

An Option for the Poor in Edmund Rice Schools

For Maree Johnson

Our Principal of St. Joseph's Melbourne who is gravely ill at the moment and with whom I have shared many of these ideas. Maree is a passionate believer in education for those most marginalised in our society.

Introduction: 18 months into EREA

In the 18 months of its formal operation, by most standards EREA has achieved a considerable amount. Among other things, we have; implemented a national remuneration framework for leaders, been involved in school renewals, worked on strategic directions for schools into the future, initiated new formation programs for staff, appointed and appraised several leaders, sharpened our knowledge around school finances and sustainability, developed support structures at national and regional levels and much more. What is more, in my travels throughout our network I am consistently inspired by the ways in which I see our schools embrace the Edmund Rice *charism* in positive and creative ways. Probably most gratifying of what has been achieved are the good relationships, mutual trust and respect and improved understanding of our complementary roles in this new era for Edmund Rice education.

We should also acknowledge that we are approaching the point of so-called 'separation' from the Province. There is much anticipation and some concern at this prospect. Concern is being raised in some external forums around the country as people wonder what will be the future of this well known group of schools which will imminently separate from its parent body, the Congregation of the Christian Brothers. Will they set themselves up as a separate system? Will they want to receive government grants centrally and redistribute this funding in a way that negates or damages relationships to local Church structures? Will they set themselves up as a powerful independent schools' system and aspire to all that might mean? At the same time, some voices from within the Edmund Rice family have also expressed concern that by becoming independent of the Province, we might lose our way in terms of our core mission and our link to the deepest aspirations of the Congregation and the broader Church.

Given this context, I believe that the time is right for us to pause and take stock before we move into the next phase of our history. Let's ask ourselves some potentially hard questions, such as:

- *What do we perceive as 'core business' for Edmund Rice schools in our mission into the future?*
- *To what mission are we being called by our society, our Church, the Christian Brothers, our Charter and Foundation documents?*
- *How united are we in our vision for the future?*
- *Is there harmony or dissonance between the direction of our current endeavours and the greatest aspirations held for us?*
- *Are we inclusive and embracing of a true 'option for the poor'?*
- *Is this our priority in mission and do our cultures and practices reflect this priority?*

In particular, I would like to focus our attention today on the central mandate that EREA has to embrace and implement an 'option for poor', in all that this might mean in our context at this time. At times this can be an uncomfortable discussion. It centres on the poor and by most measures we are not poor, it may challenge existing structures and on many of those structures we may have built our careers and community life. My intention is not to be critical of any current or past

interpretation of what the central mission of Edmund Rice schools should be. Let us enter this discussion as pilgrims on a journey, towards greater authenticity- that is, the fullest potential of what Edmund Rice education can be at this time in our history. As GK Chesterton once said that: 'The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.' Let's commit to the journey and be heartened by the words of Liberation Theologian Gustavo Gutierrez when he says that: 'Anytime privileged people come to know poor people, it is a good thing!'

Our Founding Principles: Some Reflections on the Legacy of Hope for EREA in its Service to the Poor and Marginalised

I do not seek to follow in the footsteps of those of old. I seek the things they sought.
(The Poet Basho)

As Catholic schools in the Edmund Rice tradition, we are works of and for our Church; an inclusive Church that shows deep love for the poor and marginalised; a Church which strives to usher in the *Kingdom of God*- the promise of fullness of life and true freedom for all in our troubled world. The Charter for Edmund Rice Education and the broader foundations upon which we stand clearly direct our mission to the 'margins', to the disadvantaged, to those who lack hope. The Church we serve promotes service and compassionate engagement with the world as indispensable to the way in which Christians worship a loving God who stands with and for the poor.

The opening lines of the final statement of Vatican 2 imply that faithful following of Jesus demands solidarity with the poor and the oppressed: 'The joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties, of the women and men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way oppressed, these are the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties, of the followers of Jesus.' Ignoring the poor means that we potentially ignore God since through our attempts to overcome poverty and marginalisation we participate in God's plan through Jesus; quite simply, it is the way of Jesus' disciples. Our *Foundations* Document recognises this call to discipleship:

Jesus was crucified for preaching the Reign of God and the consequences of it for the society of His day. As disciples of Jesus in a new age, we are called to give expression to this same vision by reinterpreting His message for our own times. It is a call not to forget the liberating, but at the same time, dangerous memory of Jesus (Metz, 1980). It is a challenge not to be seduced by a world where we contain and control His message for our own comfort. It is a conviction to live the memory of Jesus in.

