

BOOK REVIEWS

MJR 24/7: A Book for Life

Ogle, M., & Thomson, G. (2019). Garratt.
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Karyn Cameron

Lecturer, Avondale University College,
Cooranbong, NSW

In a world of shifting sands, young people are often left to navigate uncharted pathways in life with very little guidance, other than their peers and the media. Parents find themselves unsure of how best to help, overwhelmed with their own workloads, lack of certainty and change. Even those families who are working with great intention to speak and guide the lives of their children, often feel that the deafening voices of society are weakening their sphere of influence. As a result, society, families, and young people look to schools to support and, at times, fill the role of positive guides in this world.

I believe that Christian teachers, in both the public education sector and faith-based schools, have something of great value to share in this space. Jesus Christ, His teachings, His personal witness and His ongoing presence, has a timeless yet contemporary relevance to life in the 21st century. To reveal this to their students has the potential to offer enlightenment, hope and guidance within the often-confusing duplicity of paths, directions, intersections and dead ends that appear to present themselves to children, adolescents and young adults today.

The idea of making Jesus real and relevant to students lies deep within the souls of many Christian teachers. Within the public sector, they can be this light, hope and guide through embodying the principles and values of Jesus. Those teachers who have a school-based mandate to be more overt in their teaching, either through Scripture classes in Public Schools or throughout the curriculum in faith-based schools, have added opportunities to intentionally and prayerfully reveal Jesus to their students.

This task, however, can be onerous. The faces of students in each classroom represent a range of family, faith and cultural backgrounds. Each student is stepping into an uncertain world that tenders conflicting messages about self-

worth, moral norms, meaning and purpose. Teachers are also dealing with their own professional conflicts, navigating the educational realities of conflicting societal pushes and pulls, juggling mounting compliance tasks and an overcrowded curriculum, and the goal posts seem to keep changing. How can our schools, and specifically our teachers, meet such diverse needs amongst such relentless change?

Where can teachers find the time to develop resources that both engage students and support them in finding a unique sense of identity with value, meaning and purpose, resources that can be used with flexibility, that scaffold student personal development within a framework that supports students to sense their worth, flex their thinking, and comprehend the power of a values-rich life?

Make Jesus Real (*MJR*) 24/7 is a pastoral care resource that is purposed to fill such a need. The title indicates its purpose—to connect the realities of life with the relevance of Jesus. *MJR* is aimed at junior secondary school students. As a package it includes an engaging student journal and an e-guide for teachers. It has been developed to ‘re-engage students, via relevant issues, to think, reflect and then develop a relationship with themselves, their classmates, their teachers and maybe even Jesus’ (Ogle, 2019, p.5).

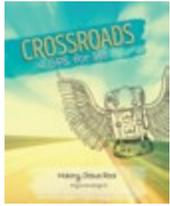
Author, Marty Ogle is a teacher with a wide range of teaching experience. He saw a need to present ‘Jesus’ to students in an engaging manner, not as an add-on to life, but as a living presence within the realities of student lives. Peter Mitchell (2016) wrote Make Jesus Real (*MJR*), a pastoral care and faith filled resource aimed at Upper Primary students. Marty coordinates the *MJR* resources and philosophy in Tasmania and throughout Australia (Ogle, 2016). *MJR* has filled a niche and its unique blend of authentic relevance, rich Christ-centred values, the potential for student and teacher dialogue, and the flexible range of uses, led to secondary teachers, students and parents asking for a continuation into the secondary space.

Co-author, Gemma Thomson is a Religious Education specialist with experience in secondary education. She has a ‘passion for pastoral care in Catholic schools’ (Ogle, 2019, p. 7). Her personal focus is ‘making Jesus real and relevant for the students’ (Ogle, 2019, p. 7), a sentiment with which Christian teachers in a wide range of faith-



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Reflections, Impressions & Experiences



based schools would resonate.

Both Marty and Gemma are passionate about developing students holistically, through ‘dialogue, reflection, prayer and social action’ (Ogle, 2019, p. 7). In Marty’s words, both authors feel that now is ‘an opportune time to connect the students and teachers to the teachings of Jesus’ (Ogle, 2019, p. 6).

The *MJR* student journal is attractively presented, including ‘lots of easy-to-remember acronyms (B.I.Y. – Believe In Yourself), quirky illustrations, wise words and insightful questions ...’ (Ogle, 2019, p. 8). Students journal their responses and reflections, ranging from single words and phrases to more extended reflective writing. The spiral bound journals are sturdy and move beyond a sense of being ‘consumable’ toward the potential for them to be regarded as ‘keep-sakes’, texts of value and on-going worth.

