



Pilgrims of Hope

Religious Education Leadership
Conference



6 & 7 October 2025



260 plus pilgrims from around South Africa gathered to pray, learn and share together in order to become leaders in educating children's Hearts Minds and Souls.



Preparations for the conference began in 2024 with mini-conferences held in regions in 2025, leading up to conference in October. A conference planning team met regularly to plan and develop the conference programme.

The conference aimed to continue the work of the Direction Statements One (Mission and Identity) and Two (Religious Education) developed at the 2019 Third Catholic Education Congress, *Towards Tomorrow Together in Faith* by promoting and strengthening Religious Education in our schools.

By using the synodal method of prayer, reflection of scripture and listening the participants participated enthusiastically throughout the two days. The programme intentionally provided opportunities for group dialogue, journalling, reflection and synthesis. The Conference brought together Religious Education thought leaders, school leaders, priests, RE coordinators teachers and NCBE leaders.

In keeping with our Religious Education multi-process curriculum design a selection of strands featured in the conference programme:



Scriptural Education; Personal Moral Education; Spiritual Education; Education by Environment; Education in Structural Morality (Social & Environmental Justice)

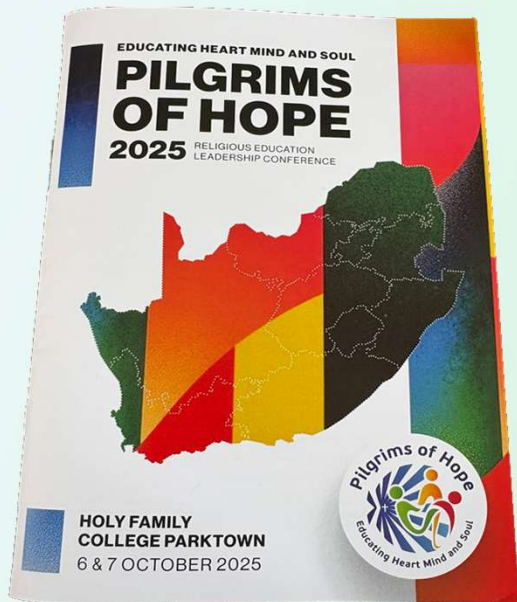
Presenters offered challenging insights and theological depth to the Pilgrims. It is important to remember that for School Leaders and Religious this conference is but part of our ongoing pilgrimage to bring the Hope promised by the Gospel to all members of our school communities.

Day One Presentations

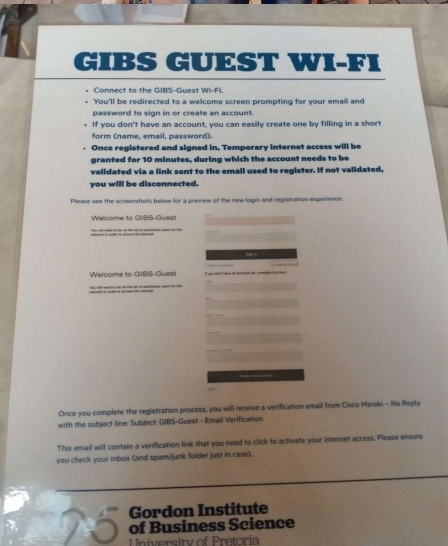


- **Scripture reflection:** *Fr David Neuhaus SJ*
- **Opening Address:** *Bishop Sithembile Sipuka (President of the NCBE)*
- **Holy Mass:** *celebrated Archbishop Henryk M Jagodziński (Papal Nuncio)*
- **Religious Education - A Sacred Quest at the Heart of the Catholic School:** *Br Michael Burke cfc*
- **Catholic Education Today and in the Future:** *Fr Hugh O'Connor (Chairperson of the NCBE)*
- **My Religious Education Context:** *Anne Baker CIE Deputy Director*
- **The Curriculum - breaking open the richness of our Curriculum:** *Ntebeng Mohapi (RE Department)*
- **Scripture Reflection:** *Fr David Neuhaus SJ*

