

# **Visions for Educational Leadership (VfEL)**

Heythrop Institute: Religion & Society and the Catholic Education Service

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NCTL Learning and Conference Centre, Nottingham

## **Thematic Paper 1: Vocation**

This paper is divided into two parts, the first descriptive of the data gathered from school leaders on the above theme and the second analytical.

Please read the paper carefully and reflect on the following three questions:

- (i) What resonates?
- (ii) What would you add?
- (iii) How does this relate to practice?

We would like you to share your thoughts on the paper during the opening session of the conference. Your participation will be essential to shaping the conference's outcomes, as we determine what is needed to build theological, ethical and spiritual capacity for leadership in Catholic schools.

The data quoted in the papers was collected through interviews, focus groups and surveys participated in by school leaders. All contributions have been anonymised.

If you have any questions about the conference please contact Robert Ivermee ([r.ivermee@heythrop.ac.uk](mailto:r.ivermee@heythrop.ac.uk)). More information about the VfEL project is available here: <http://www.heythrop.ac.uk/heythrop-institute-religion-society/hirs-visions-educational-leadership>.

## Part A: Description of the data

(Written by Robert Ivermee on behalf of the VfEL research team.)

### **1. The Meaning(s) of Vocation**

Most school leaders spoke about their role as a vocation. During interviews, the terms “vocation” or “vocational” were often used without prompting. Other leaders confirmed that they considered their role a vocation when the term was put to them. For example:

*People use this word ‘vocation’ and they talk about teaching as a profession generally being a vocation and I think that is even more the case with teachers who choose to teach in Catholic schools and particularly leaders who choose to lead in Catholic schools. It should be a vocation in the truest sense.*

*I wouldn't be sat here if it wasn't for that real kind of vocation that I feel, like God's called me to do this.*

What do leaders mean by “vocation” or “vocational”? From one person to the next, understandings differ, but the following appear frequently in articulations of Catholic school leadership as a vocation: that the role is a huge demand on individuals (“all-consuming” even); that leaders do more than their job description dictates (they “go the extra mile”); and that they don’t do the role for financial reward (or receive financial reward matching its demands). A substantial number of leaders added that “vocation” meant becoming defined in part by the role: that the role had a major impact on their self-identity or understanding of who they are. Examples:

*It is all-consuming. I'll be here at 8 o'clock and I'll be here until 7 o'clock making sure that the chores that need to be done are done. And then I go home and still more jobs to be done. And it's one of those where someone says, "Right, well, what's your job description? Oh, well you've only got two of these things, you know." But actually - that is your job description; but you've then got to invest all this time to deliver that, or to improve it. So, no - it's totally all-consuming. But I do believe that this is a vocation, this is what my particular talents that I discovered have led me to do and that it is a commitment of what I do in my life.*

*Where people driven by their vocation go - we talk about going the extra mile.*

*Vocation is important, isn't it, because it's not about material success. Possessions and status are what society is saying you should be judged on, and we model vocation as a way of life, and I think sometimes that's very difficult.*

The above are all, of course, aspects of vocation that might be shared with non-Catholics and those outside of Catholic school leadership, as many leaders recognised. Many noted that teaching itself is a vocation, or that it should be, whether in a Catholic school or another:

*I think that the concept of vocation for teaching, whether in Catholic school or not, is a good concept. Because I think for people to be truly happy in teaching, they need to, well, not need to, but those people who see it as a vocation, there's often a correlation between them being really happy with it. Because they see that, they're driven by a purpose to help people, youngsters to fulfil their potential, especially in today's society when, sadly, a lot of youngsters are coming from an environment that is quite challenging. So that vocation of creating, you could say, an oasis of normality and aspiration, I think it's especially important - and I think it's a very good concept for any Catholic school.*

*Teaching is far more than a job because we are charged with the task of looking after young people when they are going through a very formative stage in their life. What*

*happens to them now will stay with them for the rest of their life and things that happen to them now will prepare the way for the rest of their life.*

*We are human beings and human beings at work and I also think that people in secular schools can have a vocation as well; they may not be able to express it in the same theological terms as we do, but I still think they have a vocation.*

*I see my career as a vocation. Having been in teaching for a number of years you do see lots of different people. I think you have to love it, you have to love the children, you have to love the job, you have to really love coming in and working alongside other people and all that that brings. I do think it's a vocation. A real teacher, I think you are a born teacher or you're not.*

Some leaders suggested that being a Catholic sustained the sense of teaching as a vocation, provided it with a theological or spiritual basis and encouraged it to flourish:

*I personally understand the word vocation as a kind of driver. It is whatever your personal mission statement is and I would go back to that because I think that staff do have a personal mission statement. Head teachers do have a personal mission statement. They do not necessarily share that. That is a personal thing but I think it is a faith based thing. We do work in schools where some people's mission statement is me, me, me. I think you would have to work with those people to explain what it is we are about and I think when you are in school and I think when you choose to be part of a faith school you are taking on that distinctive nature. I think vocation is about my commitment to my personal faith mission statement, and how I deliver that across the school and outside of the school.*

It was very widely held that working in a Catholic school added to the sense of teaching and school leadership as a vocation. In explanation it was offered that within a Catholic school a Catholic teacher or leader is able to live their faith on a daily basis. Moreover, leaders thought that Catholic school leadership means acting as a faith leader – the leader of a faith community with responsibility for leading children, staff and other members of the community towards God.

*This is the first Catholic School that I have ever worked in. I would describe my previous roles as having a vocational element in a sense that just like most jobs in this nature, you do begin to define yourself to a degree by it, but I do think Catholic leadership is a different type of vocation – a deeper calling definitely.*

*I think it's a vocation. I'm certainly not doing it for the money or the free chalk or whatever. It is a vocation. I do have a sense that I am fulfilling God's will. Since I moved to the Catholic sector, the process has been one of reflection and prayer and spiritual reflection over what I'm trying to do, and trying to be open to God's will as best you can. So I think it is a vocation and I can't imagine that I would turn up for work tomorrow if I didn't think that.*

*I think that teaching is a vocation and head-teaching is a vocation and then there's another level on top which is being a faith leader of a Catholic school.*

*To be effective, a Catholic leader must be confident in their own faith journey and have the ability to lead by example by actively demonstrating their own faith. They need to be a role model for all pupils and staff.*

*That brings home to me the reason why I do the job that I do. It's going the extra mile for these children because you want them to be the best they can be and it doesn't stop at 4 o'clock or half past four. The job entails carrying on and seeing it through and we all know as heads what that involves and talking to families at 6 o'clock at night or doing a home visit or whatever it might be. I think it's that passion for wanting to help children as much as we possibly can and to live the Gospel values within all that.*

Understandings of Catholic school leadership as a vocation were consistently related to

conceptions of what Catholic schools are for – their particular role and mission. One primary school head teacher said:

*I think it is a true vocation and it isn't just about the education of children academically, it is that spiritual and moral development, which to me is at the heart of a Catholic school. I feel that the whole ethos of the Catholic school comes from the leadership, that the leadership has got to be there as the role models, that we have got to encourage the children's spiritual development. One of the things I am absolutely passionate about in my duty to parents is that intrinsically every child is good, and really is a gift from God, and that we have to nourish that child and we have to feed them spiritually, as well as academically. It is about helping to develop their conscience, a building block for the future and their relationship with God, and how the Holy Spirit gives them the courage to be honest and to tell the truth. I think that is something you wouldn't find in other schools and we have to live that. Equally, with the children we open doors, we say thank you and we forgive. Sometimes at assembly I tell them about some of the wrong choices that I have made because you have to be real. Equally you share that message with the parents because I would never want 'that is the naughty boy' who does not have any chance. At the heart of our Catholic school is our own belief and helping children develop their relationship with God and develop their conscience and knowing that having free will and free choice is a real gift that we mustn't abuse.*

Some made the connection between individual vocation and school mission more explicit than others:

*I think the vocation of the individuals also contributes to the vocational nature of the school as a whole – the mission statement. You try to interpret that mission statement as a vocation. It is about remembering why we are here.*

*What you want to do in a church school is to create an ethos where people are doing it because it is in the best interest of the children and is supporting the mission of the church, rather than creating a culture where people just work, if you like, to imposed contracts and things like that. It is a bigger job, a vocation. I think it is a massive advantage in a way to be a leader in a faith school because you have your own individual vocation but it's linked in and is subservient largely to the school's vocation and the certain non-negotiables there that will stand the test of time. They are not subject to the most recent political directive or – they can be affected by that type of thing but they are not subservient to it. When you have to deal with a parent who is very unhappy because their child was excluded or because they don't want their son doing this or that we can talk about certain non-negotiables which are part and parcel of this school because it is the school's vocation. So, I think it does offer a really robust integrity.*

Particular aspects of the Catholic school's mission were elaborated on by leaders considering the meaning of vocation. For example, support for the poor and vulnerable:

*I think there are things that we should do that fit in with that sense of vocation, such as the way that we include all children, the way that we accept children who may be rejected from elsewhere. I think that's really part of our strong mission. As catholic schools, we should be taking and really welcoming those families and children who are marginalised or failed elsewhere.*

