covey language, I need to regularly stop to rename the “big rocks” and ensure there is space for them. In the early years of my responsibilities, I applied this at work but actually resisted applying such discipline to my home and personal life. As in so many other areas, I have learned the foolishness of this arbitrary division. And now the “big rocks” include the personal, the

spiritual, the physical, the relational, the aesthetic, etc, as well as the professional: all elements of good health, wellbeing, sanity.

2. Make space for what you value

The constant re-focusing of priorities requires that one has a very clear view of what is important, of what is of value. Making space for what is of value is also about becoming agents of our own life-work choices. I have had to seek new models (or at least pathways) for me as mother, wife, daughter, sister, friend, professional, because the models of my mother and older sister no longer worked for me, at least in the life-work balance arena. To continue to judge myself against standards which no longer fit would be to choose to fail.

Making space for what one values has been a useful tool in managing a working life. When I was first appointed to CEO, I was at pains to exercise the role, as *if* I didn't have small children to care for. I was determined to make no excuses for how I fulfilled the role, and so, made the mistake of trying to exercise the role as if the children didn't make any difference! This was nonsense... I sincerely hope that today's women leaders in Catholic education experience no such pressure to make this same mistake. How ironic for an educator! After all, my children had made the most profound difference of all in my capacity to understand other children!

Fortunately, by the time I assumed my next role, I had become just a little wiser, - and just as well, because the possibilities for evening and weekend functions multiplied with the role. I developed **one** diary, and it included in

advance all that I value: picking up my son from boarding school, parent-teacher meetings, my daughter's choir commitments, my husband's political meetings, my exercise sessions, my mammogram appointment, my three annual retreat days... Some of my reasons from completing my term as executive director when I did were related to making myself more available to our children who were now no longer children, but young adults with less predictable timetables. Now that I no longer carry that level of responsibility, I still maintain ONE diary so that I treat my life as if I were one person!

I suspect that one element of contemporary educational leaders' lives which does not always attract its due space and value is that of exercise and physical well-being. Yet physical health is an important part of self-care, and the consequences of our not attending to exercise and physical wellbeing can be literally crippling.

I am guided in this respect by the helpful aphorism attributed to Clayton Barbeau, (source unknown), *Where you place your time you place your life, and where you place your life, you place your love.*

As Director of Schools, I learnt to delegate more. I learnt of joy of declining an invitation on the grounds I have a prior commitment. That commitment might have been, in fact, the Saturday thrill of hanging the washing, or watching my son's basketball game, or watching *Spicks and Specks* with my daughter. These times are no less important, or no less real a commitment on a weekday evening or a weekend than the most serious policy paper. What message do we give as leaders if we constantly place professional duties

above our spouses, children, friends and other family members?

There is, of course, no magic formula. I have not simply ruled out all out-of-hours commitments. That would be irresponsible. It is about balancing the things which I value and creating space for them.

As a result, over the years I have become quite agile and opportunistic, for example, with my weekend program. A daughter has a commitment in the city lasting 3-4 hours, and it is a brilliant Sydney autumn day. Why not go with her and spend the intervening time, with my paperwork and reading, in the sunshine overlooking Sydney Harbour? And put in the walking shoes as well for good measure.

3. Be part of a fellowship who shares your values and beliefs

We cannot exist outside of community. Nor can we be sustained without a community of mutual regard and shared values. Obviously, a spouse, family and friends play a critical role in creating balance and richness in our life, and part of living a balanced life is to make sure we leave enough good quality time to nurture those relationships, and to nurture those very special people.

I have been inspired by the people with whom I have worked over many years: teachers of dedication and generosity; principals; pastors; other colleagues of integrity and vision. I am humbled, too, by friends who give generously of their time to show hospitality to those in need, - the newly-arrived migrant, those who are sick or grieving. I believe that one of the secrets to living a balanced life is to always make time for some small service

to others. In the hurley-burley of a frantic lifestyle, - a life out of balance, - acts of kindness can be early victims. It is easy to say, "I'm doing enough in my role. I'm too busy to help others in my spare time." But what a difference even a very small kind deed makes to the person who receives it!

