Sustained by the Spirit

I begin by setting the context of my presentation to you today. I have been involved in Catholic education at both the primary and secondary levels for 40 years, with all but six of those years in some position of leadership and 25 of the years as Principal, mainly at Santa Sabina. The school has some 1400 students and around 200 staff.

Pondering the theme of your conference, I have asked myself two questions:

What sustains and enlivens me in my leadership of a Catholic school which is within the Dominican tradition?

How do I maintain leadership in an increasingly demanding and complex profession?

My presentation to you today is one where I have reflected on those two questions and tried to respond based on my experience, and my reading of authors for whom I have a great deal of respect. People like Patrick Duignan, Margaret Wheatley, Keith Walker, Parker Palmer, Timothy Radcliffe and Thomas Groome.

While some of what I say flows from authors such as those named, this is not a highly academic paper offering the advice of an expert, but rather a reflection from a practising Principal on what sustains me in the role, given my experience, and my values shaped as they are by life and learning, some of it in the school of hard knocks! I don’t see myself as having the answers to sustainable leadership. Hopefully though, in sharing my reflections with you, it will resonate with your own experience of leadership and both affirm and challenge you to move forward in confidence.

Where to begin?

I was a much younger teacher during the 70’s and 80’s when there was a move by religious out of the traditional apostolates such as teaching and nursing into ministries of working with the marginalised, places that were on the limits –it was indeed a movement of the Spirit.
As ranks of religious in the schools thinned I found myself asking the question – “why do I stay? What is the commitment?”

There have been several reasons but predominant among them has been this:

I believe in the young people in our schools and consider it a privilege to foster their growth through childhood into adolescence; to be an advocate for them and be one of the challenging but supportive voices that helps to shape their growth into responsible adulthood. I can still be inspired by one of the lines from the old Dominican Constitutions of the 1930’s (and the sisters predominantly taught girls) which says that “the teacher must realise that her training of the child is to prepare her for independent life, not only ensuring her possession of suitable knowledge, but especially by leading her to an intelligent use of liberty.”

Fundamentally the young are at the heart of our educational enterprise.

My yardstick in decision-making has frequently been – will this provide a better learning experience for our students? The reminder to staff at times of some heated debate has to be – “remember, we’re here for the kids”.

The way I approach that fundamental task is the result of two intersecting influences in my life:

First, I feel blessed to work within an education system in the broad sense that operates from a strong values-base. As educators within the tradition of the Catholic church we have an extraordinary opportunity to influence for good because we operate within a framework of tradition and values firmly established on the teaching of Jesus in the gospels. Our heritage as part of the Catholic tradition, within a broad church, teaches us about the qualities of hope, faith, justice and compassion that provide a story that can inspire and motivate us for the future. Sure there are plenty of examples where we fall short of the ideal but we are also offered great models of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is an inspiring story that we are called to share.

So I’m a member of the church but also a member of a religious order, the Dominicans and I have found in exercising leadership through the induction of our staff, inspiration and hope in that story and the enduring themes it offers about the pursuit of truth and justice and the proclamation of God’s word.

The theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx in an article about Dominican spirituality (though his words have a more universal application,) says; “For the greater part people live by stories. I myself live by my own story. When I became a Dominican, I tied the narrative of my life to the one of the family of Dominicans. Stories of the Dominican Order keep us together as Dominicans. Without a record we would be void of remembrances of the past, we would not find our
own place in the present and remain without hope of expectations of the future. We form our own entity. Within the wider narrative of the many religious families and within the all-embracing story of the big church community and the still more extensive community of humankind, we relate our own traditions.

So my Christian/Catholic tradition, and my understanding of the Dominican story, play a part in the way I view my leadership, and are the enduring foundations of what sustains and gives me hope when I seek to contribute to the culture of our school.

Allied to my Christian/Catholic tradition and my Dominican story is a personal belief system which has developed as a result of the way I was nurtured and educated in my earlier years. What Schillebeeckx calls the narrative of my life.

