Article

In Altum—“Put Out into the Deep”: A Formation Program for Missionary Discipleship for Students at the University of Notre Dame Australia

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Abstract: While there is a significant body of research concerning Catholic faith formation in a variety of educational contexts around the world, relatively little attention has been devoted to the notion of missionary discipleship as a foundation for Catholic formation. Recently, the National Catholic Education Commission, in its document Leading Formation for Mission, also elaborates a solid definition of formation and stated: ‘Formation is imaginative, creative and honours adult learning principles […] It engages the ‘intellect’ and is nurtured by appropriate theological content and it engages the ‘Spirit’ and is characterised by contemplation and action for mission’ (2022). This paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of formation for missionary discipleship by presenting an evaluation of the efficacy of In Altum, a student-focussed ministry and leadership program developed at the University of Notre Dame Australia in response to the developing magisterial teaching concerning the notion of ‘missionary discipleship’. In particular, we examine participants’ personal faith development, understanding of missionary discipleship on campus, preparation for future ministry, and understanding of contemporary challenges to discipleship. The study progresses in three parts: First, it provides a brief background to In Altum, including the philosophical and sociological context, as well as the key theological principles underpinning the formation offered within the program. Second, following an overview of the mixed-methodology approach taken in the study, which details both the use of qualitative and quantitative data derived from focus groups and an online survey, the paper presents the results of the study, which sought to investigate the efficacy of the program as it pertained to the following: (a) the building of (personal subjective assessment of) faith in participants; (b) the building of participants’ understanding of, and confidence in, the task of evangelisation as missionary discipleship in a secularised context; (c) building a strengthened sense of community amongst the participants. In the third and final section, the reported strengths and weaknesses of the program are examined. The paper also comments on implications for the program on the culture of the university more broadly, including precepts of the program’s findings that may be applied in light of the Australian Catholic Plenary Council’s findings to enhance the future directions of formation programs in the Catholic University Chaplaincy, with possible application to Catholic secondary schools and parish youth groups.

Keywords: faith formation; Catholic Education; missionary discipleship; Catholic Higher Education; university Chaplaincy; Campus Ministry

1. Introduction: Background and Overview of In Altum

Following from recent magisterial teaching (Francis 2013), as well as what has been learned from an engagement with research concerning peer-to-peer ministry programs based primarily in the United States (Starks and Day 2018), and their own experience on the ground with undergraduate students, the Chaplaincy office at the University of Notre Dame Australia designed and developed the In Altum Leadership and Ministry program,
launched at their Fremantle campus in 2020 with financial support from the Knights of the Southern Cross WA (Western Australia) Education Foundation (Inc.). *In Altum* was developed as a means to form the already committed young Catholic adults engaged in Chaplaincy programs on UNDA campuses into missionary disciples.

Chaplaincy staff identified that students already committed to the practice of the faith—namely those students for whom time spent in the university chapel or church, or engaged in one of the many Chaplaincy programs, was already a priority—were at risk of developing a Catholic clique on campus. The sociologists Clements and Bullivant (2022) have made an observation which is relevant in this regard: ‘there is indeed something real afoot among younger Catholics, and that this “creative minority effect” is in fact a natural side-effect or by-product of “late secularization”’. Without going into the details of this sociological claim, the designers of *In Altum* sought to treat their group of already-engaged Catholic Chaplaincy students as a “creative minority” not to be ignored, but as having the potential to themselves influence the culture of the university. The approach of *In Altum*, then, was to provide some specific formation that would encourage these young adults to begin to take some responsibility as baptised members of Christ’s Body on earth to become what Pope Francis terms ‘missionary disciples’ (Francis 2013), and to spread the Good News, primarily to their peers on campus (See Mt 28:16–20).

As with many new initiatives begun in 2020, the unforeseen development of the coronavirus pandemic meant that the program floundered and failed to gather sufficient momentum, an experience that was repeated in Fremantle again in 2021. A moderated version of the program, however, was successfully piloted on the Sydney campus in 2021, and *In Altum* was finally run nationally in semester one of 2022, and it continues to be run nationally. Attracting some 19 undergraduate students from both its Fremantle and Sydney campuses, *In Altum* ran for the entirety of semester one, 2022, with 15 students eventually completing the program, and it is this particular iteration of the program which is the focus of this study. *In Altum* is distinct in its focus on the commitment required of students, as well as the intensity of its formation and retreat components and its directly outward looking (evangelising) approach. The program ran nationally in what was a mostly uniform mode, with local variations to meet the geographical and scheduling requirements of the students.

