

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO

# Immersion for Mission

FORMATION AND TRANSFORMATION THROUGH IMMERSION



Monica Dutton



VAUGHAN PUBLISHING

## The Educator's Guides

The Mission and Education Project of BBI-TAITE (The Australian Institute of Theological Education) presents a series of Guides to serve the educational mission of Catholic schools in Australia and beyond. The Guides, each dealing with a specific area, introduce educators to ways in which mission and education may be integrated in the life and work of Catholic educators and students. The mandate given to the expert writers who create these Guides is to tap into the best available treatments of mission and also to ground their work in quality practice.

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Dr Monica Dutton's *Educator's Guide to Immersion for Mission: Formation and Transformation through Immersion*, offers a valuable educational policy and curricular document, which synthesises globalisation, values and the Catholic tradition. It describes cross-cultural experiences through participants' engagement with other cultures and resultant transformational change in wisdom, knowledge, skills and values. The guide provides a pragmatic curriculum design for immersion programs, which intentionally situate participants in a cross-cultural setting. This guide is a superb, compelling and important text for educators, diocesan system leaders, religious institutes, school leadership and policy makers.

**Associate Professor Joseph Zajda,  
Australian Catholic University (Melbourne)**

Dr Monica Dutton has written a superb immersion guide, which draws on years of practical experience and sound research. A must-have for education leaders when considering immersion trips for their staff and students.

**Dr Wendy Moran, Principal Evaluator,  
Centre for Education, Statistics and Evaluation  
(NSW Department of Education)**

Having had the pleasure of sharing many immersion experiences with Monica, I am delighted to see her research, wisdom and insight come together in this very practical guide.

The benefits of careful theological grounding and practical planning are there to see. The transformative experience offered to those who form true partnerships through this process can only enable genuine relationships characterised by 'soft eyes and warm hearts'.

**Meg Kahler SGS**

Dr Monica Dutton's work is a valuable contribution at a time when there is such strong interest in immersion experiences. This work highlights their profoundly transformative potential and provides clear theoretical and practical frameworks for their fruitful implementation. I recommend it as a guide to avoiding the many pitfalls faced by organisers ensuring that these experiences are mutually enriching to guest and host alike.

**Dr Paul Lentern, Assistant Principal – Dean of Mission,  
Mount St Benedict College, Pennant Hills**

Born from lived experience and deep reflection on that experience, this guide offers new participants venturing into the privilege of immersion a practical, thought-provoking and interactional entry into what for many will be a transformational encounter with a Majority World community.

**Moira Najdecki, Chair, Good Samaritan Education**

An immersion experience is primarily about encountering and walking with the other, particularly the other whose culture, language and way of seeing the world is less familiar. An immersion experience can be challenging and even confronting but it remains a gift without measure, facilitating new friendships, new understandings and a growing sense of mutuality and respect. Dr Monica Dutton has provided a rich resource for anyone who seeks a deeper understanding of the place of immersion experiences to 'awaken and enliven' the spirit, allowing participants to meet the Christ who 'plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his' ('As Kingfishers Catch Fire', G. M. Hopkins). Even more, this volume is also a practical and user-friendly guide for anyone planning an immersion. Monica's long and deep experience as an educator and immersion leader is evident in her thoughtful and detailed suggestions for structuring, planning and leading an immersion event.

**Catherine Slattery SGS, Good Samaritan Education**

An immersion has the potential to be an encounter of the heart for mind and spirit, thus for genuine personal transformation. Immersion for Mission is the fruit of obvious first-hand experience and offers practical, thorough, wise and sensitive advice for each stage of the immersion process and every contingency that may emerge. For educators wishing to engage in short-term cross-cultural immersion experiences, this book is certain to become the 'go-to' guide.