I was raised on a sheep property in the country, youngest of six. I must have had some ambitions even at an early age because I stupidly told my older brothers and sisters that as the 6th boss in the family I intended to work my way up – and I saw that happening by the route of their marriage and consequent departure from the family home. I grew up in an environment that taught me about responsibility, frugality, hard work, the masking of personal feelings, often by silence, the inevitability of just getting on with the job; about the need for resilience in the face of loneliness that accompanies being sent to boarding school from a very early age on the basis that the immediate pain of leaving home would eventually be balanced by a good education. Yet in all that, a spirit of optimism, faith, family, love and sacrifice. My experiences of school likewise helped to shape who I became.

When I took on the job as a Principal those early life experiences and my responses to them helped to shape the way I tackled the job, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. The same is true for each of you; you bring your life experience to the position you hold.

The two dimensions, what I bring by way of personal traits and life experience and a wider world view shaped by Catholic tradition, and the particular expression of that as a Dominican Sister are the warp and weft of what I bring to leadership as a Principal. And looking over that rich tapestry of life as a Principal there have been plenty of rough knots, dark patches, parts I’d like to unpick and start again, and thank God, occasional flashes of colour.

It may sound simplistic, but we will be sustained in our leadership by our commitment to the values we hold. We hear a lot about the significance of values in education today. I was reminded of the days when on retreats (in the 80’s) for the seniors we did things around values clarification and we ran a values auction. I knew I was getting older when I found myself getting annoyed
that the value of love would be considered priceless – worthy of a huge payout, but commitment would go for $20.

So coming back to the question, what sustains me in leadership, I thought I would do a bit of values clarification for myself. I was preparing this at school so I walked on to the verandah outside my office and looked at the scene around me.

What do I value? I noticed first some of the physical aspects; what I could see, but in each case that was but an external reminder of the people with whom I associated the objects, and in almost every instance that was about a quality of relationship.

Firstly, the landscape, taking in the trees, lawns and buildings. I value the blind faith and creativity of those who have gone before and had the foresight to develop such spaces and who saw the importance of creating something of beauty where learning takes place; women who had a sense that beauty and artistry can be a way of preaching; I value the care and dedication of those who take pride in maintaining them to this day.

I looked at the special lawned area we call Dom’s Plot and recalled the celebrations that have gone on around it; the exuberance of the Year 12’s who have danced and sung upon it, sometimes with more enthusiasm than attention to respectability; but who know there is only one day of the year they can do that; and have a quirky respect and regard for it as a spot sacred to the school; I value the inspiration these young people offer, with their energy and idealism and sense of hope.

I looked at the buildings with their different architectural styles and thought of the valued contributions made by our parent community and what they valued in education and the sacrifices they had made, especially the determination of the Sisters in the early days who moved forward with such persistence in spite of the obstacles placed before them.

I saw the ingenious spikes atop the balcony ledge beside me, designed to discourage the pigeons from nesting, and thought of one of the sisters now deceased and her dogged determination in an earlier time to get rid of the pigeons with the use of an airgun, and was thus reminded of the women who, in our context, following the call of Jesus Christ, gave their lives for the education of the young women and men. And sometimes suffered much personal hardship in a highly disciplined form of religious life, who grieved so much in accepting some of the radical shifts after Vatican 11 – a tension that was so aptly portrayed in the TV series “Brides of Christ”, much of it filmed in the very space below me;
I looked to my right and saw the bell tower and though the bell no longer tolls, I could recall the sound of it ringing out in a previous era, summoning the Sisters to prayer in measured tones, or indeed through a curious combination of dongs and tinkles, to the front door or phone. If only our communication systems were so simple today! But I still recall the sister who was most regularly on duty answering the phone and door, and her unwavering courtesy and hospitality, which was a model for me both as a student and later a sister.

I looked at the grotto, that symbol of Marian devotion found in so many Australian churches and school properties and thought of the photos I’d seen and indeed been part of, where the Children of Mary lined up to have their photos taken, symbolising a piety that is not understood by most of the people who pass by the grotto today. But I remembered too the staff and families I have seen walking past the grotto, and pausing for a moment in front of Mary’s statue or briefly laying their hand on Bernadette as she kneels in front of Mary, as though asking for grace for the day ahead or a benediction as they leave for home.