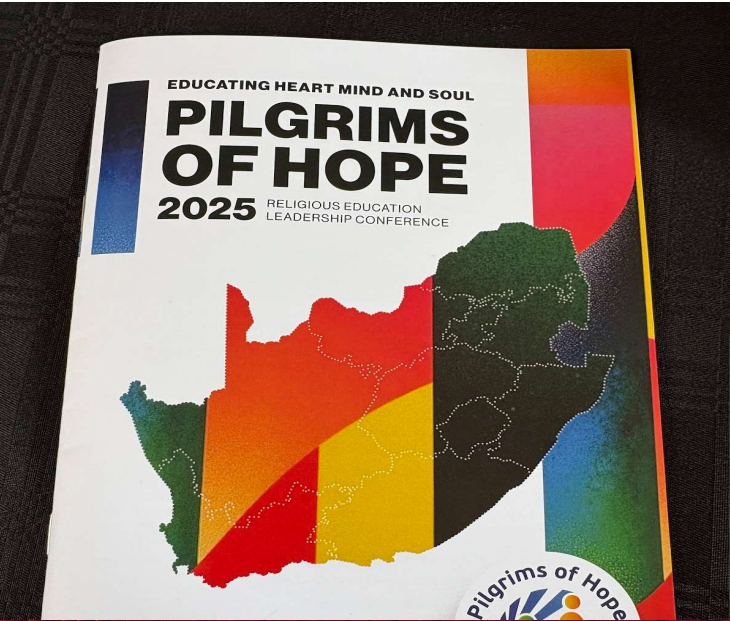
Day Two Presentations



- **Experiential Pilgrimage walks:** *John McCormick (RE Department)*
- **21st Century influences on RE:** *Al Andre Croucamp and Dr Mark Potterton*
- **Religious Education for Social Justice:** *Fr Peter-John Pearson (Director of the CPLO)*
- **Spirituality of the Religious Educator:** *Evona Rebelo (NCBE Member)*
- **Closing reflection and commissioning ceremony**



Logistics and Arrival



Day One

Opening Scriptural Reflection

The Disciples on the road to Emmaus excerpts by Rev David Niehaus, SJ

The trauma and grief of the disciples on the road to Emmaus prevented from recognising new realities after Jesus' death – a common human experience to abandon painful memories and return to normal life.

Educators need to recognize their own wounds to develop compassion and resilience. We need to become “wounded healers” who can guide others.

- This theological perspective reframes suffering as integral to spiritual growth and eventual renewal.
- The emphasis on scripture positions it as the central tool for spiritual formation and resilience building.
- The breaking and blessing of bread by Jesus triggered the disciples' full recognition and belief in resurrection life - the key moment where intellectual understanding and emotional recognition fused.



Sacred Call of Religious Education in Our Catholic Schools

Keynote Address - Bishop S. Sipuka

We stand in a great tradition that began in 1847 with St Augustine's Primary School in Gqeberha and continues today in your schools, classrooms, and daily work with young people.



The Challenge We Face

Our young people today have access to more information than any previous generation has had. Yet at the same time, we see so many of them struggling - anxiety, depression, feeling empty inside. They know how to use technology, but they struggle with the deeper questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose?

Students Are Not Empty of God

The great African theologian John Mbiti said that "Africans are notoriously religious." Our people, our cultures, have always had a deep sense of God, of the sacred, of the spiritual world. Our students are not empty vessels. They already have what we call the *sensus fidei* - a sense of the divine, an awareness of God.

Learning to Listen

The Catholic Church is on a journey of synodality - which means "walking together." And at the heart of walking together is learning to listen. We need to learn to listen to our students. Not just their answers to our questions, but their real questions, their struggles, their experiences. The Holy Spirit also touches our students. They have their own spiritual experiences, their own insights, their own questions about God.

So, what am I asking of you?

Have courage. Stand firm on the importance of Religious Education. Don't let it become just another exam subject with no heart. Have the courage to question practices that harm students.

Listen to your students. Really listen. Remember, they are not empty of God; they already possess that spiritual awareness. Create space for their questions, their doubts, their experiences. Help them recognise what the Holy Spirit is already doing in their hearts.

Make it real. Connect faith to the real issues students face: poverty, violence, peer pressure, questions about identity and sexuality, family problems, exploitation, social media, and mental health. These are exactly what Religious Education should address.

Teach with your whole life. Remember that religion is more caught than taught. Students learn more from how you treat them, how you handle problems, how you live your faith, than from any textbook.

Keep growing and support each other. Keep deepening your own faith. Take care of your own spiritual life. Teaching is hard work - don't try to do it alone. Share ideas. Encourage each other. Pray for each other.