*The success of this school and the inclusion and the progress of these students is central to my sense of self. I view my role as a catholic educator as being a cornerstone of who I am, and so that idea of vocation, where I am called to the school, and I don't mean that from some sort of miraculous blaring trumpet angel in the cloud kind of sense, but the idea that were I not to be working here regularly I would feel an incredible vacuum in my life. I do feel here that I am fulfilling a deeper sense of purpose for what Christ wants me to do. And I have always believed during my teaching career in the transformative role of education in helping the most vulnerable. I have carried that with me, so the work that I did*

*with the DFE was about supporting poorer kids and particularly kids who have been excluded and were absent and so on. I carried that sense of vocation into my role as a catholic leader. I can't stress it enough that my role as a leader of a Catholic community that deals explicitly in inclusion for all, but particularly for those who need it the most, is central to who I am.*

Some leaders related their sense of vocation to changing social circumstances surrounding schools – and in particular the declining number of baptised and practising Catholics in schools in some areas:

*Vocation for me is spending time towards mission as well isn't it, because I think the more our schools are not Catholic in the conventional sense, full of baptised Catholics...I think I have developed more of a sense of mission than I have of a sense of preservation or straight forward provision for baptised Catholics. That is just the realities of geography and the society that we live in isn't it really and I think what I try and get hold of is this sense of mission really. It is a difficult mission because, actually, we are not using our own resources and money, we are using the state's resources and money and we have to travel that road very, very carefully. But we are on a mission and we are offering something of the church, of Christian, Catholic faith to those outside.*

Others spoke about love when considering school leadership as a vocation and the mission of schools:

*Vocation is about love: I think I am very lucky that I am able to love the kids, if you don't love the kids, you are not committed and I have seen students come through on teaching practice, and we have got one at the moment, and I am very concerned that there isn't the passion and commitment.*

*We help others and make lives better and we care for children, particularly the ones that don't get a lot of love and care elsewhere. There was a girl today who refused to speak to anybody except me. I should give her a good telling off for not respecting the other staff. She came in, she sat down and I asked her if she wanted a glass of water. She still got excluded but I do it with love.*

The term vocation also resonated with leaders in so far as part of the mission of schools was thought to be to instil a sense of vocation in young people and others in the school community:

*In terms of a wider context, we want people to make a contribution and I think that relates back to the vocational aspect. We want our pupils to develop into young adults and to go on to take their place in society in a responsible way, in response to their own vocations, and for them to be a benefit to society as a whole.*

*It is something to do with pupils being better than they thought they could be, it is something like the pupils having a sense of service, isn't it? I think that is where the word vocation really resonates for me.*

*I do think we try to instil a sense of vocation in our pupils as well and everybody within our community so they have a calling.*

For many school leaders, vocation also means living and playing a major part in the life of the parish connected to the school. This is particularly the case for leaders in primary schools. One head teacher explained:

*I think that the role is all that I do every day, including the days that I'm not at school. I live and worship in the heart of the community, I'm 5 minutes' walk away from the school, so wherever I am, whatever I'm doing, it's always a part of me. I'm always conscious that a head of a Catholic school is a vocation for me. It's not just the teaching but the fact that I've chosen to stay in a Catholic school and work in a Catholic school, that I'm modelling*

*for staff all the time and the quality of relationships in and out of school. It's very important to me that we work as closely as we can with our parish, we go to Mass once a week, the classes take it in turns, the whole school would go over on Holy days, we try to take part in the parish as much as we can. We're about 75% Catholic, well certainly on paper, in our school and we do try and encourage our parents to attend Mass with their children and see them taking part in the various ministries that will be part of the parish. The church is so much more than just the building and the parish committee and all those roles of readers and welcomers and we try and encourage our children to take an active part in that. We have a very fabulous school choir who we send over, whenever we can, to take part in various liturgies and Masses.*

Clearly, the meaning of vocation is closely tied for some to an understanding of the relationship between school, parish and families.

## **2. The Origins and Discernment of Vocation**

Some school leaders suggested that they have carried a strong sense of working in Catholic schools as a vocation throughout their careers:

*I have always personally felt a strong sense of vocation. I wanted to be in a Catholic school. I didn't want to go outside of that Catholic education for the sake of promotion. I feel a strong vocation to work in a Catholic school.*

Others spoke of becoming a teacher, working in Catholic schools or moving into leadership as the result of a "calling" or sense of what "God wants me to do":

*I think this is what I was called to do. To me this is part of my calling in the same way as it is to be son, to be husband, to be brother, to be father, to be Head Teacher"*

*The fact that my particular vocation and calling has been in education has been a privilege and a tremendous blessing. It is part of a calling and what I hope God wants me to do in this stage of my life*

*What happens I think is God equips you. I mean, you can have the professional attributes or competencies and so on, but I think what then happens is if you are called into that, He gets alongside you in ways that we can't understand because He's God and provides and helps you to find those things often.*

*I think in my early years I was trying to kick against what I have ended up doing because I felt that I knew better and that I had a different plan, but somehow I ended up here completely by accident and somehow stayed here. So in a sense, I really do believe I was meant to be at this school and I certainly believe that the many times during special measures when I just felt like turning round and walking out, that it is a vocation.*

Most head teachers said that they did not plan to become school leaders. The following is typical:

*I never had a career plan. I know some people go into teaching and they have this all mapped out. I haven't at all. Things have come up, I've responded to them and I think it's God's will what's happened. I didn't plan to have a headship.*

Some considered a religious life but opted for working in a Catholic school instead:

*I was going to be a nun actually, but I decided that I had a calling to have a family, so I did not enter into the religious life and I got married and I have had two children, so I felt in a way that it is my way of fulfilling that little something that I always thought was there, to bring it into school and I do see it as a vocation in the same way that being a nun would have been.*

Others turned their backs on careers which, though rewarding financially, left them unfulfilled in other ways:

*I was working in the City and oh my goodness I hated it. It was not the tube, it was not the commute, it was just that the job was doing nothing for the world. The job was doing nothing to help anybody really. The job was not helping me. What we do every day at the school helps the students and really matters. That does not mean that it is easy and it does not mean you are not tired and does not mean you do not have bad days, but it is fantastic. It is lovely to be able to channel what you feel in real terms every day, not just at mass on a Sunday. I love when we have masses at the school and when we have assemblies and pray. I just think 'imagine, I am earning a living and having these opportunities in my day.' I want to pinch myself sometimes.*

In many instances leaders suggested that they arrived in their position through a gradual, unplanned accumulation of responsibilities, accepted because they wished to help the children or "to do the right thing". It would appear, however, that a sense of vocation helped many to respond to the challenges and responsibilities of their roles:

*I didn't start my career as a teacher expecting to progress and become a leader but opportunities did present themselves to me. Certain changes come about and you can respond to those or not and I think the vocation can sometimes lead you to respond positively and constructively. From a personal point of view, vocation underpins everything. I don't mean that in a glib way, I mean that as a significant motivating factor.*

*I do now talk about teaching as a vocation. In a Catholic school, we have to see it that way; it is not just a job. I do talk about that now but I did not at the time. I think I just sort of drifted into it.*

Some suggested that their discernment of vocation was contingent on prior spiritual formation:

*Vocation is ... had I not had my spiritual formation, I wouldn't be a teacher because I was a half decent surveyor; why would I want to be a teacher?*

Working in non-Catholic schools appears to have strengthened the sense of vocation for others:

*I have been a head at a different faith school and I've also worked in the total secular sector and that gave me a stronger vocation to become a Catholic leader. I came into a school as the only Catholic member of staff, and how do you grow catholic leadership within a school that's full of non-Catholics? You can only do that by being an example of your faith.*

### **3. The Implications of Vocation**

A large number of school leaders spoke about the vocation of Catholic school leadership as a privilege or joy:

*I still think that, despite all of the problems, it's the most wonderful job. Because there can't be many more important things than shaping young people. People's lives on a daily basis. It's just a fantastic privilege, and I do think we are all truly blessed by our vocation and there are very few other things in life like it. You see inspirational people don't you, or maybe a doctor who is saving lives or whatever, but on a daily basis our job is just fantastic. It's just a fantastic privilege to do what we do, and you're also inspired by the young teachers around you, you see in school, and you see it in them don't you? That's the hope I think for the future.*

*To be honest, I love it. It's great. I started teaching in the eighties. Then I was out of*

*teaching for about ten years. Then I came back again. This is the most comfortable and happiest I've ever been, in my work life. It's fantastic. I love every minute of it.*

*I do see it as a vocation. I think it is more than a job. And I think, for the majority of my staff, it's more than a job, because they're all very good people. They could earn more money somewhere else. But you don't get the sense of fulfilment in any other role. I used to be in charge of spiritual life at the school, when I was a Deputy, for a long time, and I love that I'm not organising those big masses now, because your heart's in your mouth, every time you want someone to move and be in the right place. But the real test, for me, is if I get a 'hairs on the back of my neck' feeling, during one of those masses. And the one that we had on Tuesday, I had two of them. You just become moved by what's going on, and you look around, and you think, 'My God, this is unbelievable. It is stunning.' And the emotion that's there, and just – it's amazing. It really is amazing.*

A number of challenges or difficulties emanating from understanding school leadership as a vocation were, however, identified. It was noted that as leader of a Catholic school an individual must fulfil the demands of many different constituencies, including the parish, governors and local authorities; these demands, and the resulting pressures on leaders, are “not necessarily recognised, because that's what vocation is.”