I soaked up the stillness and peace of the scene below me, it being Sunday, eyed a plane moving across the horizon and thought of how fortunate we were that in our school, our city, our nation there was peace, in contrast to the struggles of nations both near at hand and far away. That brief moment of reflection was helpful for me in giving me time to think about what gives meaning to what I do. What is observable to the eye points to the deeper images that help me to understand who I am and what motivates me. I realised something more about the significance of the quality of relationships. We humans are motivated by what gives us meaning. Most of us want what we do to serve some purpose, to serve a good which is usually around serving others.

In your professional role – what do you value?
What inspires you?
What challenges you?
Where do you find support?
What are some of the key influences that have led you to your position now?

The religious educator Thomas Groome, in his book ‘Educating for Life’ devotes a chapter to describing spirituality in the context of religious education. One of the ways he describes it is as “a God-conscious way of life, which means consciously allowing one’s relationship with God to permeate every aspect of existence, being alert to God’s presence in the everyday, knowing that we live in a “divine milieu”, the phrase of Teilhard de Chardin. “God consciousness,” he says “encourages us to live with more mystery than mastery, to embrace paradox. The essence of spirituality is our relationships- not only with God but with self, others and the world.”
Given my story and tradition, the spirituality that has shaped my life and leadership, I have come to the conclusion that what has been deeply sustaining for me is the quality of hope. It is forged by a deep trust in God’s Word, the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “My Word is like the snow and rain that come down from the sky to water the earth. They make the crops grow and provide seed for planting and food to eat. So also will be the word that I speak – It will not fail to do what I plan for it; It will do everything I send it to do.” Jesus who is Word, Truth and Life; promises that all will be made good.

In the Christian context the virtue of Hope is oriented toward the Kingdom of God, not as heaven alone but as the renewal and re-creation of the whole world. One theologian describes hope as the virtue by which we take responsibility for the future, not simply our individual future but the future of the world. In our world today when so many people including our young seem to have lost hope in the future, what a challenging and exciting calling and privilege is ours, to be promoters of hope.

To speak about hope it is first necessary to speak of fear. In our contemporary culture we can be immobilised by a culture of fear, and we can see it reverberating within the culture of our schools: parents afraid for their children, wrapping them in a blanket of security, failing to let them be risk-takers at any level; young people who feel so strongly the pressure of their peers, and are afraid for the future, that the world they inherit from us will be in a worse state in their adulthood than it is now. A recently released study of the fears of young people describes the four top fears as: being hit by a car, bombs, burglars and terrorists.

Our staffs are fearful of the repercussions of some of the compliance issues, or the expectations of parents, or how they are going to juggle a myriad of differing demands in their personal and professional lives. All of us afraid in a world that seems to be growing in the expression of violence, ecological disasters and inhumanity towards one another. Such fear can permeate our lives, paralyse our actions, leading us and those with whom we work to wrap ourselves in a fierce individualism, introspection or cynicism. I heard a good description of a cynic recently: a person prematurely disappointed in the future.

How can we challenge that climate of fear which has so many manifestations? In the context of our Christian communities, it is surely by building an environment of hope.

In her book ‘Finding Our Way’ Margaret Wheatley describes it like this: “As the world grows ever darker, I’ve been forcing myself to think about hope. I watch as people far from me and near me experience more grief and suffering. Aggression and violence have moved into relationships, personal and global.
Decisions are made from insecurity and fear. How is it possible to feel hopeful, to look forward to a more positive future?”

And she goes on to reflect on the connections between hope and fear, that anytime we hope for a certain outcome, and work hard to attain it, we introduce the fear of failing or of loss.⁴

Timothy Radcliffe in his latest book ‘What is the Point of being a Christian’ laments the push among politicians at both the national and global levels to push ‘the politics of fear’.⁵ Their efforts can have many unintended consequences. Fear he says, dissolves society and undermines citizenship. We don’t have to go very far to see this expressed in our Australian society.