In the words of Sr Joan Chittister: 'To say that we believe that God loves the poor, judges in their behalf, wills their deliverance but do nothing ourselves to free the poor, to hear their pleas, to lift their burdens, to act in their behalf, is an empty faith indeed.'

The term '*preferential option for the poor*' is commonly used these days in mission statements and the like and is a core value for EREA. It was originally coined by liberation theologians of Latin America. In Spanish, the verb 'optar' implies making a significant decision according to one's deepest values and priorities. The use of this verb was deliberate and implies much more than a simple choice between alternatives. When Liberation Theologians used the term 'preferential option for the poor', they were inferring a decision to stand with and for the poor. For us the use of the term should refer to a fundamental orientation in our lives and our structures towards the plight of the poor- their needs and concerns. The key question for a genuine *option for the poor* in mission is: How do I tell these people that God loves them and that the gospel is *good news*?

As a further reflection on this mandate to serve the poor and marginalised, let's consider some of the thoughts expressed in our 'Foundation' documents:

From Church Documents:

In modern society there are children who have lost all sense of meaning in life and lack any type of inspiring ideal, those to whom no value are proposed and who do not know the beauty of faith, who come from families which are broken and incapable of love, often living in situations of material and spiritual poverty, slaves to the new idols of a society, which not infrequently promises them only a future of unemployment and marginalisation. To the new poor, the Catholic school turns in a spirit of love.

(The Catholic School in the Third Millennium, par.15).

The church should offer its educational services first to the poor or those deprived of family help or affection, or those far from the faith.

(Declaration on Christian Education, 1965, par.9)

From Past Congregation Chapters:

Are the proceeds of our present 'pay schools' at the service of the "poor? Are the graduates of these schools people with a 'thirst for justice' who know how to feel compassion for the poor and how to work intelligently for the changing of the structures which keep a large majority of the human race poor? If the charism of Edmund Rice includes working for the poor, it is obvious that the rationale for our middle-class schools must be to provide education which includes justice education as a constitutive element. A Catholic education which does not include teaching about social justice clearly has something lacking in its Catholicity.

(Rome, 1978)

Our involvement with people at the margins requires a conversion of heart that enables us:

- *To see the world through the eyes of the poor*
- *To accept that our involvement with the most disadvantaged in society is a call to faith in the person and faith-vision of Jesus*

We call all brothers to move to ministry with people at the margins

(South Africa, 1996)

As disciples of Jesus we are called:

- *To open our hearts to the cry of the poor and the earth and to be moved to prophetic action through advocacy and works of justice.*

This is our vision. We entrust it to you our Brothers and to all who wish to share in Edmund's charism.

(Munnar India, 2008)

We believe that it is essential that Edmund Rice Education Australia.....works collaboratively in the areas of education, care and action for justice and eco-justice and to be advocates for the voiceless, especially the young.

(Oceania Province Chapter, 2008)

.....we walk with people in need, especially those marginalised and made vulnerable by society. Our commitment to liberation and justice drives our decisions for ministry.....

(Oceania Province Key Directions)

Extracts from the Foundations of EREA:

The concerns of women, the welfare of indigenous peoples, the alienation of some youth, the oppressed and starving poor, a sustainable planet, the inadequacy of educational opportunities for many and the injustice in political systems are just some of the new starting points for the explication of our approach to God (Theology) and our contemporary understanding of Christology, Ecclesiology and Missiology.

The Papal Brief of 1820 gave Blessed Edmund and his followers approval as a Congregation, with the role to: '....make it their principal care to teach children, particularly the poor, the things necessary for a virtuous life.' In taking up the cause of the education of the masses, Blessed Edmund was, in fact, challenging the injustices of that society. His unique insight into the Gospel was a call to support the most vulnerable, those at the margins, by means of education which was directed to personal and social liberation. His was an insightful vision that viewed education as an emancipatory process for personal growth, one that acknowledged and responded to the social needs of the time.