**Patty Fawkner SGS, Congregational Leader,  
Sisters of the Good Samaritan**

Monica Dutton is an experienced educator, working with both youth and adults in the area of ministry and immersion experiences over many years. Monica's recent study and research underpin a deep understanding of the importance of immersion experiences and the impact of immersion on the communities with which they connect. The immersion experiences my staff have participated in with Monica's guidance have been transformative.

**Elizabeth Carnegie, Principal,  
Stella Maris College, Manly**

To participate in an immersion is a privilege. It gives the participant opportunities and experiences that are long lasting and life changing. These guidelines provide a framework through which the immersion experience will be authentic, transformative and an expression of mission. Dr Monica Dutton has created a guide that illuminates the soul of immersion and provides the structures to enable participants to experience this soul.

**Sue Lennox, Principal,  
St Patrick's College, Campbelltown**

Immersion experiences are often an awakening to new perspectives and new ways to see and live the Gospel. By their very nature, they challenge participants to step outside of their ordinary living. I commend this book to you as a practical guide on the planning and conduct of immersion experiences, to ensure it is a rich experience and one that delivers on the promise of transformation.

**Dr Jane Comensoli, Executive Director,  
Good Samaritan Education**

Immersion experiences are invaluable learning opportunities that provide authentic encounters and build the participants' capacity to see the world from different perspectives. Such experiences require thoughtful preparation and clear methodology to ensure that they have long-term transformational effects for all involved. This evidence-based guide is a much-needed resource for educators and leaders that is highly accessible and practical in supporting the design of immersion experiences.

**Christina He, Leader of Co-curricular,  
Mount St Benedict College**

Having had the privilege of being led by Dr Monica Dutton on immersion in the Philippines, I have experienced first-hand the deep spiritual impact of 'entering someone else's garden' with reverence, listening with humility and openness to change. Immersions infused with this mindset and theology result in ongoing partnerships, genuine relationships and a profound understanding of the Gospel.

**Carolyn Collins, Head of Community & Social Justice,  
Stella Maris College, Manly**

This Educator's Guide lays out a three-phase immersion structure that ensures that one enters the experience well-informed, is able to sensitively experience the immersion and take quality time post-immersion to reflect and consider what to do next. Having attended numerous immersions organised and led by Dr Monica Dutton, I can attest to the experience from the very start of planning to the end-debrief and beyond. Immersion, as Dr Dutton states, 'cannot be entered into lightly'. It is truly a transforming experience that requires considered preparation and extensive follow-up afterwards.

This resource helps ensure that immersion experiences remain grounded in Gospel values and provide opportunities for meaningful dialogue and relationship-building with communities.

**Kristie Ferguson,  
Head of Year 12 & Teacher of Religious Education,  
Stella Maris College, Manly**

This is an excellent resource for supporting the design, planning and implementation of high-quality immersion experiences for adults and students. Monica has drawn on years of experience, knowledge and insights to share her wisdom in a practical guide that is deeply rooted in foundational principles of formation and Catholic Social Teaching. If you currently lead immersions or are considering future immersion programs I strongly recommend this book to you.

**Mark Smith, Catholic Educator**

It is obvious that this book has been written by someone with extensive knowledge in planning and facilitating immersions, but more importantly by one whose heart has been transformed by the experience. This is a go-to book that will assist leaders to prepare, coordinate and form their participants in such a way that the immersion experience will nourish the head, heart and hands. For me, this book connects the dots and ensures that immersions are done for the right reason, that participants are prepared well and that there is a real and authentic connection in bringing about the kingdom.

**Donna Dempsey, Leader of Religious Education,  
Mission and Formation.**



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# Foreword

**Dr Monica Dutton has written of faith-based immersions with an empathy grounded in her own multiple immersion experiences. She has planned and led immersions both within indigenous communities in Australia and in several countries in Southeast Asia over more than 15 years.**

More importantly, in writing a guide for those planning immersions, Dr Dutton has engaged with the social, personal, cultural and theological components of an immersion, providing helpful reflection points along the way.