Writers on the quality of Hope are fond of quoting Vaclav Havel, the political prisoner of conscience who went on to become the President of the Czech Republic, who describes hope “as a dimension of the soul, an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart… it is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out.” ⁶

The Dominican theologian Albert Nolan who played a significant role in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa reminds us that our hope does not depend on success; our hope is that God will act through us. Perhaps we need to remember that line at a time when we feel discouraged about the fact that our schools are pushed so hard by so many influences, and we are criticised for an apparent lack of success in educating the young.

For all of us there are times when we feel discouraged. How do we respond when nothing seems to work for us? What is the level of our resilience? And very pertinently how do we help our staff and our students develop the positive quality of hope that can grow out of the experiences of failure, of loneliness, weakness or fragility. Failure, fear, weakness are read so negatively today and by and large our society has little truck with them, sees little in them that can promote growth, either preferring to trumpet the failure of others through the media or else refusing to recognise the experience. We see modelled the behaviour of our political leaders keeping silent or in denial when an open admission of failure would allow some growth to occur. Commenting on some of the attitudes in Australia’s so-called ‘open society’ I heard a recent interview where a visiting academic described an open society as an imperfect society that holds itself open to improvement.

How do we nourish the quality of hope in the midst of fear? If I go back to Margaret Wheatley for a moment; she speaks of her experience of what happens when you let the fear go, and gives the example of a project she is involved with, centred in Zimbabwe a country where the people are suffering so intensely and
have such cause to be fearful. She writes of the people with whom she works; “we’re learning that joy is still available, not from the circumstances but from our relationships. As long as we’re together, as long as we feel others supporting us, we persevere.” So in the communities of our schools we need, at the core of our schools, like-minded people who sustain each other in building a climate of hope. Recently I heard a Uniting church minister who is a school chaplain exhorting a group of school Principals to be “Dealers in Hope”.

Who are the bearers of hope in your school?
What is their story?
Why do they stand out for you?
What have been the consequences of their presence?

The author Jonathan Sachs speaks of an ecology of hope. “There are environments in which it flourishes and others in which it dies.” As educational leaders in Catholic schools perhaps one of the best things we can do is to strive to build an environment /community where hope can flourish.

Timothy Radcliffe has reminded us that our centres of study should be ‘schools of hope’.

What would our schools be like if we had a banner up: This is a school of hope?

In an excellent monograph prepared for the Australian Council for Educational leaders, Prof. Keith Walker from the Uni. Of Saskatchewan reflects on fostering Hope in educational settings. I liked this because while we can enjoy the opportunity to reflect on the quality of hope in our schools, what does it mean in reality; in the jargon of the Federal Government’s accountability/compliance requirements, what are we value-adding if we say our schools are places where an ecology of Hope flourishes? Is it measurable?

In his analysis, Professor Walker provides summaries of research findings, built particularly around the qualities of leaders in schools to be generators of hope. He describes one particular model of hope developed by researchers which is too complex to describe in detail here, but as part of its composition suggests six dimensions of hope. The first is the affective dimension – when people feel supported in their environment their confidence increases and they are more likely to grow in trust, optimism and sense of purpose. He points out though, that feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, nervousness and vulnerability do co-exist with the positive emotions and can ebb and flow according to one’s experiences and perceptions. The second dimension is the cognitive and this is around the processes of reflection, examination and assessment. Hopeful leaders consider realistic possibilities, recall past experiences and use imagination to attain their goals. The third is the behavioural dimension. Hopeful people tend to display a high sense of mental energy; their hope is a catalyst for action; they tend to
attain their goals because of a resilient disposition. The fourth dimension is the affiliative and here meaningful relationships beyond self – with God and others are the components. Hope is born, nurtured and sustained in relationships. Through this dimension people experience a sense of belonging and interdependence. The temporal dimension is the fifth and refers to the fact that hope is directed towards the future but is influenced by past and present experiences. The last dimension he speaks of is the contextual dimension which reflects the life circumstances of one’s experience. Some find hope in the most disastrous of circumstances – I’ve often been amazed when hearing about people who have suffered greatly, at their ability to think positively about the long term – for example, the family of little Sophie Delosio, so badly injured in two accidents. What is the quality of hope at work there? What a challenge it can sometimes be for us as leaders when we are called to sustain the hope of the community when our school is struck with personal tragedy. Certainly for us as Christians our faith is built upon the story of Jesus whose death on the cross was the moment of redemption for humankind. Sometimes we can only stand silently in support and bow before the mystery of it all.