Students electing to participate attended a beginning retreat/planning day, where they were introduced to the program and immediately, within the context of prayer and reflection, began planning student-directed outreach activities for the coming semester. Throughout the semester, students attended fortnightly meetings where some spiritual formation was provided from the members of the Chaplaincy team. The formation sessions also provided opportunities for more generalised skill development in areas such as event planning, running and participating in meetings, conflict resolution, etc. Individual students also met frequently with a Chaplaincy team member who acted as a mentor, providing assistance and guidance in the development and implantation of smaller outreach projects developed by small groups of participating students. This Chaplaincy mentor also provided general accompaniment throughout the program, as students were also encouraged to take steps to cultivate a deeper life of prayer through the semester. In semester one, 2022, the students devised and delivered such activities as:

- Prayer/Lectio Divina group (Fremantle);  
- Philosophy reading group (Fremantle);  
- Fundraising activities for Caritas Australia’s Project Compassion (Fremantle);  
- Women’s Faith Share Group (Fremantle);  
- Mosaic-making craft group (Sydney);  
- Free coffee stall (Sydney);  
- Day-hike events (Sydney);  
- St Joseph’s men’s group (Sydney);  
- Poetry recital evenings (Sydney);  
- Student-directed printed newsletter (Sydney).
Aside from this central aspect of peer-to-peer ministry, the students engaged in community building dinners held every 4–5 weeks, an Ignatian ‘retreat in daily life’ facilitated by the consecrated women of the Marian Community of Reconciliation (Fraternas) internationally via Zoom, as well as a more formal, two-night live-in retreat towards the end of the program (following semester one exams).

2. Literature Review

The Church’s missionary mandate has seen increased emphasis in recent magisterial teaching from popes Paul VI through to Francis, most recently and particularly in Francis’ apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013). However, and notwithstanding Pope John Paul II’s apostolic constitution on Catholic universities, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, (1990, henceforth ECE), there has been no authoritative instruction or direction from any group of English-speaking bishops on the specific apostolate of university ministry since the 1985 publication of *Empowered by the Spirit* (henceforth ES), promulgated by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (now the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops). While in many ways dated, ES, coupled with ECE, offers sound principles for university Chaplaincy/Campus Ministry. This document is given a thorough treatment in the book, *Pope Francis and Campus Ministry: A Dialogue*, by James J. Bacik (2018). Bacik’s book is unique insofar as it was authored by one of the architects of *Empowered by the Spirit*, and it provides both historical context to the composition of the document and theological commentary. This document and the commentary offered by Bacik was especially useful for the development of the peer ministry component of *In Altum*, especially as it drew this into an engagement with the magisterium of Pope Francis, particularly his category of missionary discipleship, a concept that maps onto the work of Sherry Weddell (2012), which also informed the development of *In Altum*.

One key feature of *In Altum* was the emphasis that Chaplaincy team members gave to the accompaniment of students, working specifically to assist them in debriefing the activities and times of prayer, helping them to learn from these experiences. In this, the Chaplaincy team sought to meet Francis’ exhortation *Christus Vivit* to develop with *In Altum* the kind of project that ‘can strengthen them, accompany them and impel them to encounter others, to engage in generous service, in mission’ (Francis 2019, n. 30; see also Floridia 2023; McCorquodale 2021; Hunt 2020).

In the Australian context, the Sydney Archdiocese’s *Go Make Disciples* mission plan (2020, henceforth GMD) provided two key aspects noteworthy for the development of *In Altum*: the first is GMD’s embedding of faith formation within a sociologically informed awareness of ‘the increasing secularisation of culture’, as reflected in the phenomenon of religious disaffiliation (Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney 2020, p. 25). Citing the *Australian Bureau of Statistics* (2016), GMD acknowledges that ‘between 2011 and 2016, five percent of Catholics ceased attending Mass in the Sydney Archdiocese; almost one thousand people each year’ and that ‘younger adults’ were among those notably absent from congregations (Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney 2020, p. 25).

