After two years preparation by an international planning group, the Loreto Schools International Education Conference was held in Pretoria South Africa from 25 June to 2 July 2017. Mr Marcelo Pallozzi and colleagues from South Africa welcomed some 60 delegates from IBVM/ Loreto and Congregation of Jesus (CJ) Educational Institutions to Loreto Convent School, Queenswood, Pretoria. The local team headed by Mr. Pallozzi worked hard to put it all together and succeeded in producing an excellent conference and an amazing time in South Africa. Br. Michael Burke’s expert facilitationenabled the group of educators representing IBVM and CJ to move towards a greater sense of oneness, communion and collaboration.

Seven speakers provided input which provided a framework for the work carried out during the conference. Reflections to begin the day, group work, opportunities to discuss in groups, comfortable accommodation, South African cuisine, excursions and all kinds of details provided by our South African hosts made the conference a meaningful and enduring experience. The outcomes of the Conference stimulated our eagerness to share the learnings within our schools and throughout our international networks.

Sr. Noelle Corscadden, IBVM General Leader set the scene during the moving opening liturgy celebrated in the oldest Loreto School in Africa, former Loreto Skinner Street. “We have the opportunity this week”, she said, “to cross boundaries, boundaries of nation, of language and of experience, to celebrate our diversity and in that diversity to find our oneness”. Her wish was that the conference would be “an expression of oneness, within our Mary Ward Family and the beginning of a new way forward for our education ministry in our schools”.

Well let’s see what happened! The following points offer a tiny glimpse into the experience and wisdom shared by those who contributed. Each delegate has a copy of most of the content and will be happy to share it. Members of the IBVM/CJ network can contact them if they wish.

Ms Melanie Verwoerd’s story was of fighting for justice for others and for herself both before the ending of apartheid and in post-apartheid South Africa. “Why were you born at this time of the world’s history on this planet?” her professor used to ask. It changed her life. “It is the most important question” she says. “We have to figure out our purpose in life, how we engage with the world, how and why we engage with other people’s differentness. To do this we need new values”.
Ms Emma Sadleir is an attorney. Her expertise lies in electronic media law with a particular focus on social media. Much of her work lies in defending people whose reputation has been damaged by social media content. “Don’t let content that can harm your reputation exist,” she underlined. “Once it is on social media, it is permanent, even if you try to remove it. Your online CV is more important than the paper one. Teach students to look after their digital footprint”. A colleague completed this session with a focus on the effects of addiction to the digital world, on learning, on mental health and the ease with which children can become addicted. It was a call to parents and educators. While educating in the use of digital media is essential, the safeguards for healthy interaction are as important.

Bishop Kevin Dowling, who has participated in peace agreement discussions in a number of countries, is well known internationally for speaking out on issues of justice and peace. Everything is permeated with connectedness. What does this mean in situations of violence, and in efforts to restore peace through justice? It means that unless the underlying causes are addressed in processes of transitional justice, peace and reconciliation will not be achieved. When national and local community relationships are damaged, reconciliation is the only way forward. Restorative justice is needed. It affirms and restores the dignity of the victims as it holds the perpetrators accountable in some way. Perpetrators need to seek forgiveness and take action to show repentance and to achieve reconciliation.

Sr, Cecilia O’Dwyer ibvm presented the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda with a special emphasis on Goal 4.7 - Education for Global Citizenship. “Our Heads of State and Government made commitments on our behalf”, she reminded us, “They promised to work for a sustainable development that puts the dignity of people at the center, ensures prosperous and fulfilling lives for all people, fosters peaceful, just and inclusive societies, protects our planet’s natural resources and climate for future generations”. We are all encouraged to work in partnerships to achieve the 2030 Agenda, in our countries, to help those who are most vulnerable and “leave no one behind”. It is an agenda both local and global. Education for Global Citizenship is a significant means of working towards the vision of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda” and the transformation of our world.

Sr, Gemma Simmonds CJ presented a contemporary expression of Mary Ward’s charism. A number of changes or shifts which have recently occurred and are occurring in religious life are also being experienced by those called to share the original charisms of the religious founders. A shift towards oneness or union in a mysticism of everyday life; a shift towards the ordinary which entails discovering the mysticism of the ordinary or in the words of St. Ignatius, “finding God in all things”; a shift towards the communal in which the organic and dynamic charism grows and changes with each generation; a shift towards the transformative where we see ourselves as God’s collaborators, changing lives, committed to becoming transformed transformers. We find these shifts embedded in Mary Ward’s Vision of the Just Soul.