Professor Walker is very clear that our responsibility in schools is to be hope-givers. He concludes that where learning is being transformed, hope is happening. And I’d like to share with you just a summary of his research findings.

We hear much these days about transformational leaders and transformational learning. I just love some of his reflections about being a learning community and relating his points to a fundamental consideration of the different dimensions of Hope.

For example, he quotes one researcher on the need for wakefulness among educators; a lack of wakefulness, i.e. a lack of hope in an anticipated outcome in a school is expressed in habitual activities, domination, feelings of powerlessness, indifference, drift, impulses of expediency, bland carelessness and self-doubt.

In another section, he says that in a flourishing learning community all are learners and all are educators. The task of the leaders is to make sure that the strategies, processes and systems are in place so that the educators are touched with inspiration and mobilised to form relationships and thereby transform the school into a learning community.

Towards the end of his paper he reports on a study he and other colleagues have been engaged in about building capacity as learning communities and what have been the learnings about fostering an environment of hope. He writes about a number of factors and practices that assist in building capacity for learning and he describes hope-filled leadership as being a pivotal component of the process.
In schools that build themselves as strong learning communities the research highlighted the following characteristics as being evident. These would be, in the parlance of Timothy Radcliffe, “schools of hope”.

The first is shared understanding and responsibility. In good learning communities the staff share an understanding of teaching and learning, developed by sharing strategies and by taking collective responsibility for student learning and having a vision for it.

The second aspect was to find that teachers in hope-building schools reflect on their practices and examine alternatives. “The effective practitioner cast their gaze not only on past performances but on future possibilities and potentialities.”

In these schools there were adequate resources as well as investment in professional development. This last was seen as a direct investment in the future.

Another factor was currency. Staff kept themselves current on the latest research in teaching and learning. Dialogue was important in thinking about the future.

In high capacity learning schools there were greater opportunities to learn and to learn from each other. Difficulties encountered today became expectations about how something could be done in the future. Every day people were getting better at learning; were active, hope-driven leaders in learning.

In the schools teachers collaboratively sought ways of improving the learning experiences of their students. Student engagement in their learning was high.

Leadership in these schools was distributed in that it built a culture of community and there was consensus around the vision and mission of the school.

Parental and community involvement in the schools was high. There was coherence to the work of the schools. The emphasis on teaching and learning was always on the agenda. Hope was fostered that helped to make sense of the daily efforts, the interpersonal interactions.

And he concludes by suggesting one test of any initiative or innovation around enhancing learning. To ask the question, does this inspire hope where we need it?
He leaves us with three simple questions:

1. What hinders hope for you and your colleagues today?
2. What are your hopes and the hopes of those with whom you work?
3. How might others be directly encouraged and brought to maturity in their hopefulness with and through your leadership?

I come back to the place where I started – a yardstick for me is will this provide a better learning experience for our students? In believing that sustainable leadership is about engendering hope, what have I found personally to be helpful?

What has helped me to manage the complex and challenging role we have as leaders?

I actually think that one of the first things to do is to get over taking things personally. I know that in my early years as Principal, and still sometimes now I allowed my personal distress or hurt to shape the way I responded to some individual’s actions or attitude, rather than see it as a response to me in the role. I realised I needed a space in which to explore some of these things and as a result I sought external supervision. This provided for me a space where I could reflect on the experiences, my reactions/responses to them and work our better ways of dealing with the challenges and taking up my role. I have continued throughout my time as Principal to get supervision from a qualified counsellor and I have encouraged and supported my own senior staff to do this.

