**Personal Identity**

**Teacher Background**
Throughout life people tend to ask questions such as ‘Who am I?’ ‘Where am I going?’ ‘What am I about?’ ‘How am I different from others?’ ‘What is the real me?’ Questions such as these may be asked more urgently and more explicitly at some stages of life than at others. Nevertheless, such questions are present throughout life and are posed more or less explicitly as a person ages, matures and negotiates a diversity of experiences, both positive and negative. Identity development is important for individuals and for groups and communities. Identity formation enables the drawing of necessary boundaries and the growth in the sense of self as distinct from others, while remaining related to them. Relating authentically with others requires that individuals and groups have a sense and acceptance of their own identity.

Identity is expressed in terms of the different dimensions of the self, namely: physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and relational. Individuals may develop their identity positively in relation to these dimensions. Alternatively, flaws in, or problems with these dimensions may impact negatively on identity development. Thus images of physical ideals in advertising can reinforce positive identity in those whose physical appearance approaches the advertising “ideal”, but impact negatively on those who do not fit or conform to the advertising “ideal”. If a school were to value and affirm only academically able students, it would increase the difficulty of developing a positive sense of self in those less intellectually able. If a society devalues the spiritual dimension of life and projects only pragmatic, utilitarian and consumerist values, it increases the difficulty for its citizens in developing a healthy spiritual dimension. Societies and institutions that project only the values and cultural norms of the dominant group run the risk of impeding the development of a healthy identity in minority ethnic and cultural groups.

Acceptance of the dignity of each and every individual (which is the Christian stance) is of great significance for the development of a healthy sense of self-worth and identity. Families are crucial in the development of healthy identity when they provide that acceptance, unconditional love and ongoing nurturance and care that identity development requires. School structures, pastoral care, acceptance of individuals, valuing of diversity, and curriculum provision based on the Christian ethos have the potential to provide an environment in which the development of a healthy identity can be fostered. The Christian tradition emphasises the dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God and the need to love and value each and every individual. Where this tradition can be put into practice, even if imperfectly, the conditions for the development of a healthy identity are maximised.

**Sense of Self**
The development of a healthy sense of self in the person has both an individual and a community dimension. In contemporary western societies, the dignity, rights and responsibilities of the individual are highly prized and reinforced. Autonomy and self-identity of the individual are very much to the fore in western societies. There are advantages of this focus on the individual because it emphasises the individual sense of self as being created in the image of God. There needs to be, however, a balancing of this focus on the person as individual with an emphasis on the individual as participating member of the group. The importance of the connectedness, interrelatedness and interdependence of group and individual needs to be emphasised in the development of a healthy sense of self, particularly when the Christian understanding of God is Trinitarian, that is, God is community.

Groups in which individuals participate could include family of origin, extended family, neighbourhood, school community with its various sub-groupings, faith community, sports club, hobby or interest groups, work group, suburb, city, State and nation. Such groups will have a greater or lesser significance for individuals and their sense of self. While more traditional societies might be regarded as primarily group-oriented and tending to submerge the individual’s sense of self in the self-identity of the group, contemporary western societies can run the danger of discounting the claim of the group on the identification and commitment of the individual. Group life requires participation, connectedness and relationship. A group requires some submerging of the self in the interests of the common good and the common task. Group life exerts more or less powerful influences on the formation of the sense of self in the individual. Groups contribute to a healthy sense of self in individuals when their values, ideals, goals, culture and activity are consonant with respect for the dignity of the human person and oriented to the development of the common good.