

St Francis Xavier College – 40 Years On

by Dr Graeme Pender



The Early Years

The difficulty in trying to write a 40-year history in just a few pages is the fear something or someone important will be left out. It has been my attempt to include some of the most fascinating and important moments in the life of the College.

Our story begins in July 1973, when two parish meetings were held in Berwick and Pakenham respectively, to measure parents' ideas on the growing needs of secondary education in the area.

As a result of these meetings, Fathers O'Regan and Gallagher formed a joint committee to ascertain the needs of Catholic Secondary education. All local Catholic primary schools were surveyed from Narre Warren to Bunyip and the majority of parents expressed a positive interest in establishing a co-educational secondary school with a curriculum that was both academic, commercial and technical, staffed by a mix of lay and religious teachers. It is interesting to note that 55% of parents preferred a Religious principal. In May 1974 a preliminary report was published detailing local school populations; predicted population growth in the Casey area; a general format of the proposed college and location; avenues for funding; and a projected building schedule.

Bishop Arthur Fox accepted the committee's recommendations and set up an Interim Board. By the time the Board was inaugurated, the parishes involved in the establishment of the College had expanded to include: Pakenham, Berwick, Cranbourne, Iona-Maryknoll and Koo Wee Rup, the parishes who funded the initial purchase of land for the school. The teachers were to be the Brothers of the Sacred Heart and Presentation Sisters.

The name of the school was to be called: The West Gippsland Regional Catholic College, but it was later changed to St Francis Xavier College by the first principal, Mr Robert Schneider.

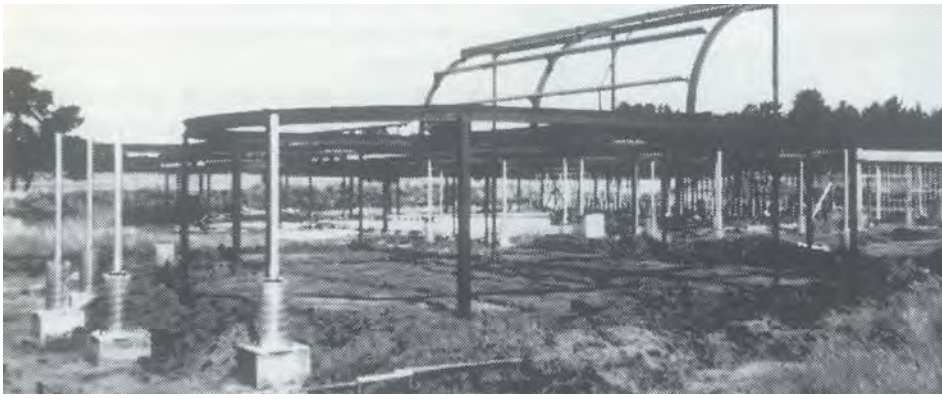
On 7 February 1978, St Francis Xavier College opened for the first time in Beaconsfield with an enrolment of 72 students in Year 7. The school comprised three classrooms, and had only one telephone. The telephone was located in the shed of the construction foreman. Schneider recalled, While not having an office meant inconvenience and a regular late night schedule on the paperwork, it yielded the more important dividend of establishing from the first day of the school's history, a style of relationship between teachers and students which was mutually courteous yet friendly, where staff were seen to be readily accessible and welcoming and with whom their lives at school were to be shared.

On 14 October 1979 with nearly 1,000 people in attendance, Bishop Fox officially blessed and opened St Francis Xavier College.

During its first three years, students were involved in contributing to the school's construction wherever possible. Students paved areas outside of classrooms, installed seats made from railway sleepers, levelled the ground and planted grass, shrubs and trees. Students also designed and built an outdoor shelter, dug trenches for water and electrical services, and mowed the lawns. The staff completed major work around the developing college with tractors, front-end loaders, Bob-Cats and trucks resulting in the transformation of farmland into spacious landscaped lawns with shrubs and trees. The football oval was constructed from the funds raised by the Parent's and Friends Committee.