I have also cherished being part of a work group who pray regularly together, in staff meetings or on other occasions; or groups of family friends who pause briefly to pray before significant gatherings, - Christians, Muslims and Hindus, along with the lapsed of all kinds. A quality of trust exists between people who can pray this way together and it leaves us all strengthened.

4. Cherish your limitations, - or at least befriend them

It is sometimes tempting for some of us, - precisely because of our desire to do good, - to become a martyr in a worthwhile cause, to think one is called to be all things to everyone. (Mothers are very good at this on bad days!)

A basic humility and faithful trust characterises authentic Christian ministry. The fact is that leaders in Catholic education are in roles which usually give them great energy. It is work which we love doing; work that we passionately believe in; work which is privileged, not least of all for the quality of those with whom we work.

Nonetheless, and maybe because of this, it is absolutely essential to view our roles as *roles*. We are **not** the role. To fall into that thinking is to go down the path of pathology. Spare our schools, - our students and our colleagues - from pathological leaders! And spare our homes, - our families and friends – from leaders who cannot leave their insignia of office back in the work place!

Ian Hutchinson (source unknown) has posed the following question: Do we leave work to go home to get on with the rest of life, or do we go home to recover from work? What is more appropriate for a leader in a Catholic agency?

5. Love Learning

One of the most useful ways of sustaining a balanced life is through ongoing learning and reflection. This can be professional learning, or personal learning, or learning for a hobby, learning for a passion. It can be formal or informal, and there are many opportunities to do this, either alone or with others. We always need to deepen our understanding of all aspects of our work, - the theological, spiritual, educational, administrative and financial. I had the opportunity to be able to seek out and enjoy formal study in all of these areas. At times, I also sought out a mentor/coach who acted as a sounding board for my own reflections on my exercise of the role. However, I am convinced that – having informed ourselves appropriately, - nothing is more important than the deliberate reflection each of us makes space for in our lives.

Another source of learning for me while I was in the Catholic Education Office came through my involvement in external agencies, such as the NSW Board of Studies, the NSW Catholic Education Commission, the NSW Institute of Teachers and the Board of Trustees of the University of Western Sydney. While I conscientiously contributed my best to each of such bodies, such external involvement offered a fresh perspective from which to view my own responsibilities, and I came away from such meetings with many new insights about the substance and process of leading a large number of Catholic schools.

There are, I would stress, other sources of learning as well, - not just those arising from one's professional responsibilities, and they are as likely to be found in the gym, in a creative writing group or on the beach.

Aspects of a Balanced Life in Summary

Dr Michael Schluter is founder of Britain's Relationships Foundation. He argues that the current ways of organising society are dominated by economic imperatives, such as raising our material standard of living and improving the efficiency of resource distribution. All of which is destructive of relationships, because we need "roots" to maintain our relationships with family, friends and neighbours.(cf Gittins)

The title of the article, "Another way to make our lives richer" is compelling and is in harmony with my purpose here in exploring with you ways of finding a more balanced life.

If we are to be authentic, - to be true to our deepest selves, to be consistent in our action and principles, and to be faithful to our mission, - whatever that is, - we simply must create in our lives moments to re-focus and rebalance. I have found that it is helpful to seek desert places to re-centre, to re-assess priorities and practices, to examine my behaviour and actions, - in short, to pray. I have found the desert place while travelling on a suburban train, in a corner of my garden, or in the car enroute to work; the desert sojourn may be as long as ten minutes or as long as a month's retreat (although normally I settled for three days).

I have learnt to create in my diary opportunities for the "desert place": daily (5-10 minutes), weekly (an hour or so), monthly, annually (a 3-day retreat, but also other times for

planning both individually and with others). In my diary, these are commitments, to be honoured as much as any other appointment.

Part B: The Role of Leaders in Sustaining Leadership in Ministry

Ministry in the Church continues the ministry of Jesus through the ages and throughout the world...Lay people working in and for the Church require support and encouragement in the special task of evangelising an increasingly incredulous world. (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops)

The context for this paper is the calling and ministry of an educator. Within that ministry, as the United States Bishops reminded people in the reference above, leadership has a responsibility to nurture the leadership of others, and to nurture others in their leadership.

