
Background notes to accompany power point presentation.)

The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed a growing secularism within western society resulting in a “degree of ambivalence and neglect” (King & Crowther, 2004, p.83) about the place of religion in the organisation (Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2002). However, studies also show an increased interest in spirituality (rather than religion) in the workplace (Fry, 2003; Lips-Wiersma, 2004). It seems that, with increasing alienation in society and the pressures of constant change, human beings still “seek connectivity and meaning in all facets of life, including the organisations in which they work” (Dent, Higgins & Wharff, 2005, p. 630).

Mindful of these issues, we sought principals’ perspectives on the challenge of faith leadership in Catholic schools and have, to date, conducted two research projects around the issue of the faith leadership role of the principal (Neidhart & Lamb, 2010; 2011).

The first project collected data from principals working in Catholic primary schools in a rural diocese in Queensland. In the next project we moved interstate to Victoria and extended the original research by including secondary principals as well, in another rural diocese. We came to this research on the understanding that the concept of the Catholic school as a ‘faith community’ itself is contested and that the leadership role of the principal is also evolving. However, in the course of this research we have come to appreciate that the problems around the principal’s faith leadership role are, at least in part, due to difficulties in aligning organisational values with personal values. The second research project, therefore, was designed to gain a more sophisticated understanding of the possible tension between personal values and organisational values at work.

The second study was also situated within the theoretical framework of “symbolic interactionism” (Charon, 2001). This theoretical framework allows the researcher to focus on the perspective of key ‘actors’ in social situations. Moreover, symbolic interactionism helps to explain the role making process by assuming that roles are not fixed but constantly negotiated as the self and society interact (Stryker, 2003). In this study, the key actors were deemed to be principals and the social situation, or society, was the Catholic primary and secondary school.

This study involved two stages of data collection, analysis and interpretation: “exploration” and “inspection” (Charon, 2004, p.208). Stage One, the exploration stage, sought an initial understanding of the phenomenon of the principal’s faith leadership role in Catholic schools. The data collection used at this stage was via a three part online questionnaire (LimeSurvey n.d.) completed by 18 principals. This stage facilitated the identification of key issues for a more comprehensive investigation undertaken in the second, the inspection stage. In this stage individual and focus group interviews were conducted with 11 principals.

• For these principals the faith leadership role requires a coming together of personal spirituality and the religious tradition.
• The majority of principals understood faith leadership as being integral to their role as principal in a Catholic school.

• Principals saw their faith leadership role as being closely connected to religious belief and practice.

• In the case of secondary schools connected to particular religious orders, it was interesting to explore the significance of the order’s charism in the enactment of the principal’s faith leadership role. These principals alerted us to the ‘power’ of charisms in providing “engaging stories” that principals could use to explain their behaviours, motivations and values. According to these principals, charisms can help to shape the cultural identity of the school, guide personal and professional formation and provide a framework for accountability.

• However, this conceptualisation of the principal’s faith leadership role is cognisant of the dangers of excessive rigidity and exclusivity in a faith-based approach. Not all of these principals totally subscribe to all the teachings of the Catholic Church. They are aware that there is some “angst” here, as they discern the “core teachings of the Catholic Church” and try to “give witness to Gospel values”. In short, they try to witness their faith commitment (e.g. through their parish connection) and look for opportunities to initiate faith conversations with others such as staff to appreciate “the gospel message through the Catholic tradition”. This finding is also consistent with Thompson’s (2010) research that conceptualised faith leadership as “Gospel-based meaning making” (p.203), characterised by the principals’ commitment to teaching the Catholic faith, active participation in prayer and liturgy, the promotion of the Catholic faith and, community building.

• Study three. Our present study in NSW is at an early stage. We are currently analysing data collected through an extensive online questionnaire, developed from diocesan documents. In this study we are again looking at the perceptions of both primary and secondary principals.

• Overall, our research in respect to the challenge of faith leadership has given us a more informed and sophisticated understanding of principalship in Catholic schools. Amongst other things, we have found that today's principals have come to faith leadership with a general understanding of faith leadership behaviours. These behaviours were primarily learnt through a process of socialisation within Catholic families, schools and parishes, and formal studies have simply reinforced this learning. In the style of a symbolic interactionist role making process, principals have been proactive in making the role their own and were able to stay true to personal goals and core beliefs. At the same time, they were mindful of their limits in respect to their faith leadership capabilities and voiced their concern regarding the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the next generation of faith leaders. As a consequence, they believed that “the Diocese(s) need(s) to come into formation in a big way” and offer diocesan programs for principals and teachers that support knowledge acquisition, skill development and attitudinal change. Again, in accord with the symbolic interactionist view, they see such programs being
delivered within an environment of formal study, self-reflection, social interaction and reflective practice to support faith leadership. In this way the practical wisdom of the principals and theoretical insights of symbolic interactionism coalesce to point a way forward for those interested in forming faith leaders in Catholic schools.

As this is a work in progress, it should not be quoted without the express written permission of the first named author: helga.neidhart@acu.edu.au

Reference list