Over the next few years, teaching facilities focused on the building of specialist areas. This included a computer room; a home economics cooking area and dining room; an area for manual arts; a typing room; general science and physics laboratories; a careers office; and a graphics room and media studies area with two dark rooms.





The Cranbourne Campus

In the meantime, growth in the City of Casey saw a major increase in the local population and an increased demand on enrolments. The College Board were already developing local feeder schools to serve Beaconsfield, but they were also aware of the substantial growth occurring in the Cranbourne area. The aim of the Board, therefore, was to attempt to provide Catholic secondary education for every Catholic child in the Cranbourne region. So in 1987, the Cranbourne Campus of St Francis Xavier College opened its doors to 49 students.

Since its opening, the Cranbourne Campus was engaged in a significant building program and the fitting out of buildings. Parents, staff, students and friends volunteered their services to work in their own time to help beautify the campus by landscaping and planting trees.

By 1989, the student population had increased to 179 and saw a block of transportable classrooms installed, along with a Home Economics Centre and a 28-unit computer network. By 1990, Stage 2 of the building program was underway and it was hoped that the building would become available to the students and staff by the opening of the 1991 school year. This new complex consisted of four classrooms and a circulation area. The design of this building allowed for each classroom to be opened into a single area, thus allowing for assemblies and theatre studies to occur when needed.

From 1992, the Campus catered for the education of students from Year 7 to 10 and endorsed the need for a new Religious Education curriculum; a review of the Parent-Teacher Interview format; and the establishment of a Student Representative Council. Through various fundraising initiatives held throughout the year, the Parents and Friends Association raised \$35,000 to offset oval drainage costs; a staggering amount of money given the cost of living at that time.

By 1994, the Cranbourne Campus of St Francis Xavier College had morphed into St Peter's College, Cranbourne, and were now separate entities. The decision to develop the campuses as distinct Colleges emerged through the recognition by the Board of the present and future growth in population within the Cranbourne-Berwick-Pakenham areas.



The Beaconsfield Chapel

The old saying that necessity is the mother of invention rings true once again, particularly with the construction of the Beaconsfield Chapel. The year 1990 became a culmination of another community undertaking; namely, the construction of the Beaconsfield Chapel. During the first few years of our history we saw our community come together shovelling dirt, laying pavers, and planting trees and shrubs. Under the leadership of Mr Des McKenna, about 70 workers: parents, students and friends of the college voluntarily gave up their weekends and holidays over the period of two years to build the Beaconsfield Chapel.

The Chapel was blessed by Bishop Jeremiah Coffey on 27 May 1990. He celebrated the first mass there with four local parish priests: Fr Gallagher, Berwick; Fr Phelan, Pakenham; Fr Coffey, Narre Warren; and Fr McGuigan, Cranbourne. He also praised the community effort in building the chapel, as well as those who had contributed financially. In particular, Coffey emphasised the importance of passing on the Christian message to our students and providing them with opportunities to worship together and hoped the chapel would become a focal point in the life of the College.



As a Catholic School we have no justification unless we are endeavouring to achieve something beyond the aspirations of schools with no religious purpose. What should be special to Catholic schools is, I suggest, their evident seeking to establish the Kingdom of God.

Robert Schneider (Principal)

Religious Education

Religious Education at St Francis Xavier began to slowly emerge over the years as the leading light in establishing its guiding statement: I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). At first the students were taught a Christocentric approach to Catholicism, namely: patience and kindness; and the absence of jealousy, conceit, pride, bad manners and selfishness. The focus was on caring for people's needs and their welfare. This method of Religious Education was modelled by the first principal, Mr Robert Schneider, who always motivated with the attempt to establish the Kingdom of God at St Francis Xavier College. His spirituality concentrated on action and the love of his students; and his focus on Gospel values becomes a theme that runs throughout the life of the College like a golden thread.