Christian Brothers, reflecting on the life and work of Blessed Edmund Rice, expressed the charism of their Founder as: "Deeply aware of the Father's providential presence in his life, Edmund Rice was moved by the Holy Spirit to open his whole heart to Christ present and appealing to him in the poor" (Inheritance 1:1983).

The Constitutions of the Christian Brothers (1996) are explicit about the mission of the Brothers and the purpose of their schools. In union with all Christians, Brothers are called to evangelisation - to advance the Reign of God in all its dimensions. In particular, the Congregation is 'missioned by the Church for the evangelisation of youth and especially for the education and care of the materially poor' (Constitution 24). This overall mission is expressed through various ministries, of which schools are a key component.

The identity of a Catholic School in the Edmund Rice Tradition lies in its being an instrument of the Church's mission and motivated by its evangelization role. While all Catholic schools work for the mission of the Church, the charism of Blessed Edmund Rice is the prism through which Christian Brothers' schools look at the world in discerning the needs in the light of the Gospel. They do this within the local Church and with the experience, joy and hope of a living tradition. Such is their mission as they strive to be part of the Kingdom vision through school ministry as Church mission.

Extracts from the Charter for Edmund Rice Education:

Edmund Rice, following Jesus, sought out the marginalised.

- 1. A Catholic school in the Edmund Rice tradition stands in solidarity with those who are powerless and marginalised.*
- 2. As a practical expression of this solidarity, the school strives to provide access to those who otherwise would not seek enrolment.*

3. *The school will not preclude the enrolment of a Catholic student on the basis of financial inability.*
4. *The school programs are designed to empower all members, especially the marginalised, to participate with dignity and confidence.*

God's gifts are to be shared justly and used wisely, as exemplified by Edmund.

1. *The school is sensitive to the economic situation of each of its families.*
2. *The school looks beyond itself in contributing, according to its means, to the overall growth and development of Catholic schools in the Edmund Rice tradition.*

Who are the Poor?

A key question arising from our consideration of these aspirations, is 'who are the poor' whom we have a mandate and obligation to serve? In an interview recorded since the beginning of EREA, Br Philip Pinto, Congregation Leader of the Christian Brothers, clearly linked the essence of the Edmund Rice *charism* to outreach to and service of the *materially* poor, who in turn 'show us the face of Christ'.

There is a temptation in our Western society and Church to spiritualise poverty; that is to speak solely of the 'spiritually' poor and our service to this group, which would probably include most of us gathered here in some way or another. When we spiritualize the scriptures we extract them from practical human experience and run the risk of diluting their social meaning and implications. It is clear that we have a mission to those in our society who have lost direction spiritually or who are searching for meaning. However, this cannot be used to 'let us off the hook' when it comes to our Gospel imperative to serve the materially poor; to those who are most marginalised; whose dignity is affronted by poverty and lack of opportunity and choice.

Some schools speak of their mission in this area as one of education of the 'elite', the future law makers and leaders in our society, in an environment of Christian values and social justice. There is no doubt that this can make a valuable contribution to the future. However, how much more powerful would be the formation of these future leaders be if their education takes place in a context of social inclusion and equity! Where the values that we hope they will embrace in future leadership 'for a better world' are present in the daily reality of their school days.

Fr Peter Henriot who conducted a three day workshop with our Northern Region principals in 2000, says that to be poor is: 'To be hungry, to be without descent shelter and clothes, to lack adequate educational and healthcare opportunities, to be unemployed, to be on the margin of society, to feel excluded from decisions that affect you, to feel controlled by outside forces, to be unable to deal with problems of daily existence, to be discriminated against.' Liberation theologians would suggest that this description befits the 'non-person', the silent ones of history. In the light of this reality, Gustavo Gutierrez proposes that Christian mission must focus on '....how to tell the non-person....that God is love, and that this love makes us all brothers and sisters.'