This text has grown out of Dr Dutton's doctoral work where she reflected upon numerous immersions encountered by schools in the Good Samaritan tradition. The deep caring of this tradition clearly shines from these pages and centres immersion as an experience of the heart rather than of travel.

I value Monica's chapters on 'post-immersion' as an acknowledgment that the work of immersion is not completed upon return to one's home country. Monica's

chapters on theological reflection emphasise that this work of the heart is such that host communities are frequently those that offer most to the experience, and immersion participants are the recipients of this gift.

This guide is a 'must have' for leaders and indeed participants of immersions. Not only should leaders have this guide, I recommend it as a planning tool for each community anticipating offering immersion experiences.

Dr Roger Vallance, FMS

# Introduction

*This is the wallpaper on my iPhone – has been for many years now. I keep it because it is a reminder of something else, something much more important than an iPhone...*

The colourful, shambolic disarray indicates the excited rush of little ones eager to get inside. They need to take off their shoes before entering the house – and do so in such a hurry that their sandals and thongs end up strewn about in a chaotic rainbow heap.

The children are looking forward to joining a Scripture class in the Boulevard, a squatter settlement just outside Bacolod in the Philippines. There they gather each week for songs, prayers, scripture readings, a small treat and the love the Sisters of the Good Samaritan have for each and every one of them. To witness this joyous, colourful cacophony through an immersion experience is to be changed forever.

Immersions are an authentic encounter and engagement with another culture, which can be at the same time uncomfortable, confronting and challenging. Many participants speak of a 'moment' during their immersion, or a 'light-bulb' experience, which causes a fundamental shift in their outlook. If they are open to being changed by that moment, it is not possible to go back to the way they were before, and they can never see the world in quite the same way again. It causes them to reposition themselves in the world.

The transformative effect of immersion trips has been well documented. It is an encounter of the heart, the mind and the spirit, and provides an opportunity for participants to step back, refocus, and reassess their priorities. Immersion offers a counterpoint for how individuals view the world and their own place in it.

Authentic immersion experiences are deeply relational. They involve real people, real communities and real stories. They are about understanding and experiencing first-hand what life is like for another person. They are about listening and learning. Immersions are not



so much about walking in someone else's shoes; but rather about walking with, or walking beside, the other. Immersion experiences are about coming to know someone else's story, and then becoming a part of each other's story.

As well as an attitudinal shift, immersion experiences can awaken and enliven the spirit. Involvement in the richness and diversity of the Catholic tradition in another cultural setting provides a global picture of Church. Witnessing the ministries and compassion of those who work in culturally diverse communities on a daily basis is to come to know Christ in a 21st century context.



Immersion experiences can also provide a way to reconnect with personal spirituality through participation in a liberating expression of faith and life. There are times of stillness, reflection and peace which invite the presence of God. There is also a restorative dimension – a sense of hope, joy and peace; and often a recognition of, and a reawakening to, something we have lost in the hi-tech whirlwind of our daily existence. Immersion experiences provide an opportunity for people to pause, to take stock and to re-evaluate. By their very nature they are confronting. Participants are commonly quite unsettled after returning home, until they are able to make some sense of their experience and what it means for their lives.

In the long-term many speak of reconnecting to their immersion experience in later years to inform decisions made in their personal and professional lives. They have been humbled by the privilege of the immersion encounter, and afterwards feel impelled to somehow make a difference in their own time and place. There are often intentional and purposeful reminders of the immersion in their daily lives and actions, which can take them back to the experience in a heartbeat.

My iPhone wallpaper is one such reminder. It tells a story – I have no intention of changing it. It takes me back to an experience of encounter and engagement, of learning and living differently, and ultimately of transformation. It is part of my story, part of who I am. It keeps me grounded.<sup>1</sup>



This guide provides a unique insight into the multi-faceted, complex experience of immersion. Personal experiences and practical examples offer a singular lens through which to view immersion in the context of mission, while at the same time providing a useful guide to planning and facilitation of trips. This guide is intended for use by diocesan system leaders, religious institutes, ministerial public juridic persons, school leadership teams, mission leaders, social justice coordinators, parishes and all those involved in building and strengthening partnerships with rural, remote, Indigenous and Majority World communities.