Perhaps the greatest expectation on school leaders deriving from an understanding, often implicit, of their role as vocational is that they should play a large role outside of school hours in the life of the school's parish. Leaders are expected to attend mass in the school's parish, to read in church, and so forth. Their private lives and prayer lives can suffer.

*The main reason that puts me off doing it, and puts me off recommending it to others, even though for me it is deeply joyous, is that it is completely vocational. You have got to live the role and live with the intrusion into your private life. The clearest example of that is on a Sunday: people notice if you are at mass, if you are late, if you are in jeans, they notice if you are looking tired, they might decide to approach and talk to you about school and you lose that private prayer space which for me, on a Sunday was incredibly sustaining while I worked in a non-Catholic setting.*

*I sometimes sit there on a Sunday feeling guilty that I am not up there doing the readings. I feel very passionate about the leading of my faith in a primary school and I feel that that is my focus, so I try not to beat myself up about not reading on a Sunday.*

Leaders often noted that they are deeply reliant on the support of family and friends for the fulfilling of their roles:

*Being a head teacher is all consuming and as a Catholic I believe it is a vocation to serve. You could not do it without the support of your wife and family or your husband and family.*

#### **4. Vocation and the Church**

Leaders sometimes spoke about their frustration that aspects of their role – including what for them rendered it vocational – were not recognised or supported by local priests or the diocese. “I sometimes feel”, said one, “that I have a vocation in spite of rather than in congruence with the practicalities of church at a local level.” He continued:

*We are ignored and sometimes there is negative criticism from the sidelines and very, very rarely does someone want to engage us in any authentic open way. We could become very demoralised, so I think sometimes our vocation, our sense of mission as a light to the nation type of thing, really keeps us going and convinces me that irrespective of what they might say we are doing the right thing.*

Another leader agreed, explaining his frustration with the Church's position within a changing social

context:

*Evangelisation now, rather than non-Catholics or non-Christians, is actually trying to re-evangelise people who have become disillusioned with the church or maybe drifted away from the church. Sometimes one of their ways of staying engaged is actually to send their children or grandchildren to a Catholic school and I think that is where there is a huge opportunity that is being missed. I think that if the clergy and schools worked more closely together, you have got access to all of the, if you like, young church, and yet all of the clergy are targeted towards parishes almost waiting for people to turn up. There is so much work that could be done engaging with the youngsters and the families. You do get some very good support from certain priests and clergy but you also have other people who are either maybe afraid to engage with schools or with young people or just don't see it as part of their mission.*

It is clear that school leaders' vocation is defined in part by perceived failings of the Church.

A part of this vocation is to exercise pastoral care over young people (and also over staff and families attached to schools). Where a conflict arises between pastoral support and particular Church teachings, some leaders see it as part of their vocation to make theological or ethical decisions of their own. For example:

*As a Catholic leader I've got to be flexible. To give you an example, we have students at the age of 13/14 years old who disclose to us that they're sexually active. Now from a doctrine perspective, from an explicitly doctrinal perspective there are ways that we should behave and I can assure you we don't behave in those ways, we give them advice that will ensure their pastoral care. And that has to be our first role as Catholic educators; it has to be, because otherwise it puts them at grave risk, at risk of death in some cases. So that's a degree of that flexibility, but I see that action as being actually central to my role as a Catholic leader. I support my students. I support them no matter what. I'm fully aware of the doctrine of our Church regarding contraception and regarding sexual activity before marriage; I'm fully aware of it, but I'm also fully aware that God has charged me to look after this community. I don't see that as being liberal. I view it as being the rigid application of what I view as my vocation in the school.*

## **5. Vocation and the Future of Catholic School Leadership**

Many school leaders expressed concerns over the decline of a sense of vocation among younger leaders and teachers. Reasons advanced for this decline included government pressures in education; changing social attitudes; and the nature of education and training that younger members of staff have received.

*The vocational nature of teaching has been recently undermined by government legislation – 25 tasks a teacher shouldn't do etc, etc. – encouraging an "Its not my job" attitude, despite much improved pay and conditions.*

*We are blessed here with our teachers but the educators who come through universities now haven't got, from what I see, the same work ethic, the same attitude for the job that we have got. It is a vocation to me but I think some youngsters haven't got that vocation: they think it is a good job and that they will get six weeks off but it isn't like that.*

One head suggested that younger generations perhaps have a different sense of vocation, rather than no sense at all:

*I have an inspirational teacher who I know doesn't go to church on Sunday and it would almost put you to shame listening to this person, the faith that comes out of this teacher. The way they can lead the children into prayer is amazing and very special and I certainly haven't got that skill. But their attitude is, why should I go and listen to this lot on a*

*Sunday? It does nothing for me, I'm not getting anything out of it, and sometimes I think if we go back to this idea of the school and the parish coming more into the school, that person may be developed more in the school. They may understand then that church is an important thing. But I think we've got to start looking at this from a young person's perspective, in the world that they're being brought up in. We need to start having a different approach to giving them that grounding. I think their understanding of vocation is completely different to ours. I don't understand it all but I'm really listening, I'm trying to understand why that person doesn't go to church on a Sunday, and I'm trying to accept, although it's hard because of my background, trying to accept that actually this teacher's faith is as strong as mine.*

Most agreed that there is a need to inculcate the vocational aspect of Catholic senior leadership.

*I think that talking about the future of school leadership and vocation go together. I don't think they can be separated. You can train anyone to do a job, but perhaps with that training and school leadership, you also need the vocation that comes with it.*

*My view, which goes to the heart of vocation, is that you can learn leadership theory, you can develop leadership skills but to have the understanding of leading a catholic school, there's a whole wealth of background that you need, which must be part of your own personal life as well. Because you can go to study, you can go to the National College and study about vision, but what about the Catholic aspect of that? Surely you can't just open a study book and learn it? That has to come from your own formation; the sustainability of Catholic leadership is linked to vocation.*

The need for vocational leadership, it was suggested, is growing, because of declining levels of theological fluency among Catholics, and wider societal and educational changes:

*Not only do we have a problem in enticing people to come into Catholic school leadership, but the kinds of people who we might want to be looking at because they have sets of skills that would maybe equip them, whether they've got the grounding in terms of their own personal faith, commitment and vocation, which equips them to do that crucial aspect of the job, is another question. I think that is a real problem.*

*Whatever happens in Catholic education in the future has to go back to whether it's your vocation to lead in a Catholic school, and how you're going to make that work for the community you work with in. I think that maybe the vocation's going to be more needed.*

*I've never known such a pressure between things like mission, vocation, where we need to be as Catholic leaders in Catholic schools, and the reality of the daily context, which is Ofsted and our colleagues just disappearing overnight, if they fall into a category.*

*I think we have to be strong. We started the conversation talking about vocation and role models and that we're all in this job in some way because of our faith. I've taught in Catholic and non-Catholic schools, I applied for headships in Catholic and non-Catholic schools. At some point in that headship process I decided no actually Catholic is where I want to go and stopped applying to anything else. But we do have to be strong, because governments come and go but God doesn't come and go.*

There were no unanimous answers, however, to the question of how to inculcate vocation. While it might be possible to encourage a vocational approach among junior staff, ultimately vocation must be personal and deep-rooted. Passing on vocation is therefore not easy:

*I don't think you can assume that somebody has a vocation, but I think that you can share yours, definitely. I think you can have your vocation and you can show your vocation and make it visible to others but I don't think that you can pass on your vocation. You can pass on the enthusiasm, the inspiration that you have and that hopefully will pass on something of your vocation.*

*We have got this group of people studying theology and they might not have thought about teaching, so we can encourage them to teach. We can talk about vocation with them but equally it can't be too preachy because if someone said to me 'oh this would be your vocation' I would run a mile.*

*I've been in a spiritual community for 30 years, so that's where I've been formed, that's part of my journey into teaching really. From being in a community, coming in to teaching, to having a sense of vocation. If you're coming into teaching as a general parish-based person without some other experiences, you're actually just regurgitating stuff; if your personal experiences are not behind it you're not going to have a vocation. So training has to be based on some form of spiritual formation. You could ditch the CCRS, although I insist on my teachers doing it. You could ditch that. That's not helping our teachers.*

## **6. Alternative Ideas about Vocation**

The paper so far has documented ideas about vocation mostly articulated by a substantial number of school leaders – albeit ideas that in some instances are in disagreement or contradiction. Before it closes, more marginal ideas should be noted.