- *Who are the materially poor and marginalised in your school and community contexts?*

Who are we?: Our Story to Date

It could be argued that in the main, EREA is made up of schools that serve the middle class of Australian society. Historically, our mandate and that of all Catholic schools was to take poor Irish and migrant people and to raise them to this position in our society. We have been fundamentally successful in this endeavour. There is the possibility, however, that our schools have become comfortable and attractive to those who may primarily seek our 'fruits but not our roots'.

Our dominant Western culture is characterised by ubiquitous consumerism which stresses getting, owning, enjoying, producing, competing and winning. Governing tenets are about getting and having: you are what you own; power and money make the world go around; the real world is the one in which the fittest survive; money talks and we all have our price. There is a premium on aggressiveness, self satisfaction, status and security. As Fr Jim DiGiacomo reminded us, this description of our culture does not sit easily with the Christian vision for what constitutes the 'good life'. He cleverly said that: 'Christianity teaches us to love people and use things. Consumerism teaches us to love things and to use people'.

In some cases we have become schools of choice for those people who aspire to exclusive, private education. In a society that increasingly sees education as a commodity which can be bought, our schools risk being used as vehicles for socio-differentiation and elitism. At times even the parents of our students need to be reminded that we are on about more than strong academic results, 'good discipline' and providing a 'caring environment', as important as these qualities are for any school community. However, where does this leave us when the Congregation, our core documents and indeed, the Gospel, tell us that our future mission should focus on those who are materially poor?

- *To what extent do certain traditions or parental expectations of us conflict with our embrace of a deeper option for the poor?*

The Catholic School in the Third Millennium document states that some Catholic schools are unable to fulfil their full potential in the Church, because they exclude the poor and marginalised on account of their inability to pay fees "leading to a selection according to means which deprives the Catholic school of one of its distinguishing features, which is to be a school for all' (par.7).

Speaking recently with the Principal of one of our schools and who has sons, he reported that in the particular city in which he lives, he simply can't afford to send his sons to an Edmund Rice school. I would suggest that there are many people in that city on incomes far less than our Principal who would be in the same boat.

If we are in line with the broader trends for Catholic schooling in Australia, poorer Catholic families are almost certainly underrepresented in our schools. Recent data from the NCEC tells us that low income Catholic families are twice as likely to be enrolled in a government school as a Catholic school. This is particularly true of secondary students. Indigenous students are also under represented in Catholic schools. Catholic schools enrol approximately 20% of Australia's students but only 10% of Australia's Indigenous students.

- *Are we currently perceived in the community as inclusive or exclusive?*
- *Do our fees and enrolment efforts and policies really encourage inclusion or are we focussed on priorities which exclude us as a possibility for those who are poor?*

Many of our schools belong to external sporting associations and historically this has been encouraged as a way of promoting healthy competition and moving the school's standing forward.

These affiliations have traditionally been encouraged by the Brothers and our parent bodies. We must always remember that belonging to external associations is what we do, not who we are! Only our core business and deepest sense of mission should define us, nothing else. We are not PSA, GPS or APS schools, we are all Catholic schools in the Edmund Rice tradition with all that that implies!

- *With whom do we align ourselves?*
- *With whom do we compete?*
- *Do these external associations drive us towards agendas and goals which distract us from that core sense of serving the poor and marginalised?*
- *In our membership of these groups, do we evangelise or maintain a prophetic stance when Gospel values are compromised?*
- *Do the scholarships we offer reflect an option for the poor or simply enhance our capacity to compete?*
- *Does the cost of our 'informal' curriculum: our excursions, school functions etc, effectively exclude the poor?*
- *Is success defined purely in terms of academic results, sporting prowess or are we proud to report success in other ways?*
- *Do we celebrate ordinary students who strive to do their best or do we consistently and exclusively hold up those high achievers; those people who are wonderfully gifted; is there a balance?*
- *Are those who contribute to society in alternative ways celebrated and recognised?*
- *What league tables motivate and define our success?*

Do we embrace an 'option for the poor' from our excess, or from the core of who we are? Do we offer fee discounts, support for foreign missions and support for local projects from our excess, or does our support for these priorities 'hurt' at some level so that it becomes a genuine 'option for the marginalised' that we embrace? I use the word 'hurt' to describe something more than just giving from our excess; we can all give easily from our excess. Put simply, do we practise justice or charity?