Homily for Religious Education Conference Mass

(Celebrated by Archbishop Jagodziński - Papal Nuncio)

Reflection on the
readings
(Call of Jonah
and the Great
Commandment)

Homily
Bishop S. Sipuka



First, **when you feel like fleeing, pray**. Like Jonah in the fish, cry out to God from wherever you are. He will hear you.

Second, **remember the heart of your mission**: teaching students to love God and love their neighbours. When you feel overwhelmed by curriculum demands and exam pressure, return to this simple centre. Everything else is just the means to this end.

Third, **trust that God is at work even when you cannot see it**. Jonah couldn't see from inside the fish that God had a plan. You may not see the fruits of your labour now. But you are planting seeds. God will bring the growth.

Finally, **know that you are doing God's work**. Not because you are perfect, not because you have all the answers, but because God has called you to your school, just as He called Jonah, do not wish to be another school; God has placed you there for a purpose, fulfil it. Like Jonah, you may sometimes fail, sometimes run away, sometimes find yourself in the depths. But God remains faithful. God will bring you through. And through you, God will reach the hearts of young people who desperately need to hear that they are loved.



Religious Education A Sacred Quest at the Heart of the Catholic School

Keynote Address - Br Michael Burke CFC

RE is for every child's needs...	...but it needs to be relevant.	RE is primarily experience.	Your role is to educate.	Respect & value the Church...	...but take your lead from Jesus.
Assert the place & value of RE - don't let it get squeezed or squashed or squished. RE is the heart of the Catholic school. It's the goose that lays the golden eggs. <i>In that story... Why do you think they killed the goose that laid the golden eggs?</i>					
RE needs to be supported.					



- RE is for **every child**, not just Catholics or believers, reflecting a broad, human-centered approach to faith and education
 - The vision includes renaming RE to better reflect its essence as teaching **true and full humanity**, moving beyond traditional labels like “religious instruction” or “catechism”
- RE must be timely, relevant, and responsive to the lived experiences and developmental agenda of children and adolescents.
- Responsiveness also means valuing **silence and reflection** within RE to allow students to internalize and connect with spiritual content deeply
 - Respect for the Church must be balanced with critical thinking and openness to change, citing the example of Galileo’s 200-year delayed apology
 - RE’s role is to **educate, not indoctrinate or persuade**, focusing on guiding students to discover their own faith and understanding

Religious education’s success depends heavily on a supportive school ethos and community involvement.

There is an urgent need to advocate for adequate time and resources for RE to maintain its importance in schools.

Catholic Education Today and in the Future

Fr Hugh O'Connor

“...we hope that our schools will be beacons of hope, providing good education, faith-based education, and safe spaces for our learners and educators, so that they may seek and strive for academic excellence in a balanced, loving, and caring environment.” *Fr Hugh O'Connor*



Network Diversity and Ethos Preservation

The network's strength lies in its diversity, which must be actively preserved through shared Catholic values despite varying local expressions

The Catholic schools network includes schools with widely different religious engagement levels, from high Catholic participation to minimal interest, and all remain united under a single Catholic ethos This diversity challenges the network to accept different approaches without enforcing uniformity

Schools with strong Catholic identity prepare students for sacraments, while others focus on broader educational service to the country

Maintaining this network requires embracing difference as a strength rather than a weakness

All Catholic schools face vulnerability due to political, economic, and social pressures, making the preservation of core values essential for survival

Every school is exposed to risks threatening its existence, regardless of current stability, making adherence to gospel values a critical differentiator

Religious education (RE) remains central to the schools' mission and a condition for their continued operation within public and independent frameworks

RE teaching is a contractual and constitutional requirement, essential to justifying school existence within the Church's mission. RE is part of the deed of agreement with government for public schools on private land and Independent schools must include RE in their constitutions to align with Church expectations

The network's future depends on balancing diversity with a firm commitment to gospel-based values and mission clarity

My Religious Education Context

Anne Baker
Deputy Director CIE
(Catholic Institute of Education)



Religious Education Challenges and Ethos

There is an urgent need to adapt religious education to a rapidly changing and troubled world.

Children face a range of pressures including environmental destruction, rising fascism, and addiction to gambling and social media.

The core of religious education remains rooted in hope, peace, and love, requiring educators to foster these values despite external hardships.

Sexuality Education and Child Safety: There is a critical need to address early exposure to harmful content and improve child safeguarding in schools.