Some school leaders expressed reservations about the use of term “vocation” in relation to their roles. It was suggested that the term has particular religious connotations which do not fit school leadership:

*In a typical Catholic upbringing, your vocation meant that you were going to be a priest or a nun and that was it, and certainly my parents and grandparents would never have thought of teaching as being a vocation. It was a good job to get and it meant standing in the community but not necessarily a vocation, which I think does have a particular religious connotation.*

*What I don't like about vocation is that it suggests in some way that our role is something special and sort of sets us apart...I suppose a holy sense of the word. But you know, what we do we do because we love doing it and it's really, really important, but so are the jobs that lots and lots of people do. I don't like to put us on a pedestal as something that is particularly special compared to whatever everybody else does. I don't like the idea that we're kind of these God-chosen people, that we are almost the next stage from being a nun or a priest.*

It was also said that the term is too broad and impersonal to be useful:

*I have never referred to my role as vocational. It is deeper than that. It's a loosely banded around term, vocation, and I think it is personal to each person, isn't it? School leadership is beyond what I would perceive vocation to be, it is just what I do.*

Other leaders were simply not sure whether their role should be considered a vocation or not:

*I struggle a little bit with vocation. I made a very deliberate choice for the career that I wanted, a very well planned choice coming from a family of teachers and both parents being school leaders, knowing all the ins and outs and all of the good bits and all the bad bits and I still do it, but very deliberately. So I don't know....and I don't actually know whether I'm the person to say whether this is my vocation. Who knows in 10, 15, 20 years what I might do and I might go 'actually that's my vocation'. I don't know.*

Some disagreed with the suggestion that teaching and leading in a Catholic school is a deeper or stronger vocation for a Catholic than a similar role in a non-Catholic school:

*What you do is you apply your leadership skills, your set of values and your ethos in a*

*particular context. It's been, in a way, quite liberating to be in a Catholic school because I can go to mass as part of, and I'm getting paid to go to mass which I always find slightly, you know, a nice thing. But I still feel that I don't have any greater sense of vocation being a head in a Catholic school than I did being a head in a non-Catholic school.*

More substantial problems with the idea of school leadership as a vocation were suggested by one secondary school head: that vocation is sometimes used in the Catholic school sector to exploit people, placing unrealistic demands upon them and not paying them enough.

*Vocation is used as an excuse. Our job is truly a vocation. I mean there is no doubt about that, for a Head Teacher. But when you are asking more staff to work more weekends, the notion of vocation becomes problematic. I am referring now directly to remuneration. I still have to pay the mortgage and so there has to be a proper understanding that the road we are taking is a professional one. I think that needs to be recognised about Catholic education and yet it is not. If you look at – there is some research somewhere about this – if you look at the pay scales of our Catholic Heads, compared to other Heads, we are actually two or three points below on the scale. The point being is that the governing body expects us to work for free. You know, the head teacher is a Catholic, he wants to work in a Catholic school and therefore... I think it's hard to do that. Yes, I think vocation is often used as an excuse to extract more out of a person than they are able to. School fairs, DJ discos, it just goes on. The expectation of the school and the parish is that as a Head Teacher you are theirs, and you are the figurehead so you must go, and you don't have a choice. The parents are quite offended. So I think there is a huge expectation.*

Some leaders strongly disagreed with this set of suggestions:

*I think whoever has said that hasn't got it; just hasn't got the fact that leadership of a Catholic school is about something far deeper. My career has been very driven towards helping people who are less fortunate. You find yourself called to a service. To simply say that the word 'vocation' is used to try and squeeze the juice out of the pips is pretty...I think anyone who said that should be taken out back and shot.*

The case was put that if vocation is considered a personal thing, it cannot be externally imposed:

*I don't think something could be externally political if in essence it comes from within. That sense of vocation for me comes from within.*

Some of the concerns raised by the head teacher did, however, resonate with other school leaders when discussed in focus groups. One noted:

*High expectations are important but we have to be very careful not to exploit people. There's all sorts of reasons, including vocation, why members of staff in schools might push themselves too hard in a very, very challenging role, day-in and day-out, and we've got to nurture and care for our staff very much. And the governors for us.*

Others continued:

*I think many of our governors think of the historical model of leadership with the head teacher in the village, so if there is an event the headteacher must be there, as the leader of the community. And of course you must be at mass in the village every Sunday. Some governors are still holding that as an example of Catholic headship. They push the notion of vocation too far.*

*The notion of vocation is abused by all levels. Ourselves included. I could apply the word vocation to my own experience of things but I would be very loathed to sell vocation to somebody else. When you do that you're into exploitation if you're not careful. The sense of being more at one with yourself when you're doing a job that you really enjoy doing is great but people on our staff, they may well have the vocation to be a teacher, but they*

*also have the vocation to be a parent and a partner, and have a life outside the school. You wouldn't want to create a climate in which you're using vocation to beat people up and make them do things.*

*Vocation is different to martyrdom. We're not here to be martyrs and I tell all my teachers look, if you are going to be here 20 years and not burn out, you don't need to do all of this. Teachers need to hear more 'you are doing too much.' Because you hear horrendous stories of what head teachers, Catholic heads are doing to their staff.*

That vocation might be mobilised in place of professionalism – and used as an excuse for not paying an individual properly – was suggested in the case of a diocese attempting to recruit a new educational leader:

*They've put an advert out for a paid salary that is less than a Head. In fact, I would probably argue, it's less than an Assistant Head. Who are you going to get, doing that job? If you want somebody to be responsible for it, and to do it, it has got to be a vocation. How is it a vocational job? You could go and earn more somewhere else, if you wanted to. That's the bit that comes across – it's the frustration.*

Other challenges to predominant ideas about vocation were also made by school leaders, sometimes implicitly. Leaders spoke about the need for a work-life balance, for a separation between their school role and the rest of their life, and for a distinction between individual faith and faith leadership of a school. For example:

*I think it is important for heads and deputies to have a life themselves too. It can be difficult. But if you are going to have your personal life you have got to separate the two. Your family is important. School leadership is a vocation but you also have a duty to your family, don't you?*

*I live in a separate parish to my school. They do not know that I am a Head teacher. The Parish Priest does but nobody else does. I need time for my faith; this is what really annoys me as well. I need time for my faith, I do not need to be seen to be leading the communion for my school's parish, no I need time for my faith. I think religion is personal so you need time to just get yourself into the right balance, so no, I do not tell anybody in that respect. They'd only know if we were on Catholic Today or something like that, but I do not broadcast it, I would never broadcast that.*

This head teacher – of an urban primary school – also questioned the need to speak about faith with colleagues at school:

*If you start talking about your faith in front of everybody else in the staff room, they will look at you quite strangely. I think faith is a very personal issue. I am not sorry, that is the way I have always felt, it is a very personal issue. I think I come from a different background; I have come from a council estate where if you talked about faith, people would think there is something strange there. A lot of your faith is actually how you live your life, the way you actually develop yourself personally. I still cannot get over the concept to talk about my faith and my calling. It is what I do and it is what I do well, it is what I have been called to do. I think if we start questioning that we will question everything. I do not think we will get anything done.*

Deputy or assistant heads who did not speak about their role as a vocation were among those who most confidently stated that they would like to be head teachers in the future.

(Written by Clare Watkins on behalf of the VfEL research team.)

*Beautiful indeed and of great importance is the vocation of all those who aid parents in fulfilling their duties and who, as representatives of the human community, undertake the task of education in schools. This vocation demands special qualities of mind and heart, very careful preparation, and continuing readiness to renew and to adapt.<sup>1</sup>*

*Wherever I am, whatever I'm doing, it's always a part of me. I'm always conscious that a head of a Catholic school is a vocation...*

Early on in our research and discussions the theme of *vocation* emerged as central. In part this reflects the ecclesially normative use of the idea that teaching in general, and schools leadership in particular, is 'vocational' - an understanding illustrated by the quote from Vatican II which heads this paper. As such, this reflects a growing currency of the language of vocation, understood as a call from God, a way of living the universal vocations of baptism and the call to holiness, which has been such a notable feature of post-conciliar church life.<sup>2</sup> This now embedded sense of vocation is not without its theological ambiguities, for all that it has done much to provide a basis for a fundamental theology of vocation, which itself is a proper basis for the much talked of 'culture of vocation'.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the language of vocation has a more general usage in our society - a usage especially used to describe the commitment of those whose work takes them into various kinds of public, societal service - nursing, social work, charities work, and, of course, teaching. This understanding is commonly related to a simple sense of the work being 'more than just a job' - a sentiment commonly expressed by those we work with. At the same time, the societal connotations of 'vocation' are not without their politicised shadow side, as we note a growing awareness of how the 'vocational' nature of work can lead to something approaching an exploitative attitude: if this is your vocation, you're clearly not in it for the money, and will be prepared to 'go the extra mile'.

Both these approaches are present in our data - although it is fair to say that there is less coherence around the exploitative potential of vocational language than around other more positive senses of the word. At a general - but significant and important level - we must note at the outset that the vast majority of those we worked with either volunteered a sense of their schools leadership work as 'vocation', or responded positively to this as a description of how their work fitted into their lives. For many this sense showed a clear theological content, in that vocation was understood as call from God, doing what God wants, following Christ.<sup>4</sup> That being said, the particularity of this vocation as a matter of both faith and employment, as both church based, and societally accountable, opens up important areas for theological reflection which cast light not only on the particular vocation of schools leadership, but also on the vexed issues surrounding lay vocation, vocation 'in the world', and universal vocation, that have begun to trouble the formal theological voices which speak into this area.<sup>5</sup> We might also helpfully note that normative voices

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<sup>1</sup> Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum Educationis (GE)* n.5

<sup>2</sup> This is a dominant theme in the Bishops of England and Wales National Vocations Framework which speaks of its purpose 'to proclaim the universal call to holiness in Christ by promoting a culture of vocation,' (Message for the Papal Visit Anniversary from the Bishops' Conference, 18 September 2012.) See also Christopher Jamison's observations in his introduction to *The Disciples' Call. Theologies of Vocation from Scripture to the Present Day*. ed. Christopher Jamison OSB (Bloomsbury 2013) pp1-3

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* pp 225ff. For a more theologically extended and helpfully nuanced account of this 'fundamental theory of vocation' see: EP Hahnenberg *Awakening Vocation. A Theology of Christian Call*. (Liturgical Press, 2010). Another work indicating the growing interest and debate in this area from a number of different perspectives can be found in: JC Haughey (ed) *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation* (CUA Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. "I think this is what I was called to do"; "I do have a sense that I am fulfilling God's will"

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

of magisterial teaching in the last fifty years also indicate certain tensions and ambivalences in relation to lay / universal and ecclesial vocations language.<sup>6</sup> Here, I suggest, there is much to be learnt from better understanding the living out of lay vocation in the world - what we might call 'ordinary vocation' - from the voices of those who actually do it.