For what do we want Edmund Rice education to be known on the Australian education scene? It's good that we're known as places of academic excellence; it's good that we're known for our sporting prowess; it's good that we are known for the connections of our old boys and ex-students and our commitment to service learning. Is this sufficient?

- *What are the 'blocks' to our embracing a more complete option for the poor?*
- *What are some excuses you have heard for not doing so?*

The Future and Our Growth

In the interview mentioned earlier, Br Philip asked the poignant question: 'Who are we supposed to be today?' He asserts that we cannot simply remain a product of history. As Pope John the 23rd once said: 'We are not on Earth to guard a museum, but to cultivate a flourishing garden of life.'

In our attempts to embrace an option for the poor into the future, I don't think the answer is to dismantle our 'well off' schools and focus solely on 'alternative' education. It would be a sad reality indeed if this was our only response in our quest for greater authenticity. Flexible Learning Centres and Annexes cannot be the entirety of our combined efforts to embrace an option for the materially poor!

Edmund Rice schools are called to be places where the priorities of the Christian Gospel are brought to bear on and in dialogue with every facet of school life. They are places where individuals form

relationships with Christ, and hearts and minds are forever changed. The Jesus we proclaim described his mission as bringing life in its fullness to the whole of humankind. Our schools need to be places where students and teachers – all of the community - can experience Christ and the power of that presence to make deep meaning of life.

A Catholic school is also challenged to evangelise or make permeable to the Gospel, its own structures, culture and curriculum. Priorities, structures, values, budgets, procedures and practices of the school must be permeable to the values of the Gospel. Not only must our mission statements, policies and formal utterances be directed by a Gospel perspective but so also those 'hidden' elements that are part of the school's life and culture. There are some hard questions we need to ask ourselves:

- *What is celebrated in this school? What is not celebrated?*
- *How are resources spent?*
- *Which voices are listened to?*
- *Who is welcomed? Who is excluded?*
- *How are we defining success for our students?*
- *What values are continually reinforced in our assemblies, bulletins and year books?*
- *How is injustice challenged in this school?*
- *How are the less able, the less articulate, and the less presentable cared for?*
- *Do we need to sharpen the focus of our school review process to reflect this discussion?*
- *Is our philosophy on debt collection guided by sensitivity to the plight of the poor?*

Similarly, we must challenge versions of the world which define success solely in terms of money, accumulation of things and over-emphasis on status and security. Our aim is to equip young people to critique our consumer culture and its version of the good, the well-lived, the important and the meaningful life. How well we do these things should become our guide to authenticity, our measure of success.

In the discernment of the way forward, clearly we must use our strengths and the solid foundations on which we stand. We have been left a magnificent legacy of success and an expansive, liberating vision by the Congregation. Theresa Mendes wasn't asked to come and present to you at our gathering because she's a world expert on development, outreach to the poor or even educational practice. She was invited to come along because she comes from a school which in many ways, even though it's from a different cultural context, is very similar to many of our schools.

Loreto Sealdah is a very prestigious and highly esteemed educational institution in Calcutta; for generations it has been the school of choice for many of the more well-heeled people of Calcutta, regardless of their religious affiliation. I've asked Theresa to speak of the outreach of Loreto Sealdah to the poor; the way in which the genius of Sr Cyril and others has been used to be creative in ways where the prestige of the school, the esteem in the community of the school can be used as a way of outreaching and including those most marginalised. In this way, education can truly become a vehicle for social transformation!

I remember sitting on the roof of Theresa's school in an environment where the children of the well to do, the future leaders of Calcutta, every day are asked to teach street kids; kids from the stations; kids who have nothing and asking a very eloquent school leader - a young lady of about 15 years of age, why her dad who could afford any type of education would send her to Loreto Sealdah; a school where, as part of the requirement of the school - she had to engage with people of a caste and a

family background very different from her own. She replied very eloquently and I think this is something we can all take note of. She said 'My dad sends me to this school so that I can receive an education, not just attain a qualification!' An *education* for that young girl, who was not a Christian by the way, means engagement with the 'other' and the use of our gifts in service to the marginalised.