A second thing I’ve tried to learn is the capacity to listen and not to pre-judge. I learned early on that to form a judgment without enquiry was likely to have poor results. A much better approach to take was to ask the question why was this said or done, – usually I’ve found that the individual can then be merited at least with good intentions even if the outcome is not so good.

A third thing I have tried to do is to pay attention to the discourse happening around me. In this I have gained an insight from the spiritual tradition of the Dominicans which goes back to Thomas Aquinas and was made explicit for me in the writings of Timothy Radcliffe, our former Master General. Timothy refers to the medieval principle of ‘disputatio’ espoused by Aquinas and which was a form of debating central to the life of the thirteenth century university. It was based on the assumption that in debate, one’s opponent is always, in some sense, right. He says it is easy to identify another person’s errors. Do we have the courage to hear what they may teach us? It can be a useful tool sometimes in a difficult interview!! Perhaps in a wider context today it infers also the avoidance of language which places viewpoints at the extremes, rather than by searching for a “both and” quality in the dialogue.
I’ve always been interested in the way language is used and tried to raise awareness in our own school community. The use of language to define the insider and the outsider for instance; the assault on human dignity wrought by language used so carelessly by our young people I find very distressing. As Radcliffe writes, “our language should be stretched open; it should offer a spacious hospitality”\textsuperscript{11}.

A fourth point is that I’ve grown to realise is that I don’t have to have all the answers. It doesn’t mean I don’t sometimes have to do some fast thinking and talking, but it does mean one can rely on the wisdom and expertise of others. I knew this would be the case when I became Principal at Santa Sabina all those years ago. I had previously been the REC and one of the things that terrified me at first was that I had never been a Deputy in a large secondary school and therefore lacked a whole set of skills of unimaginable value – e.g. I’d never done a timetable!

So I learned from an early stage that I could rely on the gifts and talents of other people, and really if I think about it, I believe it is the area that has really helped me most in my role. Yes, one needs to be decisive in decision-making, but balanced against that is the fact that good people around you have lots of ideas and are only too happy to help out. So I suppose I have tried to foster a collaborative form of leadership, attuned to the principles of delegation and accountability. In that way I think I have contributed to building up the leadership capacity in the school.

Fifth, In leading our schools I believe it is important to develop the Story of the setting of the particular school where we are. Using the story of the founders, or the patron saint of the school, to build up the meaning-making capacity in your school and give people ownership of the story does great things for building cohesion within the community. People are proud to identify with a particular story or a charism, the signs and symbols of identification or, as is the case in a new school, to be part of forging the school’s identity.

Sixth, I’ve always found that having some personal goals and following them through to achievement is something that has provided a steadiness of purpose. Seeing things you want to do and getting the satisfaction out of achieving them, despite the difficulties you might face – it might be improving the staff rooms, or getting a particular teacher to take up some professional learning opportunity. For some years I held a dream of the college purchasing a property for the conduct of outdoor education, retreats and leadership experiences. The development of our Tallong Campus, which I know is used by some of your own schools, was the fruition of that goal and has been an excellent adjunct to our learning.
As school leaders, seeing our goals come to fruition gives us a lift and helps to bolster our courage to take on the next thing.

And lastly, it helps to have a good dose of reality in realising that human nature doesn’t change much – in spite of the changes that are wrought in our society or our educational directions. Accept that you’ll win some and lose some. A sense of humor, an ability to laugh at ourselves and with others is essential I think for sustainability in the role.

I was trying to think of a good line to finish this, and yesterday at our OOSH meeting at school the director used this reflection which was used by Nelson Mandela at his inauguration; he is quoting it, and I’m not sure of the original source. I’m sure you have used it yourselves. On this occasion the last few lines struck me in a particular way because I was thinking about this talk today. He says:

“We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And, as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fears, our presence automatically liberates others.”
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