It is hoped this guide will provide a valuable resource for those wishing to undertake the process of leading others through an experience of personal encounter and cross-cultural engagement, with the ultimate aim of enlivening God's mission in the world today.



# What is immersion?

**Immersion experiences are a relatively new phenomenon. There has been a sharp rise in interest and involvement in these experiences, particularly in the Australian educational context. Factors contributing to this include more affordable travel, greater accessibility to host communities, increased awareness of global issues and a desire to be personally involved in action, advocacy, and solidarity with those in the Majority World.**

Immersion experiences have been variously described and defined. In general terms, learning experiences outside the usual environment are referred to as 'field trips' or 'study tours'. In some circles, when the experience includes a cross-cultural or service component, the term used is 'immersion trip' or 'exposure trip'. In the United States, such experiences are referred to as 'mission trips'. Generally speaking, an immersion refers to a period of time during which participants, usually from the developed world, visit and engage with people in a cross-cultural setting in a Majority World community.

Short-term cross-cultural immersion experiences typically involve leaving one's own community for a short period of time, with the majority of trips lasting around two weeks. The aims of immersions vary greatly and may include evangelism, service provision, cultural immersion, education and social justice advocacy. Motivations of participants may include desiring to have a challenging or meaningful experience, hoping to make a difference by helping others, or wishing to gain greater cross-cultural understanding. Benefits for host communities include increased understanding of global thought and concepts, development of supportive partnerships and access to financial and practical assistance.

Globalisation and the articulated outcomes of higher education such as the acquisition of intercultural knowledge, competence and engagement, have seen the inclusion of international studies, and exchange and immersion programs in many schools and universities. At the same time, immersion trips have been found to inspire participants to challenge and transform their previously held cross-cultural beliefs and understandings.

Typically, participants describe their immersion experience 'life-changing', 'transformative' or a 'light-bulb moment'. In many cases the trips appear to spark greater awareness of global inequity, which then becomes a catalyst for personal involvement in action and advocacy in the post-immersion phase. Participants commonly describe feeling both humbled and enriched by their experience, and actively seek out ways to 'give back' after returning home.

The concept of transformation through immersion has been identified and described as "entering into a foreign medium in the form of a culture or sub-culture and consequently emerging [as] a changed person"<sup>2</sup>. Importantly, an immersion needs to be an experience of solidarity with the local people and cannot be experienced without personal engagement and reflection.





Immersion experiences are characterised not only by visits to host communities, but by “conversation with local people, identification of concerns, exposure to and exploration of traditional cultures and their values, and analysis of global influences and current social issues”<sup>3</sup>.

The upsurge in frequency of immersions in recent years has generated a remarkable diversity of destinations and anticipated outcomes for both participants and for organising entities. Corporate and not-for-profit organisations including humanitarian, secular and faith-based groups all expend a great deal of time, energy and resources on planning and facilitating immersion trips.

The 21st century has seen a rapid expansion in the popularity of immersions in a range of settings. In response to the growth in the popularity of immersion experiences, this guide aims to explore short-term cross-cultural immersion experiences within the context of giving life and expression to God’s mission.

## Immersion for mission

Formation is central to the life and mission of Catholic schools. Its purpose is deep learning through a range of intentional, ongoing and reflective experiences, leading

to the transformation of individuals and educational communities. While cross-cultural immersions are still relatively new, their popularity has increased exponentially in recent times, and they are becoming widely recognised as a way of inviting staff, students and those in governance positions into an authentic and life-giving “kingdom space”. As immersion for mission is a vehicle for Catholic education, the design and development of programs need to be embedded in the Gospel message, and the spirituality at the heart of the Catholic tradition.