Some might be tempted to say that it is easier for a school in India or the developing world to embrace an option for the poor, as poverty is all around. In Australia we conduct Catholic education in a context that is unrivalled in terms of resources and government funding. Couple this with research, passion and commitment that is in abundance in our schools. We all, within the context of our capacities, need to be open, innovative and creative in terms of how we use our position in society to outreach to those who are most marginalised and make a statement to the world about the core values on which we stand. As Mother Teresa once said: 'Calcutta can be seen all over the world if you only have eyes to see!'

Co-responsibility: Not an Option!

Edmund Rice Education in this land can model a family of schools where those who can look after those who can't; where co-responsibility becomes the norm; where the strong accept responsibility for those on the margins. I think that if we are going to be authentic in our adherence to a mission to the poor and marginalised we must embrace co-responsibility. As I have said before, I don't think the solution to our common search for authenticity is to dismantle our more affluent schools and make all of our schools the same. However, we all must contribute to the broader Edmund Rice Education family that embraces outreach to the materially poor and marginalised.

Co-responsibility means much more than just giving money –as important as this is. Co-responsibility is a win, win situation - there aren't donors and receivers; we all give and we all receive. We contribute according to our possibilities and we receive according to our need. We are all liberated through our participation in the liberation of the weakest. The poor enrich us and complete our humanity.

Fr David Cappo from Adelaide links our capacity to be authentically Catholic to our openness to embracing responsibility for 'the other':

The acceptance of this expanded concept of community demands not only a redistribution of material resources, but also for measures to reconnect the excluded, the poor, the unemployed; to provide them with opportunities for social interactions; to give priority to the most vulnerable; to bring them out of dependence and isolation into interdependence and alongside-ness and with other groups in the community..... This is the stuff of Christian responsibility in engaging injustice in our social structures. This is the stuff of Jesus.... And these concepts should be an actuality in the structure of Catholic Education and its mission.

I have a vision for co-responsibility in EREA that would include all Principals and staff proudly announcing that their school belongs to a family bigger than just their own local community. In this family, resources from all schools are used to provide quality education to those most marginalised in our society. Principals would do this at speech night - take every opportunity to talk about the school's belonging to something bigger and participating in something bigger and stressing the pride that all should have in this. In this way they evangelise the whole school community.

I have a vision for co-responsibility in which parents would be proud of the fact that part of their school fee dollar would potentially go towards the support of needy kids outside of their school community; and this would be a source of great pride. When parents come along for their original interview at the school, the person interviewing would clarify and make clear right from the word go that some part of all school fees paid by parents may go to support students who are marginalised. This is what a Catholic school does as essential to who we are and what we believe! If parents aren't happy with this I'm sure there will be other alternatives in the market for them.

Are we bold enough to see a future for Edmund Rice education in which there would be some schools that charge minimal or no fees and yet are resourced as plentifully as any? This is a dream we have discussed with Maree for the future of Edmund Rice education at St. Joseph's Melbourne in its next phase, beyond 2010. Are we bold enough to look at scales of fees in all our schools where people pay according to their possibility so that all who seek the core values we offer feel welcome to apply without fear of a loss of dignity? Yes, we all know that our tax system allows people to minimise income and misrepresent their reality. But should this minority dissuade us from exploring the possibility? What are we prepared to let go of to make this possible?

Our commitment to the poor and marginalised may mean that we would lose some people and with the greatest of respect, they may be better off in another setting - either teaching or having their children educated. However, we must initially give them all the opportunity to come with us; we need to give them the opportunity for formation in the way that we see the world. We're selling them short if we don't. Let them make their choice, but let it be a choice based on formation; based on a true understanding of what we stand for.

Let's be also confident that our fidelity to this path will lead people to want to join us. As we become more widely known for our option for the poor, others will be inspired and want to cast their lot with us. What a magnificent gift to the Australian Church and society Edmund Rice education can be!

When we look at our growth in the future, it is clear that our growth has to be towards the margins. I've said in many different venues that EREA is uniquely placed to make a contribution to the Catholic education landscape of this country. We belong to the whole Church; we have the freedom of the Congregation which is an international entity; we have a vision which is radical and expansive; we have a Congregation behind us which is fearlessly leading us towards work with the marginalised.