With all this in mind, this paper will explore something of the theologies embedded in the data collected from our participating schools leaders. What we learn here from the daily lived experience of the work will inform us more deeply about the realities of this 'vocation', and so enable us better to assess the appropriateness of this term, and its particularity when used in relation to schools leaders. This exploration will result in three important sets of insights: the nature of the spirituality implied by schools leadership 'vocation'; the demands around 'recruitment' (and support / retention) in light of this vocational understanding; and the gifts of this vocational reality to the formal and normative accounts of vocation prevalent in our tradition and current thinking.

## **1. Some Opening Caveats about 'Vocation' for Schools Leaders and Fundamental Observations from the Data**

As a first stage in our reflections, I want to draw attention to the 'minority voices' in the data, which are troubled in various ways by the language around vocation. In doing this I am self-consciously trying to avoid too simple or uncontentious an account of a large amount of rich, many-voiced data, and allowing the scene to be set for a more critically aware, complex sense of what we are dealing with here. There are also, it seems to be, good theological reasons for going for the 'weak voice' first.<sup>7</sup>

The dangers of the language of vocation being used exploitatively has already been referred to, and this was a view articulated strongly by a minority of respondents: governors were sometimes seen as "push[ing] the notion of vocation too far" in order to get more out of head teachers, and it was suggested that "vocation is used as an excuse...the governing body expects us to work for free." Whilst such comments got some sharp opposing responses in focus group discussion, there was still some recognition that the use of vocational language was risky: "The notion of vocation is abused by all levels. Ourselves included. I could apply the word vocation to my own experience of things but I would be very loathed to sell vocation to somebody else. When you do that you're into exploitation if you're not careful." Theologically there seemed to be an instinct at work here that recognised the energy of vocational language as interiorly discerned, rather than exteriorly imposed.

When these instincts around the dangerous, exploitative potential of vocations language are reflected on further in the data, we see some interesting, more nuanced misgivings emerging, many of which raise specifically theological questions. In particular, the potential for exploitation can be seen as linked to a presumption about job-as-vocation translating into a totalising of the job itself as the thing for which the called person lives. Whilst, as we shall see, there is evidence from the head teachers themselves that something of this totalising of work is present - at least in rhetoric - there was also a more thoughtful set of reflections on how schools leadership work related to other aspects of life. Put at its most succinctly, this was the important realisation that "vocation is different to martyrdom." On a theological level - where 'martyrdom' is simply '[suffering] witness' - this doesn't quite work as a straightforward statement; but the point being made in

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<sup>6</sup> The difficulties in this area since the second Vatican Council are neatly (though not uncontroversially!) summed up by John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*: "At the same time, the Synod has pointed out that the post-conciliar path of the lay faithful has not been without its difficulties and dangers. In particular, two temptations can be cited which they have not always known how to avoid: the temptation of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural and political world; and the temptation of legitimising the unwarranted separation of faith from life, that is, a separation of the Gospel's acceptance from the actual living of the Gospel in various situations in the world." (*Christifideles Laici* art. 2). The promulgation in 1997 of the *Instruction on Collaboration*, by the CDF (with an astonishing number of other Dicasteries as signatories) is also symptomatic of the difficulties felt in this area, theologically and on the ground.

<sup>7</sup> For example, *Rule of St. Benedict* chapter 3.

context is that the work or vocation of schools leadership is not meant to be destructive of the person, through burn out, undue familial and health stresses, and so forth. If it were, of course, it would fail to witness effectively.

This instinct among our participants links to the evident sense of the need to integrate the 'vocation' of schools leadership into their fundamental calling to be Christian people in their state of life: "The sense of being more at one with yourself when you're doing a job that you really enjoy doing is great; but people on our staff, they may well have the vocation to be a teacher, but they also have the vocation to be a parent and a partner, and have a life outside the school." Indeed, the potential for living well the vocation to schools leadership was directly related, by some, to a calling to nurture other aspects of their life: "I need time for my faith; this is what really annoys me as well. I need time for my faith, I do not need to be seen to be leading the communion for my school's parish, no I need time for my faith."

All this suggests a pattern of vocational living which is not simply identified with a particular function or job, but which involves the integration of those distinctive functions with a domestic, prayer, social and pastoral life beyond what is explicitly required of the job. There will be more to say about this later. For now, I simply note it as a basis for understanding the distinctiveness of the schools leaders' vocation as a 'lay vocation', in a way that both protects the individual from being unhelpfully identified with function, and which ensures that the strong sense of vocation witnessed to by schools leaders is properly honoured.

A second point of caution concerns the assumptions that at least a few of the participants displayed in their response to the language of vocation - assumptions which draw on a particular and inherited understanding of vocation. This inherited understanding tended to see the language of vocation as reserved for those with a 'special call' - notably the ordained and those in religious life; vocation 'set you a part', and necessarily involved some religious experience of particular calling, rather than a career decision. Of particular note, theologically, is the way in which some Catholic assumptions about the *permanence* of vocation - marriage, priesthood, religious life - could not be translated into the 'vocation' of schools leadership: "I don't actually know whether I'm the person to say whether this is my vocation. Who knows in 10, 15, 20 years what I might do and I might go 'actually that's my vocation'. I don't know."

At the heart of these misgivings is, I suggest, a model of vocational living which depends on those particular and characteristically ecclesiastical forms of life, which we think of as explicitly 'religious'. The idea of schools leadership work being a 'religious' calling in this sense troubled at least some of those we spoke with: "It was a good job to get and it meant standing in the community but not necessarily a vocation, which I think does have a particular religious connotation." This awareness, and the knowledge that the way into teaching and headship was, for most, a 'normal' career decision, militated against any sense that this work was really vocational - a response to a specific call from God. Further, an implicit theology of the 'religious', holy or sacred as 'churchy' as *opposed to* the world, might be seen as informing this sense of schools leadership as a job *rather than* a vocation. This may be something to reflect on further theologically, especially in the light of the dominant voices from practice which seem totally at home with the use of vocation language to describe their work in schools. As is often the case, it is attention to the 'weaker' voices that casts new light on, and raises new questions for the majority voice.

## **2. The Particularity of Schools Leaders' Vocation**

This section will simply gather together some of the leading insights gained from reading the data, so as to give a particular form and shape to the distinctiveness of schools leaders' shared understanding of their work as vocational. In preparing this, I am not setting out to be exhaustive, or definitive; rather, what follows is a brief illustration of what seems to me, as one theological reader, a discernible pattern in the accounts of vocation offered from where they are actually being lived out. The test will be whether participants recognise and respond positively to what is suggested here.

## 2.1 Fundamental Christian vocation in response to particular context

One obvious starting place for reflection on vocation here would be, 'what is meant by vocation?' - and, indeed, much of what is said here will be hovering around that question and beginning to shape answers to it. When we consider the ways in which our schools leaders, both implicitly and explicitly, set out their own understandings of vocation in relation to what they do, what is striking is the ways in which fundamental and key areas of universal Christian vocation were referred to.

So, the language of 'love' was a clear ingredient for vocational understanding: "Vocation is about love." The calling of the head teacher was to "love the kids"<sup>8</sup>, and to make sure that the pupils were loved. This was expressed concretely through a practice of selflessness and service, in contrast to a perceived societal ethic of "me, me, me." It is in this, sometimes unspoken but vividly present, context of a vocation to love that we can best understand the passion, commitment and sheer hard work testified to.

*It's going the extra mile for these children because you want them to be the best they can be and it doesn't stop at 4 o'clock or half past four. The job entails carrying on and seeing it through and we all know as heads what that involves and talking to families at 6 o'clock at night or doing a home visit or whatever it might be. I think it's that passion for wanting to help children as much as we possibly can and to live the Gospel values within all that.*

Repeatedly schools leaders associated their work as vocation with its being 'more than just a job'; in the vast majority of cases what seemed to drive this, and the considerable work that resulted, was a passion for serving and enabling the children in their care: "Teaching is far more than a job because we are charged with the task of looking after young people when they are going through a very formative stage in their life."

Based on this fundamental understanding of their vocation as one of the practices of love, we can identify two other key aspects of schools leadership vocation: that it is a loving service with a special place for the poor and marginalised; and that it is missional in its relation to church and world.