There are (at least) two approaches that leaders can adopt to sustain those in the ministry of Catholic educational leadership: (i) the prudent and sensible things we can do, such as organisational strategies which support a ministry by making the individual's efforts more likely to be effective; and (ii) what we model and encourage through our own exercise of leadership.

Sustaining the Ministry of Leaders through Organisational Initiatives

Timothy O'Meara describes Christian ministry as *“the public activity of a baptised follower of Jesus Christ, flowing from the Spirit's charism and an individual personality on behalf of the Christian community to witness, to serve and realise the Kingdom of God.”* (O'Meara, p 142)

This definition is useful because it makes very clear that there are things that are ministry and things which simply are not. Ministry is a public activity; it is inspired by the Spirit working through an individual; it is exercised on behalf of the community, and by implication, therefore, is authorised by the community; its purpose is the realisation of the Kingdom. This definition makes clear that there is a formality in the call to ministry and its commissioning, making pastoral ministry quite different from individual good works. The implication for those in leadership roles in Catholic education is that in sustaining others in ministry is a public work on behalf of the whole Catholic church community.

When I was a young teacher, I fell in love with the Church promised to us by the Second Vatican Council. I am still passionate about that vision. I believed that an important pathway towards that vision was through adult education within the church. I completed doctoral studies in religious education with this in mind, and on my return to Australia, I was employed for four years in this role in my home diocese. (At that time in Australia, there were only three other dioceses with such positions.) I was single, young and inexperienced.

In O'Meara's terms, I assumed a public activity on behalf of the community. It was generally typical of that time, I think, that there was no formal letter of appointment, no formal commissioning, no role statement, no performance review. From time to time I met with my employer and reported on what I was doing and I prepared a written report each year. I cannot recall any ongoing feedback on my performance, and most of the time I was left to my own devices.

My main community of support came informally from one or two colleagues and friends outside the workplace who understood and supported my commitment. They were quite difficult and lonely years. With hindsight and experience, I recognise that there were a number of strategies which today we would simply consider good practice, and which I might have initiated in support of my work, - for example, ensuring the board and the Senate of priests and pastors were better briefed and more formally involved; or working for the establishment of a formally-convened advisory committee for adult religious education, which (especially in the absence of other structures), could have provided some supervision of my work, monitored its quality, given me feedback, advised on strategic direction, clarified and defined my role, and acted as an advocate for the ministry of adult education.

That was around 30 years ago. Organisational support generally for those in ministry has come a long way since then. Routine formalities such as role statements and ongoing feedback are important supports for those in any ministry, and that they contribute to the health of the ministry and the wellbeing of the ecclesial communities in which people serve.

I was reminded of this very pointedly shortly after I joined Catholic Education Office Parramatta in 1990. At the time, I had a team of former principals working with me, each of them responsible for a cluster of schools. After a few months, one of these very experienced people came to me and said, *How am I going? You never give me any feedback.* Well, I had been delighted with his work, but, I hadn't let him know that. I had made an assumption that because he was experienced and competent, he didn't

need feedback. I was wrong! Needless to say, I have tried to put that lesson into practice ever since.

As director of Catholic schools in Parramatta, I became more aware that one of my responsibilities was to provide appropriate organisational support to all those involved in Catholic schools to sustain them in their work. In addition to good policy and practice around recruitment, induction, appraisal and ongoing development of staff, there were specific initiatives which my colleagues and I put in place to support teachers in their ministry. They included, by way of illustration: a program for women on maternity leave, provision for job-sharing, mentoring for principals beginning their principalship and also for women considering leadership, work-life balance practices, leadership development at various levels, provision for principals to take three days a year for retreat, networks, annual professional development, spiritual formation and counselling provision for all staff.