The trauma-informed approach aims to create safe, supportive environments that help students and teachers cope with hidden emotional wounds

The Curriculum: breaking open the richness of our Curriculum

Ntebeng Mohapi



Religious education is central to Catholic schooling, forming both the spiritual and intellectual growth of learners

The curriculum aims to build the whole person by nurturing spirituality, moral values, and intellectual challenge, as highlighted by the speaker's reflection on learner engagement and questioning.

The **national religious education curriculum**, standardized across Catholic schools, aligns with Catholic teaching and national education standards, yet allows adaptation to the South African context

The curriculum includes **15 key processes**

Religious education is designed to promote moral values, compassion, justice, community, and belonging, addressing both school and societal challenges

Integrating artificial intelligence into the learning experience

Andre Croucamp
&
Dr Mark Potterton



If we want AI to support learning not replace it, teaching AI literacy is important. This includes showing what transparent, responsible and ethical AI use is in the way we teach.

There are no definitive solutions, but the best solutions appear to be about exciting learners about the process of learning itself. Asking, “How is this helping me to learn something I value?” is different to asking, “How will this help me improve my marks?” Understanding this difference is at the heart of the challenge.

Disruptive technology

A disruptive technology is an innovation that fundamentally changes how we learn, work, trade and play – outperforming, and displacing established technologies and processes, redefining how we engage the world, creating whole new markets, jobs and businesses.

Will we eventually take AI for granted, like we now do with calculators in math classrooms? It is worth remembering that even the technology of writing was once considered disruptive. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates believed the writing was not an effective means of communicating knowledge. To him, face-to-face dialogue was the only way one person could transmit knowledge to another.

“... education in the use of forms of artificial intelligence should aim above all at promoting critical thinking. Users of all ages, but especially the young, need to develop a discerning approach to the use of data and content collected on the web or produced by artificial intelligence systems.”

Integrating AI into the learning experience

Society is in a transition, the outcomes of which are largely unknown and a curriculum for which doesn't yet exist. Recognising that, we need to work together to learn about the capabilities of AI – the opportunities and challenges. Teachers are learners and learners are teachers.

A prayer for wisdom and discernment

Lord, source of all knowledge and truth, we come before you in this age of new technology. Grant us wisdom and discernment as we explore the use of AI in our schools and classrooms. Guide our hands, minds and hearts to use these tools for good - to inspire creativity, to deepen understanding, and to serve each student's unique needs. Help us to remember that it is a tool to enhance, not replace, the sacred human connection between human beings, between teachers and learners. We ask for your protection and guidance to help us ensure that AI is not used to increase economic inequality and violent political conflict. Shield us from the dangers of bias, misinformation, and our own over-reliance on the tool. Guard our privacy and the data of the vulnerable. Protect our hearts from the pride of thinking we can create wisdom without you, the ultimate source. May we use this powerful gift with humility, integrity, and a constant desire to seek what is true, good, and beautiful.
Amen.

Day Two

Opening Scriptural Reflection

Samaritan Woman at the Well excerpts by Rev David Niehaus, SJ

Encounter and Relationship Building

The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman models a transformative meeting based on mutual need and vulnerability

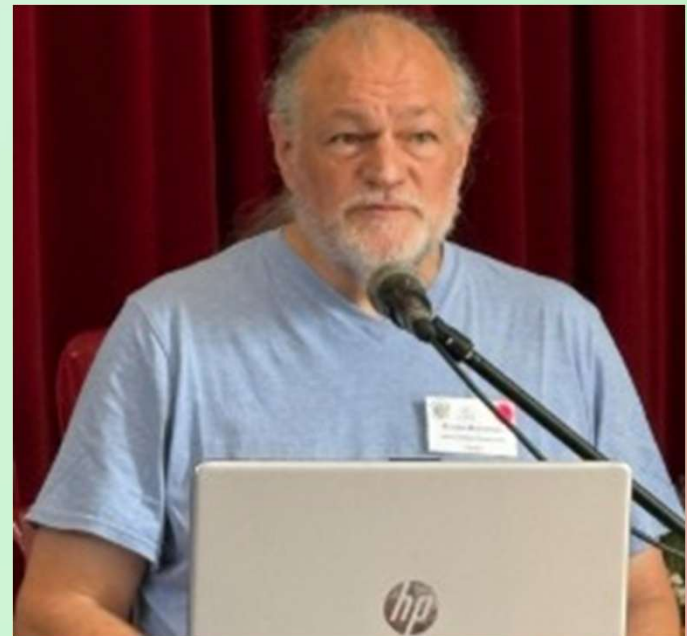
Educational and Pedagogical Implications