The second noteworthy element of GMD is its vision for Christian formation, which acknowledges that formation occurs best within ‘densely-clustered social networks’. This acknowledgment of the connections between formation, community, and commitment in the context of Australian secularization echoes sociological observations made of US parishes that ‘the overall social integration of parishioners within their parishes [...] appears to be the most critical factor for increasing commitment and involvement’. These sociological observations form the backdrop for GMD’s theological vision of missionary discipleship in continuity with that outlined by Francis (2013), which was instructive in the development of *In Altum*. In this, the designers of the program were particularly cognisant of GMD’s citation of Benedict XVI, who pointed out that ‘there can be no actuosa participatio [active participation] without an accompanying effort to participate actively in the life of the Church as a whole, including a missionary commitment to bring Christ’s love into the life of society’. (Benedict XVI 2007, n. 55).
3. Research Aims

The aim of this research was to explore the perceptions of UNDA students participating in *In Altum*. The research questions addressed were under the themes of:

1. Personal faith development: What is the value of *In Altum* to a participant’s faith development during their time in the program?
2. Understanding of missionary discipleship on campus: How has *In Altum* assisted a participant’s understanding of the nature of discipleship and practice of a missionary discipleship, both on campus and in other contexts if relevant?
3. Preparation for future ministry: How has a participant’s involvement in the program prepared them to be missionary disciples within their parishes, families, and/or work communities?
4. Understanding contemporary challenges to discipleship: What are the challenges involved in missionary discipleship in twenty-first century Australia?

4. Methodology

Due to the immediate impact of COVID-19 and the national character of the program (operating on both the Fremantle and Sydney campuses), the study was conducted via two online surveys, as well as via an online Zoom focus group.

The ticks of the focus group and those of the surveys were then combined, and an overall percentage of the achievement of that descriptor identified. The results were then combined to inform mixed method analysis in order to answer the above research questions.

Nine out of fifteen students engaged in *In Altum* participated in the study (60% of students) as evidenced in Table 1. Of course, the small sample size of only 9 students across only 2 campuses should give some pause to any attempt to make broad generalizations concerning these findings. For ease of reference, Table 2 shows the Religious make-up background of the participants and Table 3 displays the different programs, participants were enrolled in from the University.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>21.4 years old</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Religious makeup.

| Practicing Catholic | 7 |
| Non-practicing Catholic | 1 |
| Buddhist | 1 |
| Total | 9 |

Table 3. The breakdown of students by program studied at the university.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Numbers of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Education</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Nursing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Arts</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Philosophy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Laws</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1. Data Analysis Procedure

A separate analysis of two QUAN (survey) + one QUAL (focus group) data was undertaken. The mixed methods analysis involved identification of the descriptors/main themes from the literature, and these were plotted against the current qualitative and
quantitative data, using a simple tick or cross to represent whether or not the descriptor/theme was evident. The ticks of the focus group and those of the two surveys were then converged and an overall percentage of the achievement of that descriptor identified. The results were then combined to inform mixed method analysis in order to answer the above research questions.

4.1.1. Qualitative Data Analysis (Focus Group Interview)

The qualitative data collected in the focus group was digitally recorded using the researcher’s iPad and Microsoft Word program. The use of the Microsoft Word software program (Aleahmad 2012) enabled the researcher to transcribe the data from their recording on the iPad. This program allows for data to be typed into a word document directly from the focus group recording, as recommended by Aleahmad (2012). The initial notes were used to interpret ‘meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, theory building, and other analytic processes’ (Saldaña 2012, p. 3). The identification, or coding, of several descriptor themes that surfaced in the focus group data is what Burns (1995) further described as ‘coding is not something one does to get data ready for analysis but something that drives ongoing data collection. It is in short a form of continuing analysis’ (p. 290). In light of this understanding, repeated reference was made to the data to ensure that it had been interpreted accurately. As indicated previously, in order to verify semantic accuracy, member checking was undertaken.

4.1.2. Qualitative Data Analysis (Qualtrics Surveys)

Simple descriptive statistical analysis was undertaken on the two Qualtrics web-based surveys. Data sets were analysed from the two Qualtrics surveys. The data for analysis consisted of two separate surveys collected in March and June and one Zoom focus group in May involving UNDA students participating in In Altum at both the Fremantle and Sydney campuses. Finally, the findings of the analysis of the converged quantitative and qualitative data sets were used to determine common themes which the researchers recognised as of particular importance to the success of In Altum, or similar potential programs for other educational contexts.