The theme ‘journey’ is conveyed through text, art and layout. Both the student journal and lesson plans for teachers give the impression that the teacher is there to accompany the students, not take control of their journey. Jesus is revealed as having a valued relevance within the uncharted territory of tomorrows.

MJR has 30 topics, each centred on a life reality pertinent to adolescents. Each topic highlights one particular value and some supporting virtues that can be lived out within this issue. The focus point of each topic is one particular life issue, with the values, virtues and ‘Jesus connection’ being established within that context. The teacher resource also highlights one specific connecting content descriptor from ACARA. Table 1 shows a sample of these focus points within the scope of topics.

As I poured through both the student journal and the e-learning guide for educators (<https://www.mjr247.com.au>), I could see many strengths for both teachers and students. I found the teacher guide to be masterfully designed. There is a clear, repeated template which gets to the focal point of each lesson with a minimum of dense text. A teacher could pick each lesson plan up, and within a few moments they would know the learning intention, the warm up and main activities, and any preparation required. Each section of the lesson plan has no more than two sentences to read, cutting to the main ideas succinctly, yet highlighting the deep messages and points of dialogue and reflection that would encourage students to question, reflect and

internalise within their own unique context. There are extension ideas that could move beyond the single lesson. There is a familiar rhythm to the lessons, with changing yet sequential activities that have the potential to provide evidence of personal growth to the teacher and, importantly, the students.

I believe that the rich simplicity within the lesson plans would allow busy teachers to put their time and effort into the space that will have the most impact, listening to and dialoguing with their students about things that matter.

How is Jesus revealed in each topic? His wisdom, experiences and teachings, as recorded in Scripture, are shared directly into life issues that are common to adolescents, yet unique in lived experience. And this, I believe, is a great strength of *MJR*.

This resource was initially created to fill a need within the Catholic education sector. As such, I expected that it may not be directly transferable to the wider Christian faith-based schools and systems. I did not find that to be the case. There are some quotes by Pope Francis, each relevant to the value being highlighted, and adding a positive perspective to the discussion. Possibly the biggest barrier to use within the wider range of Christian schools is the occasional use of Scriptural quotes from the book of Macabees, a book not recognised as part of the Scriptural Canon adopted within most protestant Christian faith systems.

To address these issues, *Crossroads: A GPS for life* (2020) has been released. *Crossroads* keeps the delightful strengths of *MJR247* with a light dusting of changes to better meet the needs of a wider audience across independent faith-based schools. Some phrasing, terminology, quotes and artworks have been adapted to widen the reach, giving more teachers the opportunity to engage this resource to support rich discussions, and reveal the relevance Jesus has to the life of adolescent students.

As a Christian educator, I believe that revealing Jesus through who I am, what I say, how I teach and the opportunities I give my students to question, reflect, discuss and ‘act’, should be at the core of all I do. As I poured through both of these teaching resources, I could see rich opportunities for dialogue, for listening, for responding and for journeying with students in lower secondary, through both scripture classes within the public sector and pastoral care

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Reflections, Impressions & Experiences

opportunities within a wide range of Christian faith-based schools.

In fact, I found myself loathe to return the student journals. I would love the opportunity to personally use MJR and Crossroads with adolescents within my own scope of influence. I believe it would provide me with a great many opportunities for rich dialogue and relevant avenues to reveal Jesus whilst 'doing life' with young people.

I believe that MJR fulfils a need within Catholic education, offering valuable opportunities to demonstrate the relevance of Jesus in the complex world of teenagers. I am also excited to know that this Crossroads is now available to Christian educators and students in the wider realm of faith-based educational contexts. Both of these editions are rich with possibilities when put in the hands of passionate Christian teachers.

Neither MJR or Crossroads profess to be

Religious Education curriculums. They are quality examples of biblically-based, values-rich Christian resources that have the potential to enrich a pastoral care program in secondary schools. They are each a tool through which teachers can share the relevance of Jesus to student lives, providing rich opportunities to share the timeless wisdom of Jesus, a wisdom that speaks into, and transcends the shifting sands of society. [TEACH](#)

References

- Mitchell, P. (2016). *Make Jesus Real: A book for life*. Garratt.
- Ogle, Marty (2016) "What I 'C' is a crucial tool in our schools," *TEACH Journal of Christian Education*, 10(2), 8-10. <https://research.avondale.edu.au/teach/vol10/iss2/3>
- Ogle, M., & Thomson, G. (2019). *MJR 24/7: A book for life*. Garratt.
- Editor Note: Online resources for Crossroads are available at <https://mjrcrossroads.com.au/>

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