The first of these - a vivid and consistent theme through the data - is summed up well by one head teacher who comments:

*I think there are things that we should do that fit in with that sense of vocation, such as the way that we include all children, the way that we accept children who may be rejected from elsewhere. I think that's really part of our strong mission. As Catholic schools, we should be taking and really welcoming those families and children who are marginalised or failed elsewhere.*

And again:

*I do feel here that I am fulfilling a deeper sense of purpose for what Christ wants me to do. And I have always believed during my teaching career in the transformative role of education in helping the most vulnerable....I carried that sense of vocation into my role as a Catholic leader. I can't stress it enough that my role as a leader of a Catholic community that deals explicitly in inclusion for all, but particularly for those who need it the most, is central to who I am.*

There is a strong sense, across the interviews and focus groups, that it is intrinsic to Catholic schools leadership that it develops communities of inclusion, where even the most difficult and marginal find a home. For many of our head teachers, it was Catholic Social Teaching that provided the most helpful magisterial texts in support of their work, providing, as it does, the articulation of a tradition committed to live church and the love of God beyond ecclesiastical

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<sup>8</sup> "I think you have to love it, you have to love the children, you have to love the job, you have to really love coming in and working alongside other people and all that that brings."

bounds, in places of need and human challenge. This was seen as a specifically (though not exclusively), Catholic characteristic for leaders to reflect on in developing their schools culture: “You judge yourself as Catholics by what you do with your most challenging, needy students.”

It is from this place of love and option for the poor that the sense of missional emerges for Catholic schools. In particular, for many of our head teachers, this was an emerging understanding in response to the changing demographic of their schools and local areas. No longer was there a sense that these were Catholic head teachers providing good education for the Catholic faithful in a largely non-Catholic (but Christian) environment; rather, the mission of the Catholic school was seen as a service to wider society, and specifically to those in need in the locality. This situation was described particularly well in one focus group session:

*Vocation for me is spending time towards mission as well isn't it, because I think the more our schools are not Catholic in the conventional sense, full of baptised Catholics...I think I have developed more of a sense of mission than I have of a sense of preservation or straight forward provision for baptised Catholics. That is just the realities of geography and the society that we live in isn't it really and I think what I try and get hold of is this sense of mission really. It is a difficult mission because, actually, we are not using our own resources and money, we are using the state's resources and money and we have to travel that road very, very carefully. But we are on a mission and we are offering something of the church, of Christian, Catholic faith to those outside.*

Love, service, option for the poor, and mission: these are characteristics of what has been described as vocation for our head teachers which are, recognisably, calls on every Christian in their own living of baptism and growth in holiness. In addition, there was evidence that, for a number of head teachers, an explicit relating of their work to a deep prayer and spiritual life was significant. At heart, what we are being privileged to glimpse here, is the living out of baptismal vocation ‘in ordinary’.

If it is the case that the vocational sense described by schools leaders coheres with a fundamental sense of Christian discipleship, it is also important to note that the data gives insights into the ‘ordinary’ and practical ways in which these ‘grand’ callings of love, service, option for the poor, mission and prayer are lived within a particular set of circumstances. Nor is this context here always an easy one, as here Christian discipleship is being lived out in a place largely dependent upon and accountable to a secular state, and plural society, in which economics and results are the dominant measuring rods: “I’ve never known such a pressure between things like mission, vocation, where we need to be as Catholic leaders in Catholic schools, and the reality of the daily context, which is Ofsted and our colleagues just disappearing overnight, if they fall into a category.” If the vocation to schools leadership can be read as a specific contextual instance of the universal Christian vocation, then the manner of its response to these contextual challenges are significant moments for our reflection.

## **2.2 A living of fundamental Christian vocation...plus?**

Having commented on the ways in which schools leadership vocation is a form of universal Christian vocation, and in this sense an authentic ‘lay’ or ‘ordinary’ calling, we must also, briefly, note the extent to which this is also *not* the case. That is to say, whilst the basic characteristics of schools leadership cohere strongly with the universal baptism call to mission and holiness, there is, at the same time, an experience of the particularity of headship, for example, which does, in fact, set the person apart. In some cases this particularity of vocation was experienced as isolating, and for a great many it involved a certain kind of exposure, and demand in relation to the wider community. The person responding to vocation in schools eldership is becoming something of a public person - and, in the context of Catholic schools, they become public persons of faith and church.

So, we heard many speak of this sense of being recognised, with certain misgivings, including an accompanying reticence to recommend the work to other: “You have to live the role and live with the intrusion into your private life...people notice if you are at mass, if you are late, if you are in

jeans, they notice if you are looking tired, they might decide to approach and talk to you about school and you lose that private prayer space ...” For a number this was experienced as a joyful, if demanding, integration of their work life and wider living in church and society; but for many, too, there was a sense of difficulty of knowing how to manage this sense of being ‘public property’, of experiencing, for example, the ways in which one’s own family or faith life might come under scrutiny if it was less than ‘up to the mark’, in some way.

This is an important area to note. It runs alongside perennial testimony to a certain isolation - even loneliness - among headteachers, and the often articulated felt need for support, from mentors, parish priests, and others. In particular, the sometimes difficult or unsupportive relationship with clergy, left some feeling that their genuine sense of vocation to schools work was unrecognised, or, at best, not properly understood. Schools leader are often left with the feeling that they have a vocation “in spite of rather than in congruence with the practicalities of church at a local level.”

All this raises questions about the ongoing nurture of schools leaders’ vocations, and the appropriate pastoral and spiritual support and attention they should be given. The peculiarity of this is that theirs is not, as they recognise, a ‘religious’ vocation in the traditional sense; and yet the public nature of their work as ‘faith leaders’ in schools contexts, leaves them in a distinctive and exposed position of leadership. Whereas in the past ecclesial and faith leaders might have been expected through seminary training or religious life formation to be working from a long and embedded discipline of life, in which prayers, friendship and work were integrated, the church is now requiring, in its schools, that lay people carry out similarly public and public ‘vocation’ without the recognition, formation and support that has, traditionally, been deemed necessary.

### **2.3 A step-by-step vocation; a ‘part of a calling’**

One of the significant ways in which the schools leaders’ experience of vocation challenges certain (popular) views, is in the ways in which the vocational stories were, in the main, testimonies of ‘step-by-step vocations’. By this I mean to refer to the ways in which the majority of respondents did not claim some definite moment of revelation or calling in which their ‘vocation’ to be a schools leader was made clear to them. For most the way into this work was through a process of response to need, the suggestions of others, and even through reluctance overcome by the insistence of colleagues or pressure of circumstance. One participant sums this up:

*I never had a career plan. I know some people go into teaching and they have this all mapped out. I haven't at all. Things have come up, I've responded to them and I think it's God's will what's happened. I didn't plan to have a headship.*

This common sense of finding oneself living a vocation almost without realising it is theologically significant. It suggests a challenge to notions of a person’s ‘vocation’ as ‘out there’, waiting to be discovered and then lived. Rather, it is almost as if the vocational accompanies the person through the life-long process of their Christian living in contexts of work, family, and social life: “Certain changes come about and you can respond to those or not and I think the vocation can sometimes lead you to respond positively and constructively”; “I do now talk about teaching as a vocation...but I did not at the time. I think I just sort of drifted into it.” There is a sense that this vocational sense of schools leadership was only really discovered in the doing of the work for many - sometimes against their own instincts and plans:

*I think in my early days I was trying to kick against what I have ended up doing because I felt that I knew better and that I had a different plan, but somehow I ended up here completely by accident and somehow stayed here. So in a sense, I really do believe I was meant to be at this school and I certainly believe that the many times during special measures when I just felt like turning round and walking out, that it is a vocation.*

It is as if, here, ‘the vocation’ is mysteriously, more or less in hidden ways, present within and alongside the job and work, and becomes more apparent, more significant at certain moments - notably, though not exclusively, moments of difficulty or crisis. As one schools leader described it, God “gets alongside you in ways that we can’t understand”, working with the pre-existing

professional competencies, and calling the person more deeply “into” them, in God’s own way.

Along with this process and accompanying sense of vocation there is a strong sense of the schools leaders’ work as being ‘part of a calling’: “It is part of a calling and what I hope God wants me to do in this stage of my life.”; “...this is part of my calling in the same way as it is to be son, to be husband, to be father, to be Head Teacher.” This sense of the work as vocational but not exhaustively so was also, as we have seen, a significant antidote to any unhealthy or exploitative tendencies associated with vocational language (see above, section 1). This strikes me as a very significant insight, both for the theology of vocation in general, and also for the specific ways in which we articulate any vocational sense of schools leadership. It returns us to the earlier observations that the vocation described by our schools leaders was fundamentally a living of Christian vocation - to love, option for the poor, mission and prayer - within a particular context. It is the *context* that gives the calling its particularity, rather than some pre-existing category of ‘vocation’, abstracted from particular circumstance.

What we seem to be seeing here is the ways in which, within the totality of the living of the baptismal vocation, schools leadership is enabled as a specific and structured discipline of that vocational life. Schools leadership does not exhaustively sum up any particular head teacher’s vocation - they will, as pointed out by many of them, retire from this work, after all; and yet it is seen, by the vast majority, as truly vocational. This suggests an operant theology of vocation in which the particular work or employment of the person functions as a societally structured framework for the effective living of holiness. The (Catholic) school becomes a vocational context for Christian discipleship, in which the disciplines long recognised as part of the religious and ministerial ways of vocation are, in many ways, paralleled, with the same effect of structuring an *ordo*, a way of life, which nurtures Christian vocation *for* the world.