Despite two of the researchers’ joint involvement in In Altum as coordinators and also being partly responsible for analysing de-identified survey and focus group interview data, care was taken by the independent researcher of the program, who ensured that a dual and unequal relationship was avoided. At no time were any of the participants in the employ of the researcher. None of the participants had a direct relationship to the researchers and as such neither were they placed in a professionally or personally compromising situation. All information was collected on a voluntary basis in In Altum and participants could withdraw from the research at any time.

5. Key Findings

The key findings are presented below in summarised form, and this is then combined into key findings at the end of the section, from the combination of both the Qual + Quan data.

5.1. Survey 1, Summary

In the first survey, carried out early on in the program, 70% of participants said they longed for the existence of a vibrant community life and that this was important for other people also interested in developing their faith. Fifty-five percent of participants had also considered becoming missionaries. The In Altum cohort could be summarised as a group heavily invested in their faith life. However, they also provided important insights into obstacles for their faith.

Seven out of the nine (77%) participants responded to the question, ‘What are some of the barriers you see for others of your age in coming to faith?’ Some of the responses were as follows:
(Participant 2) Some [of my peers] believe it [the Church] is a cult;

(Participant 4) They had personal experience with others who poorly expressed their faith in the past, i.e., teachers/priests/family;

(Participant 5) Social media; secular society and materialistic culture portray faith as not as important;

(Participant 7) It is considered counter cultural;

(Participant 8) I’m not into faith. I just want to do something charitable.

Interestingly, the comments gave useful insight into what may be a lack of understanding in the general populace of some common Catholic terminology. ‘Faith’, ‘charity’, and ‘cult’, in particular, were identified as denoting a meaning in popular culture widely divergent from the basic Catholic understanding of those terms. For instance, some authors (Sam and Tanner 2018; Wright 2023) argued that many people define a cult today as follows: ‘A cult is usually short-lived and features rituals and practices from other religions, usually of the foreign and exotic kind [. . .] So, in modern terms, a cult is a bad thing. There are some warning signs to determine whether you are in a cult’ (Wright 2023). Wright, however argued this understanding of the history of a ‘cult’ in Catholicism has more meaning if enriched in Church history and specifically defined it as follows:

In the Church, the word “cult” is also employed to mean the veneration (not worship) of a person who has died. The foundation of a cult around a person is a banal word which just means venerable devotion. The person will then be titled “Venerable” by the Church; this is the first step on the way to “Blessed” (Beatification) and “Saint” (Canonization). This “cult” or special devotion and veneration also applies to each of the saints, including the greatest veneration owed to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Some students, despite being regularly practicing Catholics, may have adopted an understanding of these key terms from the broader culture or within the context of their education, from their fellow students or family members, or from social media, rather than from official programs of formation such as In Altum.

Participants reported a somewhat underdeveloped but not wholly inaccurate understanding of the term ‘evangelisation’:

(Participant 3) Spread faith;

(Participant 5) Follow in Jesus’ footsteps;

(Participant 6) Proclaim, share;

(Participant 7) Expose the message of God to others.

In his apostolic exhortation Gaudete et Exsultate: on the Call to Holiness, Pope Francis (2018) describes the importance of evangelisation as an intrinsic and essential aspect of holiness.

‘Holiness’, he writes, ‘is also parrhesia: it is boldness, an impulse to evangelize and to leave a mark in this world. To allow us to do this, Jesus himself comes and tells us once more, serenely yet firmly: “Do not be afraid” (Mk 6:50) [. . .] How often we are tempted to keep close to the shore! Yet the Lord calls us to put out into the deep and let down our nets (cf. Lk 5:4)’. (n. 129–30)

Francis exhorts Christians everywhere to a boldness in their impulse to evangelise and to leave a mark in this world. It is clear that programs such as In Altum are in alignment with the missionary impulse which can be said to characterise the pontificate of Pope Francis, and indeed all the post-conciliar popes to go and ‘put out into the deep and let down your nets’ (John Paul II 2001; Pope Francis 2018). Two separate surveys were collected in March and June and one Zoom focus group in May, involving UNDA students participating in In Altum at both the Fremantle and Sydney campuses. Finally, the findings of the analysis...
of the converged quantitative and qualitative data sets were used to determine common themes which the researchers recognised as of particular importance to the success of In Altum, or similar potential programs for other educational contexts.

