Experiri is a quarterly newsletter presenting stories of innovation in school ministry from Australia and beyond. Each edition provides single page profiles of innovative strategies that have been developed in response to challenges or emerging issues for chaplains or others in the school, including Heads and Religious Educators. If you are interested in contributing to Experiri see our contact information below.

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Innovation #1

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“school is a spiritual home for many people and the ideal place to belong to a church”

What was the need or challenge being addressed?
In my early days at King’s I met many people from the School community who called the Chapel their church. They seemed quite content that we only met once a year (Christmas Day)! Our historic Chapel is ideal for weddings, baptisms and funerals and my attempt to encourage people into their local parish after their service was usually met with lethargy from both sides. Students were coming to faith through the school ministry and some struggled to find a church (especially the Boarders who live on campus). We needed to provide a spiritual home for these people!

What was the response to the need?
We continued with our successful Christmas Day Service then organised an Easter Sunday Service which was well attended. A Thanksgiving Service was organised on a random Sunday and people came. A team of five met together to pray and plan and we launched a morning service on 27 February, 2005 in the School’s new auditorium. Many who attended were supporters from other churches and the real issue was to see who would turn up the next week. Through God’s grace a small congregation (30 adults and 20 children) began meeting under the leadership of the Chaplain who was answerable to the Headmaster.

What was the impact?
Church@Kings is celebrating our 10th year of ministry this year (60 adults/ 30 children each week). The ministry includes Sunday School, youth groups, Bible studies, evangelism courses, marriage and baptism seminars. It has greatly broadened the Christian ministry in the School. Many found it easier to join us rather than their local church because they know the School and they know the people. A Contemporary Night Service (Church@theChapel) began three years ago (35 people each week). We collect an offertory and employ part time staff to minister.

What were the greatest challenges?
The extra workload was a challenge. Starting the Church five years into my appointment at King’s was necessary for relationships and time management. School issues have occasionally dribbled over into our Church family but the inclusion of people from outside the School has helped. Schools are transient places and people can come and go quickly, although many old boys and their families remain with us. Some Christian staff and families simply see school as a place of work and education and are keen to get away once the bell goes.
What was the need or challenge being addressed?

The Brotherhood was engaging with many educational institutions in lots of different ways and was being asked if we could provide a practical experiential learning program for their students. The interaction was welcomed but was consuming a lot of staff time in organising activities that stretched young people. Background information showed us that students could learn about disadvantage, poverty and social justice in a classroom environment but many had never seen it for themselves, met people in need or been able to help in a hands on way.

What were the greatest challenges?

The majority of our participants from co-ed schools are girls. We are working on ways to secure the interest of young men to help them see that this is a valuable and inspiring experience for them. We work really hard to ensure that Urban Camp is not a token experience for students but a beginning to a future of serving others in their community.

Funding this program is difficult – whilst participants pay to come to camp, it pays only for the expenses of camp, not the staff time. Philanthropic trusts don’t see us as a program that they want to support as we might be teaching but we’re not helping disadvantaged youth in a direct kind of way.

What was the response to the need?

After discussion with schools and trialling of a few different activities, the Urban Camp project was created to allow a practical experience for students to be engaged with the community, and meet people they might not otherwise interact with. Students come and stay at the Brotherhood for four days and become part of the community we work with, from young children at the Breakfast Club program, to young refugees, to sorting at our warehouse, to older people at the Coolibah senior citizens centre and everyone in-between.

What was the impact?

Some students come to camp with a very limited idea about disadvantage. The program shows them that, each person has a unique story to tell, all should be treated with dignity and it is within everyone’s power to help others. After camp students have returned to their schools and continued the work of fundraising but also sharing their new knowledge and helping out in their own communities. We have even had groups organise excursions for people they have met while on camp. The program is helping to grow a culture of volunteering amongst young people and encouraging them to be involved with others. The program has grown over the last five years with new schools signing up each year and new community activities wanting to be involved.

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The All Saints Senior School needed: a comfortable, welcoming and relaxing space for Senior School students in which to ‘hang out’ at lunchtimes and after school; somewhere for students to microwave food, toast sandwiches and chat with friends; a place where relational ministry could take place and where the Senior School Chaplain could get alongside students, build friendships, provide encouragement, support and informal counselling; somewhere to park a bunch of couches, two pool tables, a table tennis table, a foosball table and a large fridge full of drinks and snacks.

The answer was The Zone. The School recognised the need and the Zone began its life at the back of the stage area in the old Performing Arts building. Now it’s a purpose-built area beneath our Visual Arts Centre. In terms of how it operates, it’s like an updated version of the Drop-In centre. At lunchtimes it functions as a Year 12 common room, while after school it’s open to all Senior School students. On any given day there could be 140+ students who come through its doors to chill out.

Like all relational ministries, it’s difficult to quantify the results. Do you measure it in terms of sandwiches cooked? Pool balls potted? Volume of conversation in decibels during lunchtime? Qualitatively though, running the Zone continues to be a really useful part of my ministry in the Senior School. Partly it gives me an opportunity to serve the students and care for them in a practical way. It certainly helps me develop relationships with my students and this pays dividends in terms of building respect, credibility and open ears and hearts in the classroom and in the Chapel. There are often really valuable conversations which happen over a game of pool or when waiting to play table tennis. It’s a reminder that young people want to talk about important issues and they will if we create comfortable spaces for those conversations to naturally happen.

I’m blessed with a school leadership who are fully committed to seeing the Zone continue – they recognise the value that it adds to the Senior School and are nothing but supportive. Once a week the youth minister from our local Anglican parish works alongside me in the Zone. The biggest challenge, in a busy school, is to make sure I guard my time – remembering that just ‘hanging out with students’, building friendships, being available and ready to listen... these things are critical ingredients to any ministry with students.