St Thomas Aquinas, some 750 years ago, proposed that the whole Christian community ought become teachers and learners together. Secular organisations have embraced the idea of learning communities as a way they can have continuity. We also now clearly identify all our educational communities as learning communities and give a renewed emphasis to the process of learning in the teaching/learning dynamic. Students are no longer regarded as vessels to be filled but rather reflective, self-directed learners who are to be empowered in the learning process.

Reflecting this shift in focus away from a gathered information paradigm and into a lifelong learning paradigm, adult professional development too, is now widely referred to as professional learning. All school and centre staff are involved in the lifelong learning journey. For them too, learning happens in a variety of contexts in their lives, and is a continuing process of discovery, understanding and integration. Thus, adult learning is lifelong and lifewide, and is less about collecting ‘chunks of information’ and more about discerning one’s own needs and proactively shaping that learning path.

Aquinas’ ideas too have come of age in contemporary Christian communities. A growing body of work in adult education and Christian adult education now situates all learning in community. Here too, learning communities are the conduit for the development of ‘shared vision’ and systems thinking, ‘personal mastery’ and team learning. (See Senge, whose work is foundational to the movement in organisations as learning communities) In all processes, reflective practice is integral. For Christian communities, the notion of being a learning community has some sound theological foundations as well. To nurture community is to embrace an ecclesial understanding that wisdom and insight (the Spirit) live within every member of the community and we are called to identify and support the gifts of all.

The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School (SCCE, 1988) frames education as a dynamic and transformative process. The work of teachers in a Catholic school is vitally linked with the evangelising mission of the church and is concerned with the formation (and transformation) of human persons (SCCE, 1982, #16). The Catholic School at the Threshold of a New Millennium sets education for the promotion and formation of the human person as a centrepiece of the document. (SCCE, 1998, #11). Most importantly, this formation occurs through interpersonal relationships within an educational community that has a theological as well as a sociological foundation (SCCE, 1998, #18). Apostolicam Actuositatem acknowledged that the spirituality of the laity is shaped by the conditions of one’s life (Vatican 11, 1965, #4).

Adult spiritual formation in the Catholic educational context then is central to the professional life of the workplace. It is personal and it is professional, tapping into the adult learner’s own experience and living that out professionally as part of the Catholic education community.

Beliefs and Principles

This next section outlines our beliefs and principles about learning and discusses two of the main challenges for adult learning within Catholic
education communities in the Archdiocese of Brisbane today:

Beliefs About Learning

...about adult learners

- Each person is created in the image and likeness of God
- Every person is a lifelong learner
- Every person is in some respect, like all others, like some others, like no other

...about adult learning in spiritual formation

- The person of Jesus gives meaning to life and learning
- Learning occurs in the richly diverse aspects of all life experience which is lifelong and lifewide
- Formation approaches encompass the variety of adult learning styles and strengths
- God (the Lifelong Creator) is present and active in each person’s life
- Learning in the context of Christian spiritual formation is about facilitating the engagement of the lifelong learner with the lifelong Creator

...about adult learning communities

- The educational mission of Catholic Christian schools gives witness to the gospel and the integration of faith, life and culture through the learning community
- Adult learning communities engage in systems thinking – seeing the whole; recognising interrelationships rather than separated ‘things’
- Adult learning communities for spiritual formation are:
  - flexibly structured
  - mutually instructive
  - respectful of personal story
  - experiential
  - reflective
  - re-creative
- All Christian communities, including school communities, are learning communities where each person is both ‘teacher’ and ‘learner’

- Each adult Christian learning community seeks to maintain a clearly defined vision of its fundamental identity, its shared beliefs and understandings, and is concerned to make meaningful connections to life

Principles of Adult Learning

Based on the above beliefs about adult learning in the area of spiritual formation, the following principles are operational:

- Learning is an experience which occurs inside the learner and is activated by the learner
- Learning is the discovery of the personal meaning and relevance of ideas
- Behavioural change is a consequence of learning through relevant experience
- Learning is a cooperative and collaborative process, with high individual engagement
- Learning is a sometimes painful process
- The process of learning is emotional as well as intellectual
- Clarity of purpose, progress and methods informed by sound research and experience is central to all quality learning opportunities
- Professional and skilled facilitators are crucial in effective adult learning
- The processes of problem solving and learning are highly unique and individual
- Adult learning is most useful when it draws on personal experience and is relevant to day-to-day life/work
• Adult learning is most effective within the context of a learning community
• Individual and shared reflection and application are critical in adult learning processes, with opportunities for review within a variety of developmental stages

The Challenges of Contemporary Times

These beliefs and principles about adult learning operate within a challenging contemporary culture. Two characteristics of this environment which have great impact are the rapid pace of change and the influence of post-modern thinking.

Responding to Change

The reality of change and the speed of change in our present culture means that to survive and thrive, there must be an openness to seeing the future and creating the future in a new way. For many, it may well be that our community’s intensified focus on spiritual formation constitutes unwelcome change. This needs to be given some consideration, since spiritual formation is fundamentally about change facilitation. Following are principles of ‘change education’ which reflect best practice research in the field.