5.2. Focus Group, Summary

The first focus group, held a week after the initial survey, asked five basic questions, as outlined below:

1. What have been your experiences of the In Altum program so far? How has it benefitted you, or not, and in what ways?
2. What has been your previous experience of involvement in Faith-based School, Parish or university service programs and how did they cater for your spiritual needs compared to the In Altum program structure?
3. Do you think the In Altum program is helpful to your spiritual growth, or are there other ways of assisting fellow university students or members of the community? If so, how could this be achieved by the Chaplaincy?
4. Would you classify spiritual mentoring, evangelisation, missionary service, and Christian leadership programs as essential for your life as a student in a Catholic university? How has this assisted you in your own faith understanding, or not?
5. In your experience with In Altum, what are the key components found in a successful spiritual formation program?

The focus group provided the opportunity for the participants to provide genuine insights into the nature of In Altum, and of faith formation programs in general. One participant, in response to question one, noted that, ‘Everything about it [In Altum], I think it’s been mostly positive’. Another stated ‘In Altum has benefitted me by getting to know likeminded people and have some interesting conversations with one another’. One also spoke of how they developed from the experience a better ‘sense of [the] leadership, time management, organisation, and planning skills needed in day-to-day life [. . .] with the group projects planned’.

In commenting about their faith and spiritual life in response to the second question, one participant observed, ‘I learned kind of more forms of prayer that, like, I didn’t really know about’. Another commented on the importance of having a religious/priest participating in delivery of the formation program, saying how much they appreciated ‘having, like, Father XXXXX kind of take us through that’.

In response to the third question, students provided an informal assessment of their own spiritual growth. Participant 1 said that, ‘the advantage of taking the programme I [think is] understanding faith’. While not being able to articulate much of their meaning, Participant 3 stated, ‘I believe In Altum has helped my spiritual growth substantially’. Participant 5 was a little more specific, describing positively what they saw as an ‘emphasis on prayer and scripture and how it can apply to our lives’. It appears to be the case that a significant effect of In Altum was in assisting some students to grow and learn about their own faith.

The participants’ responses to the fourth question revealed their assessments of the impact of mentoring and accompaniment on their development.

Importantly, the participants’ summative judgments of the program and its success and its usefulness in their development as missionary disciples were particularly useful, providing key insights as to not only what the participants found most useful in the program but also what they could also take away. When asked about the aspects of the program that they found most useful, Participant 9 said, ‘I would say, like, spiritual mentoring or Christian service’. Participant 7 spoke of the importance of, ‘the emphasis on community with the group chats, the regular dinners and other group projects [which] enforce[d] a sense of togetherness in this journey’.

Finally, Participant 2 spoke of how, ‘as a faith [filled]/Catholic person and a student in this university, I believe it [In Altum] has been essential in reinforcing my faith and
helping it grow. It reminded me of important scripture passages and how I could apply it to my life.

*In Altum* may be described as showing a significant impact in the lives of the students, even in the initial stages of their participation in the program, as eight out of nine of participants reported finding the program helpful in understanding their task as one of the baptized, as a missionary disciple.

### 5.3. Survey 2, Summary

The second survey was held toward the end of the program. It confirmed the findings of the first survey that this group were heavily invested in developing their faith commitment, where eight out of nine participants attended Mass regularly. Six out of nine participants indicated that they also now felt more comfortable in the engaging activities of evangelization. The majority of participants, after the program was complete, now summarised their understanding of the concept of ‘missionary discipleship’ and evangelisation in the following definition:

> A mission to follow Jesus by going out and encountering God in others.

Evangelisation is an invitation freely given, inviting others to an encounter with Jesus, which does not include proselytism.

The language of one student in particular, as it was offered in the final survey response, is especially poignant:

> Evangelisation is bringing the Word of God to others by bringing it to life in my own life like the seed in rich soil, and then inviting others into that community of life and love to “come and see” that they might be moved to do the same or to continue in their own journey to Christ and evangelisation. This is a cornerstone of Christian living, without which the lamps of life in Christ and the love of the Spirit would be lit and placed under the bed where none could see by its light.

(Participant 7)

The richness of such responses was an indication of how, in a short period of time, *In Altum* impacted the faith-life of the majority of student participants in a positive way, providing them with a clear understanding of what was needed for a student to partake in evangelization efforts in the context of a Catholic university and beyond.