- Integrate the encounter model of Jesus and the Samaritan woman into religious education curricula by creating spaces for vulnerability and relational encounter
- Adapt sermon and Gospel proclamation strategies to emphasize the pedagogy of neediness and mutual vulnerability illustrated by the text
- Develop teaching materials that analyze step-by-step the dialogic process of recognition and becoming a disciple based on the Samaritan woman's experience



Pilgrimage Walks

John McCormick



Engagement with Nature and Presence

The session aimed to deepen participants' awareness of nature through focused sensory engagement outdoors, fostering a mindful connection to creation

- **Participants were encouraged to use their full sensory awareness**—including sight, hearing, touch, and even subtle body sensations—to heighten presence with nature
- **The activity centred on four thematic encounters with nature**, inspired by St. Francis's Canticle of the Creatures, to guide reflection and group prayer preparation.



These included “Brother Sun,” “Brother Wind,” “Sister Water,” and “Sister Mother Earth,” personifying elements to foster a relational experience with nature.

Religious Education for Social Justice

Fr Peter-John Pearson



Nelson Mandela once said, nudging our understanding of education and teaching for justice, in that more socially responsible direction: he said so correctly that **‘education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.’**

We must assume that education is more than the traditional ‘arithmetic, reading and writing.’ It leans, surely more to the contemporary 3 Rs that spoken about in pedagogical circles, and that have the potential to nurture an appropriate education, namely, ‘Responsiveness, Resilience and Relationships.’

Pope Francis coined that memorable phrase about the ‘globalisation of indifference’ He describes it as a dangerous apathy and dehumanisation in society where people are numb to suffering, injustice and human dramas. It is a disease of the heart, a failure to act due to self-interest, and a state where people turn away from those in need.’ The correct response says the Pope is ‘advocating for a response of feeling, compassion and active engagement, by which he means enhancing the agency of the poor and marginalised.

Teachers have long understood that every child is a gifted child, ours is the task of finding that gift and growing it. Along with that, this too has been long recognised that a dignity based approach empowers educators to create inclusive spaces, empowering students and disrupting the hegemonic and unequal structures often found in educational institutions.

Let us see education as part of our Christian vocation: to teach truth with gentleness, to nurture dignity with patience, and to form hearts that can recognize Christ in every Lazarus at the gate.

May our teaching, our learning, and our living all serve that one great purpose — the building of God's kingdom of justice, hope and peace.

The Spirituality of the RE Teacher

Evona Rebelo



To honour our vocation as a RE teacher we need to ‘fill our cups’ as we cannot give what we do not have

Mary and Martha – we need to sit at the foot of the Master

Recognise stages of faith development James Fowler

Passion, joy, compassion, gratitude are key attributes

‘Celebrate what’s right in the world’ – be agents of hope, incorporate prayer, meditation, and retreats into school routines strengthens community and individual well-being

Quiet reflection spaces in staff rooms and classrooms were identified as vital for daily spiritual nourishment

Serenity Prayer

Day Two

Closing
Scriptural
Reflection

The Good Samaritan John 4:3-42

- **Compassion-driven leadership and responsibility**
- **Strategic vision for Relationship and Presence**
- **The call to ‘see, stop, listen, care, and return’ – essential for effective leadership**



Data Analysis and AI Integration

Cullen MacKenzie
CIE Socio-linguistic Educational Consultant
and Communications Officer at CIE

Mthulisi Tshuma
CIE Monitoring and Evaluation Officer



The meeting showcased how **AI technology** was used to process input from over **260 participants**, turning qualitative feedback into structured insights that highlight the collective voice