Stated aims of Australian Catholic schools include encouraging students to develop an international perspective on their own country, and to discover how their country can identify and respond justly to its international obligations. Catholic schools therefore strive to prioritise events involving active community service, and issues of social justice informed by Catholic Social Teaching. *The Framework for Formation for Mission in Catholic Education*<sup>4</sup> highlights the importance of developing capabilities for mission and service in the Church and the world. If these aims are to be met with authenticity and integrity, it is critical that members of Catholic school communities be provided with engaging, experiential and developmental opportunities which include a cross-cultural dimension.





Schools that articulate their expression of Catholicism through a particular charism have also revitalised their emphasis on programs to facilitate this approach and offer immersion and pilgrimage opportunities for members of their school communities. Participants engage with the charism by connecting to the history, traditions, spirituality, and contemporary expression of its mission, with a particular focus on ministries involved with vulnerable and marginalised people.

The starting point for developing social justice programs aimed at individual and spiritual growth is to make them personally meaningful. Designing immersion programs which intentionally situate participants in cross-cultural settings leads to direct encounters and engagement with communities at risk. Engaging with the heart of the Gospel message through holistic concern for others as a result of an immersion experience, opens the possibility for individual and communal transformation.

Catholic immersions are Christocentric, promote a Catholic worldview, aim to deepen an awareness and appreciation of the Catholic tradition in another cultural context, and involve participants in experiences that invite a response from the heart, soul, strength and mind. Catholic immersion experiences are underpinned by a Catholic anthropology, contemporary theologies and the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, thereby providing opportunities for action and advocacy that resonate strongly with staff, students and parents.

Along with contemplative and reflective practices, the embodiment of the Gospel message in the Catholic

tradition is found in outreach and service to others. This transformational vision at the heart of the Gospel couples with the social justice imperative of the Catholic school. With Jesus as model, immersions link participants to contemporary Catholic ministries through themes of partnership, service and spirituality. Through personal engagement with God's mission in the world today, it becomes clear to participants that Catholic social justice is not optional, and not peripheral to the Gospel invitation.

All of these aspects point to the philosophical and theological underpinnings of short-term cross-cultural immersion. As such, the selection of this increasingly popular experience in the Catholic school setting is well founded.

*Immersions have been  
described as being nothing  
less than building the  
Kingdom of God.*

Aidan Donaldson  
(Irish writer, lecturer, social justice activist)



## Immersion for mission:

- is framed within the Catholic context
- is authentically grounded in the Gospel message
- is informed by Catholic Social Teaching, respecting the principles of human dignity, the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity
- advocates the principles of Liberation Theology, particularly in relation to the preferential option for the poor
- is informed by contemporary approaches to mission, theology and cross-cultural engagement
- provides compassion, a listening ear, and a voice for those facing issues of injustice
- encompasses formation and deep learning through experiential and transformative learning processes
- is a prayerful, spiritual and reflective experience
- engages a spirit of dialogue and partnership with host communities
- provides opportunities for encounters with difference
- promotes transformative outcomes in terms of internal shift and changed perspectives and behaviours
- involves three distinct phases (pre-immersion, immersion and post-immersion)
- prioritises the building of mutually beneficial relationships
- engages in respectful dialogue
- seeks to empower and support host communities
- enlivens the spirit and awakens possibilities for mission
- respects the environment of the host community and the need to conserve precious resources

## Immersion for mission does not:

- create unhealthy dependencies or 'hand-out' mentalities
- engage in voyeurism, 'voluntourism' or poverty tourism
- deplete fragile resources in the host community

Figure 1. Guiding principles for immersion for mission

## Think about, talk about...

1. What three aspects of immersion for mission do you consider to be the most important?
2. Which of these aspects are clearly evident in your planning for immersion?
3. What are some practical examples of these aspects from your own experiences of immersion?