#### **2.4 Secular vocation - in and for the world (and ‘of’ it?)**

This point brings us to a fourth observation about vocation in the data - that schools leadership is Christian vocation lived in the ‘secular’, as part of the ‘ordinary’ world of educational management, finance, families, business, and so forth. Indeed, this secular reality is one of the reasons that a minority of participants felt uncomfortable with describing what they did as ‘vocation’, as this language was instinctive associated with the ‘special’ calling of ‘religious’, or ‘churchy’ callings.

Whilst this theme is not one specifically raised by those interviewed, it remains a consistent and ever-present feature of the data, which we need to articulate if the reading of the vocational language is to be given its true context. The sense of vocation, and the understanding that schools work was ‘part’ of a calling, are closely related to schools leadership as properly ‘lay’ vocation. In so far as head teachers and their colleagues work in institutions regulated, and largely funded, by the state, and are subject to the same qualifications and requirements of their wider profession, they live a vocation which is, *at the same time*, a properly societal (‘secular’) profession.

For some, as we have already seen, there were hard-felt tensions between the vocational sense of schools work as love and mission towards children and families, and the increasingly detailed requirements of state policy in relation to schools education. However, what was more striking was the consistent ways in which, when directly asked about the researchers’ anticipated sense of the tensions between the ‘vocational’ and the ‘professional’, senior leaders consistently responded that, for themselves, there was no tension. To live the vocation of love and prayer in the schools context was to be thoroughly professional, and meet high standards of education, albeit with an accompanying commitment to those students with particular difficulties, who might be seen as getting in the way of targets and so forth. What seems to be being lived, here, is an understanding of Christian vocation which is at once thoroughly faith-based, spiritual, and thoroughly in tune with its situation in the world.

Related to this, I suggest, is the high level of what would be generally recognised as practical theological discernment practised by schools leaders. Just about all of our participants recognised the frequency of difficult pastoral decision making that their day to day work entailed - whether in terms of exclusions, admissions, family difficulties, staff in ecclesially ‘irregular’ states of life

(extremely common), or the moral / pastoral welfare of the young people in their care. What became clear to us in the research is the 'practical wisdom', informed both by compassion, and a central commitment to church teaching, that many of these schools leaders have learnt and practice in these areas. The ability to hold belief in Catholic teaching, whilst holding in love and community those persons whose lives, situations and outlooks make strict compliance with that teaching not yet possible, was a striking and recurrent characteristic of those we heard from.

The point about raising this under the heading of vocation, is that it makes clear the ways in which this secular-faith vocation of schools work makes high pastoral demands on our head teachers - just as demanding, and in many ways more so, as those traditionally faced by parish priests. For the schools leaders, as a faith leader, deals with a high diversity of community members in their school - Catholics and non-Catholics, to be sure, but also, and commonly, many Catholics with divergent, and sometimes distant relationships with the institutional church, or the parish. The head teacher takes up a faith leadership role in a rather curious 'faith community' - a school commonly made up of very diverse attitudes to faith, and to ethical life style choices. If the context of the schools leaders vocation is faith, it is also, and just as much, the secular, ordinary, and societal. This locates this as a 'religious vocation' in an especially challenging place, requiring distinctive responses in terms of spirituality and support.

### **3. Wider Theological Observations (the Normative and Formal)**

Enough has been seen in this theological reflection on our data, I think, to demonstrate the potential importance for this research not only for the building up of an authentic vision of schools leadership vocation, but also for a practical detailing of theologies of vocation more generally. Whilst an extensive account of this potential - let alone its development - cannot be undertaken in a discussion paper such as this, I want to spend a little time indicating the areas of normative and formal theology which might fruitfully be explored in relation to the vocational theme as articulated from these places of practice.

#### **3.1 Baptismal vocation, Christ's missions, and lay discipleship: schools leadership as a particular case**

The second Vatican Council is widely recognised as marking a watershed in the understanding of vocation. In large part, this can be seen in terms of an attempt to expand the notion of vocation to include all the faithful, in whatever way they live out the common baptismal vocation to holiness and to mission. Contextually this theological development can be set in the context of the church's learning to be church in a secularised context, in which the work of lay people *in the world* was increasingly recognised as an essential aspect of the church's mission and purpose. The increasingly common tendency prior to the Council (and still persisting in some areas) to associate vocations language exclusively with ordained ministry and religious life, has been challenged in the years since the Council, through the recognition of marriage as a sacramental vocational state, and, more especially, the insistence that lay people in the world are also 'called'.

This background makes clear both the very common acceptance of the language of vocation amongst the schools leaders worked with, and the reservations which we have noted were expressed by a few. The Catholic Church, even now, is a place where vocational sensibilities are fraught and complex.<sup>9</sup> However, a careful reading of the normative theology of vocation, as set out in the Vatican II documents themselves, indicates that this complexity is the fruit of the fundamental theological insight that *each* baptised person is called by God, to take up a specific role, *in relation to* the whole people of God and the mission of God in and for the world. Vocation

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<sup>9</sup> I am struck that the most recent Catholic study of vocations (Christopher Jamison ed. op. cit.), includes chapters on religious life, priesthood, consecrated life, and marriage (in relation to priesthood, oddly), but nothing specifically on what is the most common way of living Christian vocation - baptised living in the world. Fifty years on from Vatican II the question is still pressing as to how we can speak both of 'special' ecclesial (or public) vocations, and of the universal vocation of all believers, which must, necessarily, take particular forms in the lives of individuals.

necessarily has a personal and communal - and so ordered - reality. It is always generic, and particular, and mutually ordered to the vocation of others.

In *Lumen Gentium* - and throughout the Council documents as they speak of the call of the People of God, in all states of life - this vocational sense of the Church and of persons is given an especially Christological focus. The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ in and for the world; as each person is baptised 'into Christ, they become equally participant in His three-fold ministry of priest, prophet and king; the ways in which these missions are lived out by each person is shaped by his or her particular context and 'state of life'. If there is an ordering of these particular states, it is an ordering towards the common mission, so that, for example, the priesthood of the ordained is at the service of the baptismal priesthood, as the baptised faithful live out the call to consecrate the world to Christ.

Within our data there were a few instances where schools leaders made more or less explicit reference to this sense of living out a vocation of participation in Christ's priesthood (and, in one case, the all three fold missions). These rare explicit theological references highlighted the more hidden ways in which there was often some real sense of correspondence between the work of schools leaders, and the work of parish priests: as pastoral leaders of complex 'faith' communities (or not), as liturgical leaders, and teachers of faith, as confidants and people called on to give ethical and even spiritual counsel. The sense of pastoral responsibility weighed heavily on many head teachers, who were able to recognise this as 'priestly'.

At the same time, the experience of our schools leaders needs to be recognised in the context of the normative theology of lay vocation as characteristically 'secular'.<sup>10</sup> At its most straightforward, this makes clear that the mission of the Church lived commonly by the baptised is a living of the priestly, prophetic and kingly ministries in and for the world. The *ad intra* ecclesial expressions of these Christological missions serve this *ad extra* life of the Spirit. In this way there is, in the normative voice of the church, a clear recognition of the integration of the professional and vocational to which so many of our schools leaders testified. Moreover, this proper secular reading of vocation is given a strong theological foundation, not only through the teaching on the baptismal participation in Christ's missions, but in the recognition of the charismatic giftedness of the baptised person, and their specific call to discernment of and expertise in the things of society. So, *Gaudium et Spes* teaches that engagement with wider society is a call of the Spirit:

*Now, the gifts of the Spirit are diverse: while He calls some to give clear witness to the desire for a heavenly home and to keep that desire green among the human family, He summons others to dedicate themselves to the earthly service of men and to make ready the material of the celestial realm by this ministry of theirs.<sup>11</sup>*

Furthermore, lay people in particular have a special place in this mission in the world, which they are to take a proper pastoral and prayerful responsibility for:

*Secular duties and activities belong properly although not exclusively to laymen. Therefore acting as citizens in the world, whether individually or socially, they will keep the laws proper to each discipline, and labour to equip themselves with a genuine expertise in their various fields. They will gladly work with men seeking the same goals... Laymen should also know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city; from priests they may look for spiritual light and nourishment. Let the layman not imagine that his pastors are always such experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission...<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> An assertion clearly made at Vatican II, and revisited with added nuance and development by John Paul II in *Christifideles Laici*.

<sup>11</sup> GS 38

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 43

The living of vocation described by our schools leaders seems to match well with this normative theology, and so suggests schools leadership as a concrete example of precisely what is envisioned by the Council Fathers here. At the same time, the struggles inherent in the schools leader's witness to this as really lived, challenges us to ask how far this normative church theology of lay vocation has been truly appropriated, and made effective in the wider life and structures of the church. The highest teaching authority of the Catholic Church here seems to celebrate and authorise in its own right the secular-faith vocation of schools leaders; at the same time, the church practice on the ground seems often to leave them feeling isolated, and lacking in the support and pastoral-spiritual equipping that they feel they need.