### 6. Discussion

Resulting from the mixed-methods analysis, the researchers identified seven key aspects of the program that were imperative in the success of *In Altum*. These included:

1. Pastoral care of the students in the program, including priest chaplains and other facilitators;
2. Opportunities for participants to gather socially and share experiences;
3. Opportunities for participants to experience retreats and receive the Sacraments;
4. Opportunity for prayer (individual and communal) and to read scripture;
5. Focus on discerning individual gifts and talents, and sharing these through apostolic works/Christian service;
6. A catechetical (education) program with a focus on empowering young people to evangelise in the context of secular/post-Christian culture;
7. A strong focus on and a clear articulation of the commitment required of the student participants.

What follows provides a brief description of each of these seven aspects as they were manifest in *In Altum* and some feedback ascertained from the students who participated in the program about this aspect, as well as a link to the applicable literature. The results reported here, it must be remembered, represent a small sample size of 9 students who engaged in the study out of a possible 15 who were participants in the program. While the participant group demonstrates some diversity, particularly with it being across two cam-
puses more than 3300 km apart, the findings presented here should be taken as indicative of how such a program could be effective in formation for missionary discipleship, rather than definitive.

6.1. Pastoral Care of the Students in the Program, Including Priest Chaplains and Other Facilitators

Throughout the program, staff of the Chaplaincy office sought to offer support and guidance to the students, following what Pope Francis refers to as ‘accompaniment’. This involved regular one-on-one meetings, but also more casual ‘check-ins’ as students were working on their outreach activities. In this, the facilitators of the program were seeking to follow the admonition of Pope Francis that ‘genuine spiritual accompaniment always begins and flourishes in the context of service to the mission of evangelisation’ (Francis 2013, n. 173). The importance of accompaniment in youth ministry programs is widely acknowledged in contemporary literature (Floridia 2023; McCorquodale 2021; Hunt 2020).

As one participant recalled,

I think that the staff, the Chaplaincy, as you know, really made an effort to make sure that [they] sort of treat us sort of as individuals going through it really and to make sure that we as individuals are getting the most out of it. It is personally enriching to individuals really, rather than kind of speaking to us [. . . ] I think it’s probably the most effective moment of it.

This personalised attention assisted the students in discerning their own particular gifts and talents and verifying them over the course of their activities in the program. In this, the facilitators again were seeking to follow the guidance of Pope Francis, who, in Gaudete et Exsultate, wrote:

The important thing is that each believer discerns his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts (cf. 1 Cor 12:7), rather than hopelessly trying to imitate something not meant for them. We are all called to be witnesses, but there are many actual ways of bearing witness.

(Francis 2018, n. 11)

6.2. Opportunities for Participants to Gather Socially and Share Experiences

What was evident to the researchers in their analysis of the data was the importance of the newly formed In Altum community for those students who participated. ‘For me’, reflected Participant 2, ‘the most significant was the kind of the social aspect [. . . ]’.

More eloquently, Participant 4 also recalled positively, ‘the emphasis on community with the group chats, the regular dinners, and other group projects enforce a sense of togetherness in this journey; the emphasis on prayer and scripture and how it can apply to our lives; the sense of leadership, time management, organisation, and planning skills needed in day-to-day life shown with the group projects planned’.

This experience maps onto research noting the significance of community and friendship in the context of faith development for young people (Clements and Bullivant 2022). It further meets with the understanding of Pope Francis as expressed in his exhortation to young people: ‘it is always better to live the faith together and to show our love by living in community and sharing with other young people our affection, our time, our faith and our troubles. The Church offers many different possibilities for living our faith in community, for everything is easier when we do it together’ (Francis 2019, n. 164).

The researchers note that the regularity of the In Altum meetings, along with the bonds forged in the work undergone together within the contexts of the common projects of the student led outreach activities, facilitated the building of genuine friendships and communion amongst the group.
6.3. Opportunities for Participants to Experience Retreats and Receive the Sacraments

The importance of developing the sacramental life of individuals is vital and important to the life of the Church. Survey 2 showed that ‘opportunities for retreat and contemplation’ were highly valued by the participants in the program, this item being selected by the majority of students as the activity which most assisted them as a participant, in part because of their provision of sacraments such as the Mass, in a new and spiritually fruitful context.

As several participants commented:

(Participant 2) The retreat was, like, useful [...] it was something that was new to me.

(Participant 4) I believe the In Altum program has helped my spiritual growth substantially as it not only helped me connect with other people who wanted to increase the spirituality but also reminded me of the importance of prayer and understanding scripture [...] the In Altum program has catered [to] my spiritual needs as we had a focus on Mass and prayer before our fortnightly meetings.