Principles of Change Facilitation

Some of the most important characteristics of change facilitation that need to be integrated into strategic action include the following:

• Experiential – many of the best ‘intuitive’ change facilitation helps people to ‘dip their toe in the water’.
• Participatory – systemic change seeks to involve as many of the people in as many parts of the process as possible, and seeks to help them interact in new ways.
• Multi-sensory – the most effective learning approaches seem to limit the use of text and passive listening approaches.
• Narrative – people are moved most deeply by stories rather than by propositions or arguments for change.
• Connective – the most effective change allows and encourages people to connect with other people in new ways.
• Transformational – Education in the Christian western tradition has been more about information than transformation. This is a shift in focus.
• Christological – reformation of our ecclesiology and missiology cannot take place without an exploration of Christology – it must be Jesus centred.
• Contextual – change involves seeing and understanding our living context in new ways.
• Historical – people have little sense of history and respond strongly to fresh insights about today from the past.
• Paradoxical – educating for change and living with change involves helping people to name, explore and become comfortable with paradox.
• Behavioural – acting ourselves, into new ways of thinking, not assuming that people will change because they have been given reasons to change; this is about learning or recovering vital practices/habits/gestures of Christian spiritual tradition.
• Discerning – more about discovering the skills, settings and habits which encourage prayerful discernment than being told ‘where to go’ by someone in authority.
• Integrated – learning to speak ‘two languages’, to engage with God in the world, to discover the sacred in the secular, faith as a part of everyday life.

A Note on Post-modern Generations

Generation X are those born between 1960 and 1975; Generation Y are those born between 1976 and 2000. (Baby boomers are those born between 1945 and 1959) Generation X includes many of our young teachers and educational leaders, and Generation Y incorporates those in early teacher training now. Consideration needs to be given to the implications for the spiritual formation of these generations who have had experiences of religion, Church and culture that are distinctly different to
the baby boomers who currently carry the major leadership responsibilities for Catholic education in the Archdiocese of Brisbane.

Gen X Catholics are the first post-conciliar generation and have little knowledge and connection to the cohesive pre-Vatican II Catholic culture with its strong experiential indicators (fasting; benediction; devotional practices; distinctive liturgical practices). While researchers like Rymarz identify three different cultures within Gen X Catholics, there are some generalisations that are made about Gen X-ers and Gen Y-ers relevant to our focus.

• They are suspicious of authority, institutions and ideology, reactive to orthodoxy and absolutism, preferring to build their own conceptions of reality.
• They identify liminal experiences but do not connect them to ‘Catholicity’.
• They have engaged with the world in ways that often give stronger meaning to them than their engagement with ‘church.’
• Voluntary commitments tend to be short term, outcome visible and local.

There is a view that trying to ‘sell’ spiritual formation connected with a church tradition to post-modern generations is doomed to fail; that the clash in world views is too great to reconcile. However, there is another view that holds that contemporary spiritual formation affords an approach that has the potential to connect with Gen X-ers and Gen Y-ers in ways that other kinds of ‘religious learning’ may not. This approach allows for a respectfulness of previous and current experience and the individual quest. The path to God and the meaning making of that is individual and unique. This understanding speaks to a generation who trusts their own experience, distrusts second hand truth, knows the plurality of experience and sees validity in the individual’s truth. In fact there is a longing for a personal discovery of trustworthy certainties. They are a generation of seekers.

The experiential dimension of formation is key here. Authenticity is powerful for this generation. It is not coincidental that the mystic tradition in Christianity holds the strongest point of connection for this generation. The exposure to real life, real time interaction with mentors/companions is critical, for it is in story and dialogue that this generation organises its loyalties and makes meaning. While much is made of these communities being in cyberspace, face to face interaction remains the most powerful formative context for all spiritual formation.

Overarching codes and myths are irrelevant because they cannot be relied upon, but once an overarching narrative has become authentic, allegiance is strong. The post-modern culture is one of such bombardment with words that they have no meaning. The experience gives the meaning. Old assumptions about a ‘one size fits all’ mentality need to be laid to rest. At the same time, an understanding of the Communion dimension that speaks of an interconnectedness between us all as the basis for a bigger binding picture remains a challenge. Spiritual formation, however, is an area that allows for the introduction of new language to talk about ‘old beliefs.’ Again, nowhere in the tradition do we see new language used to talk about God more innovatively than we do in the language of the mystics. There is precedent! And there is need. While nested within a clear framework, there is a freedom to use new ways of speaking about the sacred, about church and about being Catholic, that may well unlearn some ill-informed assumptions. At the same time it allows an embracing of the creative, colourful, theological imagination of post-modern generations, unbounded by an adherence to traditional culture.

Finally, for this generation (but not only this generation) time commitment is an issue. Voluntary involvement in any ‘extras’, especially initially, is unlikely. System expectations need to be clear, and the integration of spiritual formation into professional learning pathways must be explicit.

Within this framework, though, the opportunity for self directed learning and the provision of a well articulated vision commands its own respect as a basis for the development of a personal vocation in a professional context.