However, these initiatives did not always come as early as they might. For example, in 1999, I commissioned a review of recruitment processes for principals in the diocese. During the research process, women leaders made it very clear that our rhetoric did not always match the reality for them and that organisational changes needed to be made to support them in their role as leaders. Some of the issues named by women principals in the review included:

- tension between maintaining integrity of personal leadership style and being taken seriously in a masculine environment
- having a public voice in overwhelmingly male forums

- a perception of bias towards male applicants for principalship by some clergy and parents on panels
- career options for women in the 30-40 age group with family
- Need for flexibility, including part time leadership positions (Organisational Consultants)

A response was needed. I appointed a senior, experienced and highly creative person to drive an agenda to support “women in leadership” in our schools. In the words of my colleague, Patricia Crennan, who assumed that position, *Our women leaders identified issues common to both men and women... Part of my task became to suggest and advocate ways in which these legitimate hopes and expectations could become a reality for women, men and the system as a whole.*(Crennan & Benjamin)

The initiatives named above came only as a result of this process.

Finally, to conclude this section, one of the most important ways for those in leadership positions to sustain and nurture leadership in Catholic education is through pertinent and timely and ongoing professional development. There are as many ways to achieve this creatively as there is the willingness to imagine.

Leaders model an appropriate style of educational leadership

Leaders need to model for others what they believe about their own ministry of leadership.

How many times have I caught myself out? Take this scenario. I have gone to the office around 7.30am, had a full day with an evening Diocesan function at 7.00pm. As I pack to leave the office at 5.30pm, I begin stuffing my bag with all sorts of goodies, - papers to read and write, letters to sign. Who here is not guilty of this? Suddenly, I ask myself “Why?” or more accurately, “When?” do I think I will attend to this? At 2am in the morning? Not a good move! While reading the paper over breakfast? Bad for digestion! The ridiculousness of it all is so obvious and the only thing to do is unpack it all again!

What messages do leaders give to women and men throughout the organization about striving for an authenticity with Catholic beliefs about the dignity of the individual, the dignity of work and the primacy of the family as a “domestic church” and the profound centre of growth in faith? When do we set meetings? Under what conditions do we contact staff at home or out of hours? Does the organization small talk belie our rhetoric? (“Oh, you must be so busy,” people would say, and I liked to say that I was really not as busy as people thought.)

I have known senior staff who consistently expected staff to stay beyond normal office hours: that is poor leadership. I have known persons in positions of authority dishonour or ignore established good-practice processes (for example, for appointments, appraisal, grievance, dismissal,): that is poor leadership. I have known of people in leadership positions acting with prejudice to an individual because of personal preference, gender, age, status, ethnicity: that is poor leadership. Whenever there is such an instance of poor leadership, the sustainability of Catholic educational leadership is undermined.

Part C Nurturing a Spirituality of Service, Creativity and Caring¹

Who we are as educators far outweighs anything we do. For those of us who are Christian, we are first *disciples* and we are only ministers because of the discipleship. And so, ultimately, I would suggest, it is our spirituality which sustains us in the ministry of educating young people because it is our spirituality which sustains our discipleship. It seems to me that this spirituality has certain identifying characteristics.

Foundational to this spirituality as Catholic educators is that we are called to contribute to build up Eucharistic communities. Within that context, I offer you five statements about these characteristics. I am sure each of you has your own framework for your spirituality and I make no claim for anything special about the five I have chosen. In creating this list, I have borrowed shamelessly from a number of people.

One spirituality which sustains us in ministry recognises that:

1. We teach the good news of Jesus in an increasingly incredulous world and not for popular response.

It is important that we recognise and admit this truth. This means our work will be counter-cultural and challenging. It will be a small voice in a noisy world, which, nonetheless, is searching for the connectedness of community and the meaning which faith brings.

¹ This is adapted from the subtitle of Palmer 1999.

2. We minister from within our weakness not from strength.

In the poetic language of Fr Henri Nouwen, we are “wounded healers”. (Nouwen, 1974)

“If teaching, preaching, individual pastoral care, organising and celebrating are acts of service that go beyond the level of professional expertise, it is precisely because in these acts the minister is asked to lay down his own life for his friends...But the minister, who takes off his clothes to wash the feet of his friends, is powerless, and his training and formation are meant to enable him to face his own weakness without fear and make it available to others.” (Nouwen, 1971, p 110)

The “it” which the minister makes available to others, Nouwen makes clear, is his *creative weakness*. The “wounded healer” is not apart from those he serves, but in genuine dialogue with them.

