

Distinct Voice: Faith Traditions and Mercy



Sharon Collins (Brisbane)

*Empowering young women in a changing world
Educating, Liberating every girl
Like grains of sand into a beautiful pearl
Empowering young women in a changing world*

(Lyrics from the College song, '[Mercy Girl](#)').

Words and music by Josh Arnold and St Saviour's College students. 2019 ©)

[St Saviour's College](#) is Toowoomba's oldest secondary school, steeped in its proud and rich mercy tradition that has spanned almost 150 years. The legacy of Catherine McAuley remains at the heart of the mission and vision of the College. As a community, we openly commit ourselves the values she lived by – hospitality, justice, compassion and excellence – qualities that are the hallmark of our Mercy education. St Saviour's is a richly diverse community, which educates young women from across rural and remote Queensland, Australia and Papua New Guinea. In 2013, Toowoomba was officially declared a [Refugee Welcome Zone](#) (one of five in Queensland) and is now the second largest refugee settlement location in the State, behind Brisbane. As such, many of our young women do not identify as Catholic. This, however, does not impede with their ability to access a quality religious curriculum that considers a breadth of religious worldviews, whilst remaining faithful to our Catholic Christian traditions. Furthermore, many families would see St Saviour's as a school of choice for their daughters, given the inclusive nature of the community at large.

Clearly, several factors need to be considered if an authentic, inclusive environment is to be fostered. Firstly, upon enrolment, families of the young women are explicitly informed of what it means to be a part of our Mercy community. Students understand and respect that Religious Education classes are an integral part of our learning. The curriculum is designed to teach young people *about* religion. While full participation is encouraged, our young women are free to express their individual beliefs. We draw upon the Catholic Christian tradition in ways that are attentive to our local context and the ecumenical and multi-faith realities of contemporary culture. Rituals and celebrations that are important to our Catholic tradition encourage full and active participation, in a way that is inclusive of all gathered. We are blessed to have wonderful priests who do this in an inobtrusive and respectful manner that does not isolate; rather seeks to build the whole of our community. Our lay led prayer gatherings are often prepared by our young women and are carried out with sensitivity and grace, honouring our faith, and embracing the beliefs of others.

One of the most enriching elements of our College community is the large proportion of students who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. With greater than 25% of our students in this grouping, this adds a tremendous cultural flavour to our context. Many of our young women are from northern Queensland communities, including Kowanyama and Aurukun, Torres Strait Islands including Dauan and Horn Island, and western Queensland communities, including Cunnamulla. Historically, the school has also boasted a significant proportion of Papua New Guinean students, who again, contribute so richly to the culture of the College. Members of staff have made visits to both PNG and our indigenous communities in an effort to forge relationships with the families of our girls, and have gained deeper insight into the girls' perspectives by immersing themselves in their communities. Further to this, over the past two years, cultural immersion days have been included as a part of staff professional development. Such experiences have included a day trip to Cherbourg, visiting the local school and Ration Shed Museum; and a local excursion in the Toowoomba, visiting HumeRidge (a multi-generational, multi-cultural local church community where our boarders attend youth group), the Toowoomba Mosque and Buddhist Pure Land Learning College.

The College provides many opportunities for our indigenous and PNG young women to celebrate their culture. Such activities include weekly yarning circles, participation in our local university's (University of Southern Queensland – USQ) 'Deadly Ways' programs and inviting local indigenous visitors to the school who serve to encourage a great pride in the girls in terms of their culture. Celebrations such as the Cooee Festival, Harmony Day, Sorry Day and NAIDOC Week are timely opportunities for us to honour our cultural groups and celebrate our diversity.

Many of our students present to us with a great faith. Contextually, the way we celebrate our faith through weekly Eucharist, looks very different to way some of girls' experience of faith rituals and celebrations from where they come. Our local parish is St Patrick's Cathedral, and the Cathedral building is a beautiful, opulent Victorian Gothic structure located close to the centre of town, and across the road from the residential school, McAuley House. Visiting the Church for many of these young women can be initially overwhelming. For this reason, in terms of expressing their spirituality, the girls attend Mass once every fortnight, and every other weekend, they put together their own community ritual, in the form of a liturgy, that engages them through scripture and song, in their own context, at the convent Chapel which adjoins the residential school.

St Saviour's is a special community which clearly has faith, traditions and mercy at the heart. The inclusive nature of the school ensures that a lived faith experience is provided, and each student is valued for the unique contribution they make. The true essence of the mercy charism is alive and well. In the same way Catherine ensured that her Mercy Sisters were the lived expression of mercy, so too, this worldview is adopted at each level of the girls' education. Staff are committed to ensuring that each student in the College is valued, loved and experiences a sense of belonging. Most importantly, we commit to knowing the 'story' of each student so that their learning journey may be tailored specifically to them.