Mr. David Grier set out to follow his dream by taking it to the extreme and exploring the limits of the human mind and body. He shared his journey of personal change which involves running thousands of miles in very difficult conditions to fundraise for projects helping South Africa’s impoverished people. “We have no control over the external things of life but we are free to choose what goes on within. The process of change begins with the realization of the need to change. Attitudes and values are learned and reinforced along the way through interactions with other people. “You cannot do it alone” he says. “When things are difficult I am not going to moan and groan. I am going to do something that makes a difference”. We can inspire but we also need to give young people the tools to be able to make a difference. He quoted motivational speaker Denis Waitley saying “View change as the one constant in your life. Welcome it, Expect it. Anticipate it.”

Dr. Nonthando Hadebe, a South African lay theologian, explored the deep roots of multi-faith, racism, intolerance, multi-culture and the African legacy of ubuntu. She based her input on three questions: What has brought us to this place in our world where we need to discuss multi-faith, multi-culture and racial intolerance at primary and High
School level? What values can be brought to build an alternative paradigm of equality, justice, inclusion as building blocks for multi faith, multicultural, racially tolerant primary and secondary schools globally? What would it take for every child, irrespective of their religion, race and culture, to step into a school from the first day in primary to the last in High School to feel truly valued, included, understood and accepted (a non-prejudiced space)?

Group conversations and reflections broadened and deepened the presentations that applied to our personal lives as well as our role as educators. Accepting responsibility for evolving and enfolding the Mary Ward Charism allows us to free ourselves from the weight of tradition which can paralyze us. We must ensure that traditional values do not remain stagnant. At the same time, other values needed in our world today are an essential component of the education process. These values aim at cultivating inner strength, healthy relationships, diversity, giving back to society and interconnectedness. We educate our students to think and act justly, to give back to society and to work with the wider world and to engage safely and ethically with social media. All of this challenges each one of us to embrace change and to carry forward through education God's purpose for us.

The conference provided a good balance of work, recreational and cultural opportunities. While the main conference was held at Loreto Queenswood, the opening liturgy and a special visit to the first Loreto school in Africa were highlights of the week. Students from the school welcomed us and sang during the liturgy. A second visit to the school – during exam time - included a moving story of the history of the founding of Loreto, Nana Sita Street (Former Skinner Street) enabled us to meet with students who were not doing exams just then. The ancient and diverse cultural attractions included a visit to “The Cradle of Humankind” which contains the remains of 2 – 3 million year old ancestors, Ledesi Village where some of the main cultures of South Africa are showcased, Lion and Rhino Park with significant wild life and The Apartheid Museum to remind us of a past that must not be forgotten so that humans will learn from it.

Some Conference Outcomes

The conference outcomes include a “Mary Ward Schools” document, produced as a result of our work together. A compliment to the Kolkata Education Guidelines, it will be an exciting and challenging guideline to help us respond in a relevant way to 21st century education. This is a significant shift in the CJ/IBVM journey together in the sense
that we began the conference speaking in terms of Loreto and CJ schools and ended with some guidelines for "Mary Ward Schools".

Collaboration was further advanced with a proposal for a structure to ensure the continuation of joint Education Conferences. This proposal will be presented to the General Leadership of both Congregations. A well-kept secret, the "Mary Ward Resources Document Library" - an online library www.marywarddocuments.org – now has a group of enthusiastic delegates willing to work on the upkeep and development of this valuable resource.

Ms. Anette Haseneder, from Germany, proposed a practical way of networking called “Global Citizen: Mary Ward Excursion 2018”. The activity offers an opportunity for an international exchange of experiences among youth and teachers. For more information contact Anette at a.haseneder@online.de

Finally the participants left the Conference having met colleagues from many countries, made new friends and found possibilities of communicating and networking. We enjoyed the warm and generous hospitality offered in this country where our common vision as educators in the tradition of Mary Ward schools is alive and the work done by the Loreto Sisters for more than 150 years has transitioned and flourishes in the hands of wonderful people who carry on the tradition.