Given there was no chapel or quiet place of retreat during the 1980's, students celebrated their faith through College masses, classroom liturgies, daily reflections and service to the vulnerable of our local community. The senior students experienced Christian Living camps. Over a third of the staff were involved in religious education and were committed to the ideal of a Christian community where the Gospel was ministered through service to the elderly and handicapped of our local community.

In 1990 there grew a need for the fourteen teachers of Religious Education to be supported by the College. Much of the support occurred through planning meetings, school-based in-service and in-service by the Catholic Education Office at Warragul and Melbourne. Teachers taught from the Melbourne Archdiocese Guidelines in Religious Education for Secondary Schools.

By 1994 our Year 11 students visited the local primary schools and helped the Grade 6 children prepare for the Sacrament of Confirmation. This goodwill gesture has continued through to the present day, seeing students help prepare primary students for the Sacraments of Initiation. The College was visited by guest speakers who shared their expertise with the students in the area of social justice. One such person was the Angel of Collingwood who spoke about her work with the homeless in Collingwood.

The following year the House System began and comprised eight Houses, each with its own House Coordinator, then sub-divided into four Care Groups with students from all levels (7 to 12). The Pastoral Care program was built into the House System, enabling teachers and House Coordinators a better opportunity to get to know their students and support them. In Year 9, students participated in a Social Awareness program; one that allowed students to spend one hour per week at a Community Service placement. The Pastoral Care and the Social Justice Awareness programs gave students the opportunity to once again place Gospel practices into action.

The practical application of Religious Education through service was highlighted in 2008 with the introduction of the REMAR and Youth Ministry programs. These ministry initiatives enabled students the chance to experience individual faith formation, personal development, learning leadership skills and service to the community. The Christian Leadership program began in 2009 and developed leadership skills for senior students in a Christian perspective.

By 2011, Catholic Schools Youth Ministry Australia (CSYMA) emerged as the Australian-wide youth ministry program. The focus of this program was to encourage and Year 11 and 12 students to lead younger students in various areas of ministry, as well as allow them time to reflect on their own faith journey. The opportunity to serve on the St Vincent de Paul Soup van from February to November was a welcome chance for senior students to once again take the Gospel message of Christ to the most vulnerable of our community: the homeless; those addicted to drugs and alcohol; and those who are victims of domestic violence. This ministry still continues today. In the same year, we saw the emergence of the Liturgy Choir (Cantabile) as an elective subject in order to learn about their faith, perform musically and participate in liturgical celebrations.

With the establishment of the Catholic Identity Team, the College now celebrates over 50 masses annually from Year 7 to 12; St Francis Xavier Day; retreats; liturgies; outreach through fund-raising charities; supporting students in local primary schools by preparing them for their Sacraments of Initiation; youth ministry from Year 10 to 12; St Vincent de Paul Soup Van; overseas immersion programs such as staff professional development in the Holy Land and student visits to Timor Leste; Cantabile Liturgical Choir; and numerous social justice, ministry and service activities throughout the year.

Currently our Religious Education curriculum has been reviewed and is being implemented in the classroom. The focus is recontextualising Scripture in a way that speaks in relevant language to our students. It is a massive change, but is one that seeks to enliven the faith journey of everyone; student and teacher.





The Past 20 Years

For anyone who lives or teaches in the City of Casey, you will know about the dramatic rise in the population over the past few years. I have been a resident in Berwick for nearly 25 years and have seen the development of roads and massive housing estates to the detriment of farming land. No longer can one see the acres of land supporting market gardens, cattle and horses anymore. As a result of the population boom, St Francis Xavier College has had to expand itself considerably.

The Beaconsfield Campus saw continued growth in its Capital Works program with the opening and blessing of six more buildings in 2000 by Bishop Coffey. The Campus saw a major upgrade of computers and the purchase of a new College bus. An inaugural Expo saw Learning Areas working together to showcase their work to widen the idea of community. Twilight seminars were held involving people from age 5 to 70 experiencing art classes, computer workshops, cooking, driver safety and learning study skills.