6.4. Opportunity for Prayer (Individual and Communal) and to Read Scripture

A key feature of In Altum was introducing the students to a variety of Catholic prayer forms, particularly Lectio Divina and the Liturgy of the Hours. Morning and evening prayer were often prayed in common at In Altum meetings, and many of the formation sessions were begun with a facilitated time of Lectio. While the majority of the participants in In Altum had attended Catholic schools and were regularly engaged in parish life, the experience of these fundamental forms of prayer was new for many, though not all, of the students. Participant 2 recalls, ‘I learned kind of more forms of prayer, that I, like, I didn’t really know about. And so, like, having, like, Father XXXXX kind of take us through that. And it was, like, it was in particular was like morning and evening prayer, which you would do before our meeting. And then, like, before we go to dinner and stuff’.

Participant 4 noted that, ‘In Altum has catered [to] my spiritual needs as we had a focus on mass and prayer before our fortnightly meetings’. According to the students’ own self-assessment, this had a positive impact on their own sense of spirituality. ‘Yes, so I found it kind of [...] assisted [my] spiritual life. Yes, very much so’. (Participant 1).

It was evident to the researchers that the participants very much valued the fact that the program set aside a significant amount of time for both private personal prayer and communal prayer.

6.5. Focus on Discerning Individual Gifts and Talents, and Sharing These through Apostolic Works/Christian Service

The driving goal of In Altum was to encourage the development of a spirit of informed and courageous missionary discipleship amongst the participants. This was achieved through direct instruction on the nature of modern secularised culture, a theology of evangelisation that has been developed in post-conciliar magisterial teaching, and the explicit focus on the development and enacting of student-led peer-to-peer outreach and ministry activities. Beyond this, the role of the Chaplaincy staff who facilitated the program was to merely encourage the students to use their own gifts and talents to reach out to their colleagues and friends.

In encouraging and empowering the In Altum participants to engage in this kind of student-directed peer-to-peer ministry, the Chaplaincy team were seeking to enact Pope Francis’ advice: ‘As for outreach, I trust that young people themselves know how best to find appealing ways to come together. They know how to organize events, sports competitions and ways to evangelize using social media, through text messages, songs, videos and other ways. They only have to be encouraged and given the freedom to be enthused about evangelizing other young people wherever they are to be found’ (Francis 2019, n. 210).

This aspect was one which, many of the students indicated, was genuinely fulfilling. Participant 1 pointed out, ‘I really like[d] the idea of developing our own projects because
often, you know, these sort of things [without the input of a young person] could be quite, sort of, square peg, round hole’. Participant 2 noted, ‘we have a lot of autonomy and what we want to kind of, like, what direction we want our project to go’.

6.6. A Catechetical (Education) Program with a Focus on Empowering Young People to Evangelise in the Context of Secular/Post-Christian Culture

The Final Document of the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Young People, The Faith, and Vocational Discernment speaks of the importance of formation for missionary discipleship (Synod of Bishops 2018). This was the key focus of the formation program of In Altum. Participants spoke of how they had developed their understanding of the task of evangelisation within their particular contexts. Participant 7 said, ‘Evangelisation is bringing the Word of God to others by bringing it to life in my own life like the seed in rich soil, and then inviting others into that community of life and love to “come and see” that they might be moved to do the same or to continue in their own journey to Christ and evangelisation. This is a cornerstone of Christian living, without which the lamps of life in Christ and the love of the Spirit would be lit and placed under the bed where none could see by its light’.

Key for the formation program was helping the students to understand the distinction between proselytism and evangelisation, which Pope Francis makes in his exhortation Evangelii Gaudium (Francis 2013, n. 14) and which was articulated in the doctrinal note on some aspects of evangelisation, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2007):

The term proselytism originated in the context of Judaism, in which the term proselyte referred to someone who, coming from the gentiles, had passed into the Chosen People. So too, in the Christian context, the term proselytism was often used as a synonym for missionary activity. More recently, however, the term has taken on a negative connotation, to mean the promotion of a religion by using means, and for motives, contrary to the spirit of the Gospel; that is, which do not safeguard the freedom and dignity of the human person. It is in this sense that the term proselytism is understood in the context of the ecumenical movement (n. 49).