3. We are ministers not messiahs.

The work in which we are involved is not our own work, but a mission entrusted to us. It is a mission, as Archbishop Romero wrote, beyond our vision (Romero): a mission, as Vatican II stated, to be led by the Spirit, to make God and his incarnate Son present and in a sense visible in our world. (Vatican II, para 21) This is a mission beyond all others! And it links each of us with anyone else who in anyway shares in that mission, - ministry is not for mavericks. What we do builds on what others have done before us, and others who follow us will build on that.

4. We share from abundance, not from scarcity

In his meditation on the “Feeding of the Five Thousand” (Mark 6:30-44), Quaker Parker Palmer reflects on what he calls, “acts of scarcity or abundance”. Jesus had gone away with his disciples to rest, but the crowds followed them. Moved by an abundance of compassion, we read,

Jesus begins to teach those who had come after them. A model of scarcity would have said, "Go away, I am tired, come back tomorrow, or next week", - meaning, the love I have for you is in scarce supply; it must be measured out.

In the next part of the story, the disciples want to send the people away to get their own food, - that is, to disperse them and have them compete individually for scarce food. But Jesus has the disciples break the crowd up into groups, and in the intimacy of that closeness, where people could face each other and recognise and relate to each other, - in those small communities, - the miracle of abundance was repeated, and the people found from within their group, - each small community, - sufficient food to satisfy all of them.(Palmer, Ch 7)

I have found this image of abundance a challenging perspective on my vocation as an educator. Palmer writes that the people who followed Jesus experienced his feeling for them "at their point of need". In Palmer's words,

They had heard his teaching...that had come from deep within his own heart and had reached deep into their hearts.... They had shared a meal with one another, a meal of abundance that had arisen from apparent scarcity. These people must have sensed that they were participants in a wonderful event, one in which a new reality was being revealed, a reality far removed from the conventional wisdom but as close as the human heart. No wonder, then, that "all...were satisfied".(Palmer, p 132)

5. We minister from our relationship with God in Jesus more than from any skills and knowledge.

The personal encounter with Jesus in each of our lives shapes our hope for the realisation of the Kingdom. This encounter challenges us to put faith and hope into action. As we encounter and re-encounter Jesus, - in a way which is intensely personal and intimate, in our depths, and at the

heart of who we really are, - our passion for the possible is enkindled and re-enkindled, giving radical meaning and urgency to the ministry we serve.

These ways of being in ministry free us to be open to the Spirit, whose gifts alone can sustain a service of compassion, resilience, joy, creativity and love. And that is a truly balanced life.

In Conclusion

Sustainable educational leadership is a broad topic. In this paper I have chosen to focus on the personal aspects of sustaining Catholic educational leaders because these are not as well developed in current literature as they warrant. The paper named five principles to guide personal management of leadership roles, drawn from the author's personal experience and reflection while exercising a senior educational role as wife and mother of young children.

The paper has further touched on the responsibility that leaders have to model good management within their own leadership role and to support others in their leadership through appropriate structures, organisational processes, conditions and culture which also respect staff in their personal and family life. Finally, the paper touched on some elements of a spirituality to support a ministry of Catholic educational leadership.

The paper has located Catholic educational leadership within a context of ministry and discipleship. Underpinning this discussion also has been the assumption that any exercise of leadership, and especially educational leadership, is a work within an intrinsic ethical imperative.

(Benjamin 1998) If this is true for educational leadership generally, it is even more the case for Catholic educational leadership. Sustaining oneself and others in leadership is an ethical responsibility within ministry.

In a recent pastoral letter, Bishop Saunders (p 3) calls for Australians to “put work in its proper perspective”. He reminds us what Australians have themselves named as their highest aspirations: “the welfare of spouses and families, their health and wellbeing, strong friendships, community life and their faith”. (ibid) Who should appropriately lead such a reclaiming of perspective if not Catholic educational leaders?

In conclusion, the children whom we educate deserve to be taught by adults who are healthy and balanced in their own lives. In doing this, we might in fact attract more young people to consider education and educational leadership as a profession and ministry they might follow.

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