However, if we are going to fully embrace our potential in this area, we must also include the opportunity for all of our current schools to flourish. This was the vision of Edmund Rice; he called some schools the 'pay schools' and some the 'poor schools'. I wouldn't necessarily suggest we use that language; however, I don't think that EREA should have too many qualms about imposing significant levies on our more affluent schools to support the work, not only of our schools who deal at the margins, but other projects that EREA can sponsor and foster who work with those most excluded in our society.

Conclusion

As human institutions, we can only struggle to live up to our own vision, to reform our life continually, so as to be coherent with our vision. Our efforts to address these questions in the light of the Gospel contribute to our authenticity and capacity to claim the title of Christian community. Faithfulness to the Charter for Edmund Rice education demands that we do so.

In conclusion, I offer the words of Leonardo Boff:

An evangelisation that does not directly involve the poor....does not take up the cause of the poor...loses its Christian density and betrays the historical Jesus who was a poor person in this world and who identified with the poor...The poor, as poor, whether they are good or not, are the objects of the Father's love and Jesus' option. It is in the poor that we perceive the nature of God...No approach to evangelisation may leave this perspective out of account, under pain of actually losing God and the lord Jesus...

It is my hope that the themes touched upon in this paper will become the touchstone for all that will follow for EREA. Our strategic plans, our policies, our key decisions must all be formulated within the context of our option for the poor. It is a non-negotiable part of our future. We must work together and help one another to grow more fully into this vision and its implications.

At the National Launch of EREA, Br Philip urged us to be 'subversive'! I sense he was referring to an understanding of subversions as '...learning from our history to date and forging a new history of justice'. Putting things right! To this task let us commit ourselves today!

Live Jesus in our Hearts.

Wayne Tinsey
May, 2009

Appendix

Reflection Questions in this Paper

'Core Business' and Option for the Poor

- What do we perceive as 'core- business' for Edmund Rice schools in our mission into the future?
- To what mission are we being called by our society, our Church, the Christian Brothers, our Charter and Foundation documents?
- How united are we in our vision for the future?
- Is there harmony or dissonance between the direction of our current endeavours and the greatest aspirations held for us?
- Are we inclusive and embracing of a true 'option for the poor'?
- Is this our priority in mission and do our cultures and practices reflect this priority?
- What are the 'blocks' to our embracing a more complete 'option for the poor'?
- What are some excuses you have heard for not doing so?

Who are the Poor?

- Who are the materially poor and marginalised in your school and community contexts?
- To what extent do certain traditions or parental expectations of us conflict with our embrace of a deeper option for the poor?
- Are we currently perceived in the community as inclusive or exclusive?
- Do our fees and enrolment efforts and policies really encourage inclusion or are we focussed on priorities which exclude us as a possibility for those who are poor?
- Does the cost of our 'informal' curriculum: our excursions, school functions etc, effectively exclude the poor?

Who are we? What defines us?

- With whom do we align ourselves?
- With whom do we compete?
- Do our external associations drive us towards agendas and goals which distract us from that core sense of serving the poor and marginalised?
- In our membership of these groups, do we evangelise or maintain a prophetic stance when Gospel values are compromised?
- Do the scholarships we offer reflect an option for the poor or simply enhance our capacity to compete?

Success!

- Is success defined purely in terms of academic results, sporting prowess or are we proud to report success in other ways?
- Do we celebrate ordinary students who strive to do their best or do we consistently and exclusively hold up those high achievers; those people who are wonderfully gifted; is there a balance?
- Are those who contribute to society in alternative ways celebrated and recognised?
- What league tables motivate and define our success?
- Do we need to sharpen the focus of our school review process to reflect this discussion?

The Evangelised School

- What is celebrated in this school? What is not celebrated?
- How are resources spent?
- Which voices are listened to?
- What values are continually reinforced in our assemblies, bulletins and year books?
- How is injustice challenged in this school?
- How are the less able, the less articulate, and the less presentable cared for?
- Is our philosophy on debt collection guided by sensitivity to the plight of the poor?