AI-generated word clouds

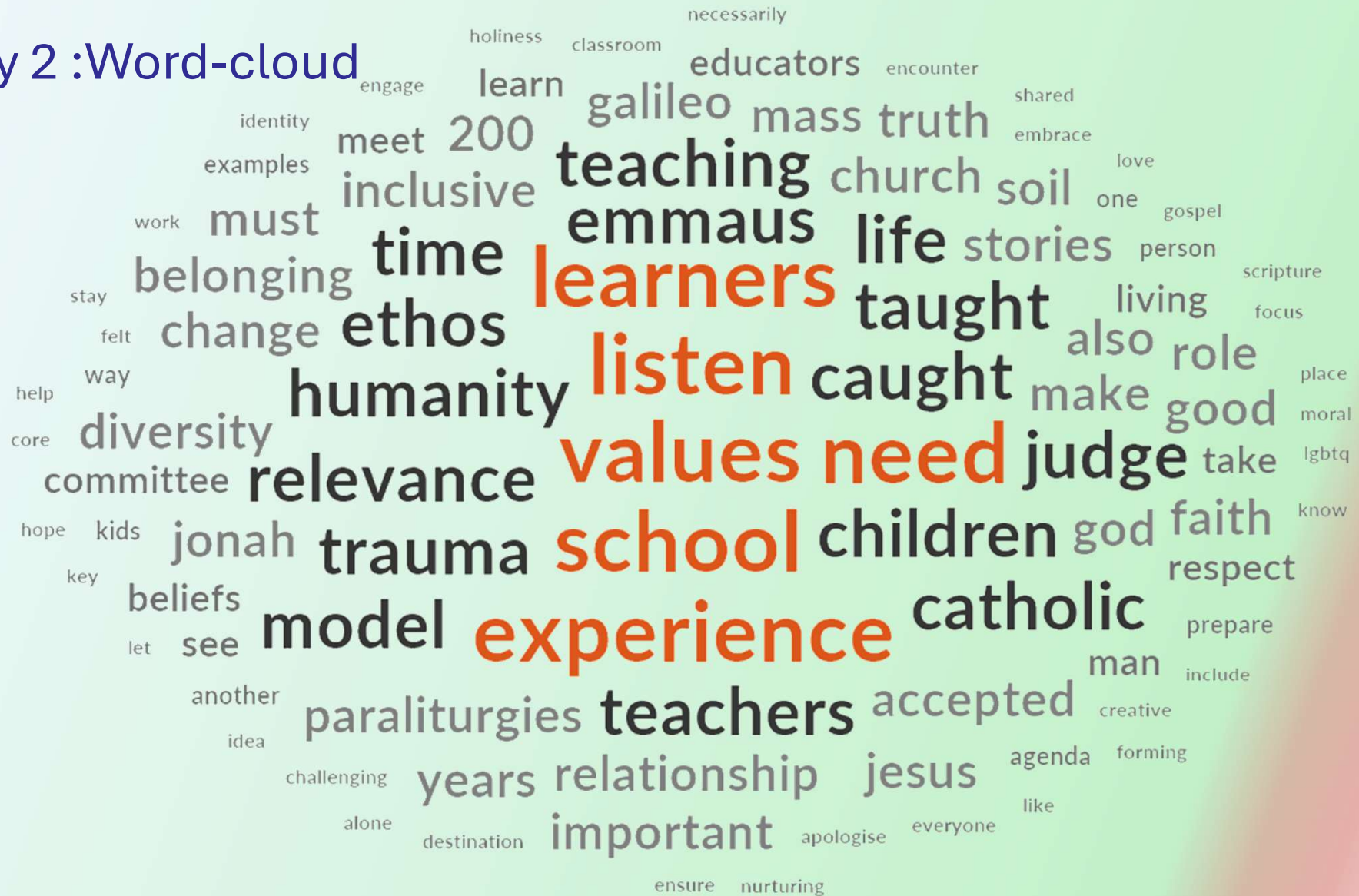
Below are the two word-clouds representing the discussions of Day 1 and 2 of the RE conference, generated from words recorded by the scribes in 20 different focus group discussions, as well as the words on the wall and those spoken by the guest voices invited to share their wisdom at the conference. The words in red are those mentioned most, those in bold mentioned less than them but more than the large words in grey, which are mentioned more than the small grey words.

- **Sentiment analysis revealed a split but mostly positive outlook, with 83 positive and 55 negative comments, including 74 moderately positive and 18 very negative notes**

Day 1: Word-cloud

lessons make believe reminded
poor relevant responsibility understand
respect abused human principal inspire want
encourage importance others aware
just mother
stand church hope justice person nothing john
bring work care teachers nature bishop realise
losing good social let need spiritually time show
gift use calling god learners children feel change talks
continuity well ways life curriculum help school catholic journey faith
challenges know teaching child like jesus smt
hearing crying learn ethos love people support prayer
happened see
encounter take scripture formation pray dignity
things now conference sipuka share one
purpose educate

Day 2 :Word-cloud





“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” *Romans 15:13*