Berwick Campus

The Berwick Campus was formally opened and blessed by Bishop Jeremiah Coffey in 2005 to ensure the College was able to cater appropriately for the projected enrolment of 900 students in Years 7 to 9.

In its first year, the Berwick Campus had 300 students in Year 7, and the Beaconsfield Campus catered for Year 8 to 12. Eventually, Berwick would become the Junior campus (Years 7 to 9) and Beaconsfield would become the Senior campus (Years 10 to 12).

At Berwick, students were offered a choice of subjects. No longer was the subject called: Year 7 Religious Education. Rather, there was the freedom to select from alternatives such as: Faith and Philosophy, Belief through Art, Messiah or Magician, or Parables Played Out. Similarly, Year 7 English offered alternatives to study: Communication, I'm an Aussie, What an Adventure, Who's into Fantasy, or Our Neighbourhood.

There has been the constant effort to strengthen the College ethos whilst building an increasingly deeper sense of justice and Christian community between the students, staff and parents at the Berwick Campus. Academically, the staff at Berwick always attempted to consolidate the academic and personal challenges of all students by exploring a range of options to ensure the values of the Gospel as well as maintaining the two campuses remained as one community.

The Berwick Campus has implemented many major initiatives over the years and it is pleasing to discover that they are still relevant today: a structured Pastoral Care Program; a House System; Restorative Justice Practices; a Peer Support Program; and many others.

Besides the constant Capital Works at the Berwick Campus, one of the most stunning buildings recently celebrated was: Our Lady of the Southern Cross Chapel, opened in 2015. It is a shared sacred space with St Catherine's Primary School and invites one to reflect on the various fragments of Scripture found throughout the building; on stone, in the glass panels behind the altar; and on the skylight above.



Officer Campus

In order to cater for the rising population in the Officer, Pakenham and neighbouring areas, a third campus was built. In 2011, Bishop Christopher Prowse turned the first clod of soil for the construction of a new Campus in Officer. Given this occurred in August 2011, the plan was to offer 150 places for aspiring Year 7 students to begin their secondary education in 2012.

In 2012 the first Stage of the building plan provided a learning space for each class which abutted an expansive central zone. The multipurpose area could be used for assemblies, special events, drama, or music performances. Moreover, a space for a library and outdoor kitchen area to cater for the various programs was built.

By 2014 additional buildings were constructed to cater to the needs of students. There was the opening of the Design, Arts, Technology and Science Centre and the construction of the first Sporting grounds. Stage 3 of the building program neared completion in 2015 which provided the final learning and sporting/recreational areas.

This new Campus was designed to meet the challenge: What do students of today need for the 21st century? The varying designs being built over the next few years will attempt to reflect the answer to this question.

Epilogue

As I suggested in the opening of this story, to cover 40 years of history in only a few pages does not do justice to a school originally forged on the dreams and faith values of a handful of people and carried into the 21st century by a succession of principals, Board members, teachers, staff members, parents, friends and students, both past and present. There are untold stories of humour, sadness, vision, disenchantment and elation that go hand-in-hand when attempting to build a school of this size to meet the educational and spiritual needs of local students in a rapidly developing area. These stories need to be written in a book and in the detail that is not present here. Someday that may happen. I hope so. That will provide the proper tribute to the founding fathers and mothers of this great school. Let me finish with a beautiful quote from Mr Robert Schneider, our founding principal because I think it captures the grass roots essence of who we are as a faith community.

There's something very special about pioneering a school... There's an enthusiasm that's almost intoxicating and people give so generously of their time. Pioneering calls on one's resourcefulness and one's ability to improvise. When you think of how little we started with here – just a few classrooms, a cow paddock and a haystack really...and you only have to look around to see how much we've grown since then.



Principals

1. Robert Schneider: 1978 - 1983

2. Kevin Styring: 1984 - 1989

3. Aidan Burns: 1990 - 1999

4. Maree Johnson: 2000 - 2004

5. Paul Desmond: 2005 - 2014

6. Vincent Feeney: 2015 - Present