### **3.2 Schools leadership as a lay vocation and an ecclesial vocation - implications**

The particular challenge to local church practice implied by this last observation might usefully extend to the question of lay Christian vocation in the word more generally. In this case, schools leadership might be taken as a type, and example of the sorts of challenges and gifts that such a living of baptism presents. However, whilst this might open up a useful line of theological inquiry, it is also the case that schools leadership has its own particular challenge and gift, which has become evident through the data, in the way that it points us to the nature of Catholic schools leadership as simultaneously a professional work in a state dependent and related institution, and a living of faith leadership, with considerable pastoral, liturgical and faith formation responsibilities.

In this sense, schools leadership deserves to be looked at as something of a special case in terms of lay vocation. If Catholic schools are to be owned by the Church as 'ecclesial institutions', sharing in the Church's mission to society,<sup>13</sup> then there is a real sense in which the schools leader is an ecclesial person, a public and recognised (and by contract, we might say 'commissioned'), faith leader. Such an ecclesiological observation is backed up by the schools leaders' own sense that their work was 'more than a job', and involved a level of public position, even exposure to view, as a person of whom things, especially faith-things, might be properly expected.

This curious locating of schools leadership, as at once ecclesial and properly 'secular' (in the sense of lay, *ad extra*) suggests that it should make particular demands on the church's resources, theologically, pastorally and structurally. We are accustomed to investing such support and encouragement to more clearly demarcated ecclesial ministries; but in the case of schools leadership, it may be that we are only at the start of recognising the particular characteristics which form and inform this work as vocational. Only when these characteristics have been more clearly identified and reflected upon can truly appropriate and authentic steps be taken, for an effective nurturing and discerning of this vocation. One of those characteristics, and one of especial demands, is the nature of the school leader as both 'worldly professional' and 'faith leader'.

### **3.3 Schools leaders' vocational testimony as witness to vocational process**

I have remarked on how the schools leaders' accounts of vocation witness to a 'step-by-step' sense of coming to vocation, even 'by accident', seemingly. Vocation to headship is often arrived at through the graced doing of the job, and the faith-full response to needs. Such operant theology coheres with some contemporary thinking in the field, which is increasingly striving to get beyond a 'states of life' approach, towards a more fundamental account of how Christian men and women are called into ways of baptismal living. So, for example, the Jesuit scholar, John Haughey suggests that 'vocation' needs to be understood as an 'heuristic notion'. That is, 'vocation' is not so much a 'thing out there' to be discovered, or figured out through various strategies, and then applied to a person; but rather refers to a personal dynamic toward God, whose living out we are called to discover *in via*, as we make particular choices, commitments and responses day to day. Haughey puts it like this:

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<sup>13</sup> E.g. "The ecclesial nature of the Catholic school, therefore, is written in the very heart of its identity as a tacking institution." *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*. (Congregation for Catholic Education 1997) n. 11

*[Vocation as an heuristic notion is] something immanent in us that is prior to the conception we eventually develop of it...which can lure one into ever greater depths, rather than something one arrives at and lives happily ever after with.*<sup>14</sup>

Our schools leaders' sense of vocation seems to give practical expression to this sense of vocation as something that is found out in the person, through their ever more deeply living it.

Such a dynamic, process notion of vocation is also attested to in the ways in which our schools' leaders work was so frequently arrived at throughout the inspiration and needs experienced within the community of the school itself. This observation coheres with certain scholarly arguments about the plight of Christian vocation in a late modern, largely individualist culture. Conyers, for example, highlights the peculiarity of a vocational context in which life decisions are (seemingly) so open to the individual's *choice*, when historically the living of one's life was largely shaped by its being a response to a large number of contextual and constraining factors. This, he suggests, lies at the heart of a failure of a Christian culture for vocations, as our church communities become affected by the dominant culture of individual choice towards perceived self-fulfilment.<sup>15</sup> In this light, our schools leaders, far from being careless in arriving at their vocation 'by accident', or reluctantly, are actually embodying a traditional way of vocation, in which the person makes practical, contextual choices, which, in being held open to God through faith and prayer, are accompanied by His grace and Spirit, enabling vocation to be *grown from context*.

If this is something like an authentic reading of the dynamics of vocation, then it suggests that, as well as the person of the (potential) schools leader being of importance in our vocations thinking, the school (and wider church?) as a vocational *context*, or vocational community must also be attended to. Not only this: the process nature of the schools leaders vocation, and its component of communal contextual discernment, can be theologically recognised as fully coherent with tradition. In this way, we can learn to be better equipped for the *shared*, ecclesial discernment of future schools leaders, fully cognisant that this is of a quite different type from that more normally associated with the decision to seek ordination, or committed religious or married life. We might interestingly note, here, that Richard Price's account of the *lack* of early monastic concern for 'vocation' (at least as understood by the modern mind),<sup>16</sup> comes very close to describing processes of responding to calls in contexts which parallel those outlined in our schools leaders' testimonies. Price comments: "What made a monk was not a vocation that could be discerned in advance, but a gradual progress lasting a lifetime."<sup>17</sup> It may well be that our participant's operant theology of vocation is returning us to a more ancient notion of 'vocation' than that with which we most commonly operate today - one more in keeping with those early Fathers of the Church.

### **3.4 Schools leadership and phronesis; a practical theological vocation**

I want to offer one final theological reflection on the data: simply, that many of the skills and challenges detailed by our headteachers resonate with the skill set most consistently named and explored in the discipline of practical theology. The story referenced earlier is only one example of many in the data, where head teachers spoke of the tough work of discerning how to live the Catholic schools life as centred around the Catholic faith, whilst at the same time honestly acknowledging, and caring for, those pupils and staff whose lives were at some distance from the church and its teaching. What we are glimpsing in these stories is a living of the vocation to pastoral discernment which is typical of pastoral ministry, and the constant focus for practical theological disciplines. Increasingly our seminaries are developing practical theological studies to enable such 'practical wisdom' in difficult pastoral situations. This raises the question, firstly, as to how our schools leaders are enabled to learn such skills; and secondly, how they have, in fact, learnt them, and what they might teach the wider church from their experience of honing skills of *phronesis* in the complex pastoral environment of the school community.

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<sup>14</sup> Haughey, J (ed) *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation* (CUA Press) p ix

<sup>15</sup> AJ Conyers *The Listening Heart. Vocation and the Crisis of Modern Culture*. (Baylor University Press: Waco, Texas. 2009)

<sup>16</sup> Richard Price "Did the early monastic tradition have a concept of vocation?" in, Christopher Jamison (ed) *The Disciples' Call* (op. cit.) pp 29ff

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p 39

#### **4. Conclusions: Insights for Discerning, Nurturing and Sustaining ‘Vocation’ in Schools Leadership**

This paper is already too long! Rather than burden you (and myself!) with another few pages trying to detail possible responses to what has been explored here, I want to suggest we discuss the insights gained from the data, and examined theologically above, under three headings:

##### **4.1 The vocation of the schools leader - a lived theology / spirituality**

If we were to move from this discussion to write a vision document about the theology of the schools leader’s vocation, what would it look like? I suspect that there would be something of the shape of the universal baptismal vocation, brought into detailed focus through the particular contextual demands of the job itself. It seems clear that there are particular emphases here on an option for the poor and marginalised, and authentically ‘secular’ living of baptismal vocation. In addition, the process nature of vocational living described here, and the demand of an account which is properly integrated with the whole person’s life (as parent, spouse, friend etc.), need to be attended to. My hope would be that such a vision statement might form a theological basis for a spirituality that was supportive of the particular characteristics of schools leadership vocation - in all its contextual detail and reality.

##### **4.2 The vocation of the schools leader: implications for recruitment, support and nurture**

These reflections, and, indeed, the testimony of those interviewed itself, raises sharply the question of what resources are needed for the discernment and continuing support / nurture of this important ecclesial-worldly vocation. The evidence and accompanying reflections suggest that any discernment must be on-going and communally or contextually based; it is a discernment in ordinary, as people interested in and experienced in teaching are accompanied in thoroughly non-intense, but attentive ways through years of educational, professional and personal and faith development. The vocation is, remember, grown out of contexts, rather than plonked before the person as a kind of objective goal. This seems to me to have implications for ecclesial, schools and college cultures which are far reaching, but not beyond reach. The relational sense of ongoing discernment in ordinary can be seen as of a piece with that strong sense of the need for mentoring and mutual learning among head teachers that is evidenced in the data. Schools leaders might be enabled to find ways of becoming more intentional ‘communities’ of and for common vocation - communities of discernment and of fraternal nurture and support.

##### **4.3 Some learnings for a theology of vocation**

The Theological Action Research methods employed by this project, and its critical framework of the four voices of theology, is committed not only to enabling practitioner based learning and change, but equally to the learning from practice and practitioners, as an enrichment of and challenge to the formal and normative theological voices. At this stage it seems to be that the insights and experiences of schools leaders offer substantial contributions to both normative and formal understandings of vocations in a number of areas:

- a) the ‘secular-christological’ nature of lay vocation
- b) work / employment / profession as a significant but not totalising locus of Christian vocation
- c) vocation as accompanying life choices rather than being revealed ahead of them (grown from contexts)
- d) the relation of universal baptismal vocation and particular, contextual living out of vocation
- e) the development of (ordinary) communities for vocational discernment and nurture; on-going relational discernment.