6.7. A Strong Focus on and a Clear Articulation of the Commitment Required of the Student Participants

One of the complications that the program facilitators encountered, which they had anticipated, was the particular difficulties that the time commitment posed to the students. The students’ engaged in In Altum, much like the vast majority of the students of the university, were known to have busy study schedules as well as a vast array of extracurricular commitments to family, work, Church, and other social groups. The researchers noted how the clear articulation of the commitments that the program required of the participants as well as the supports which were offered were significant in setting an appropriate culture within the community, assisting in the participants’ successful completion of the program.

Researchers found that In Altum was successful in fostering a spirit of missionary discipleship within those who were invited to participate in the program. As one student stated, ‘In Altum has helped me to utilise my gifts and talents for the purpose of evangelisation and being an active rather than a passive Christian’. The seven aspects of the program each contributed to the participants’ understanding of their missionary task, as well as to their sense of the faith more broadly. For those seeking to develop similar programs in other contexts, each of the seven aspects should be considered as essential.

7. Conclusions

Finally, the research questions which were the focus of this this study were centred on the value of In Altum to the participant’s personal faith development, understanding of missionary discipleship on campus, preparation for future ministry, and understanding
contemporary challenges to discipleship. Despite the relatively small scale of the program and the numbers of students who participated, the researchers were satisfied with the findings and would be interested to note the implications of such a program on a larger group across both campuses of the university or in other university contexts in Australia and abroad, including mainstream or secular university campuses.

As evident in the focus group responses, students noted informally that the program assisted in their spiritual growth ‘substantially’, with particular reference to the value of mentoring, community, and retreat opportunities, as well as personal and communal prayer. The program enabled a majority of students to articulate, with reference to their own activities as well as to magisterial teaching, an understanding of missionary discipleship and feel more comfortable in the activities of evangelisation. The participants also were able to provide positive accounts of the challenges posed to evangelisation in contemporary Australian culture, with particular reference to secularism, consumerism, and the negative portrayals of the Catholic faith among their peers.

The In Altum researchers found that a deliberate program of formation in missionary discipleship was effective in forming young adults within the university context in this task. In the establishment of any such program, it is important to not only assess the needs of the specific students undertaking the program but also the teaching of various ecclesial bodies, including the teaching of Pope Francis as well as his immediate predecessors.

The researchers found that participants reported feeling equipped to act as missionary disciples, especially as a result of their own participation in a community focussed on formation, where they were given explicit catechetical instruction and opportunities to develop their personal and communal prayer and sacramental life. Participants noted the importance of learning of their own specific charisms, and how they could be exercised in the apostolate was particularly important, as was the accompaniment of Chaplaincy staff.

The In Altum researchers also noted the importance of this kind of formation for undergraduate university students, particularly in light of Pope Francis’ post-synodal apostolic exhortation Christus Vivit and his clear teaching on the missionary mandate of all the baptised. Further, such a program would support the fulfilment of the final decree of the fifth Australian Plenary Council (2020, paragraph 11), which as of this writing awaits the formal ratification of the Pope.

The study undertaken by the In Altum researchers opens many further opportunities for research, one of which would be the efficacy of the outreach of the various programs or peer-to-peer ministry and evangelisation devised and carried out by the participating students. Such a study would need to be carried out over a longer timeframe and engage a broader grouping of students who had been invited to engage in these activities. Another opportunity for research would likely seek to measure the long-term impact of In Altum, following up with the participating students in the semesters following their participation in the program, measuring their ongoing commitment to faith and participation in activities which could be understood as evangelistic or missionary in purpose.

Beyond recommending these features as essential parts of any other specific programs of formation in this area, the authors of this study wish to highlight the specific need for direction from the Bishops regarding the particular apostolate of university ministry. To date, in the English language there is only one document that specifically addresses this important area of ministry, that being Empowered by the Spirit, which the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB, precursor to USCCB) promulgated in 1985. This document offers sound guidelines for university Chaplaincy/Campus Ministry that remains pertinent in a number of ways; however, the social context has changed so significantly that it is beyond time for some renewed guidance amidst the changing landscape. More recent than this is Pope John Paul II’s apostolic constitution on Catholic universities, Ex Corde Ecclesiae, (John Paul II 1990). Sections 38–49 and Article 6, sections 1 and 2 of that document provide sound guidelines for university ministry, but there remains a space for more particularised guidance that accounts for the socio-religious context of the contemporary Australian university in the first few decades of the third millennium.
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