“The issue a lot of Catholic agencies are facing, and we are facing too, is how we establish and maintain and develop our Catholic identity,” says ACU National Professor of Theology Neil Ormerod.

As Australia’s only Catholic, public, national university, open to all, ACU National has non-discriminatory employment and enrolment policies, and welcomes Catholic and non-Catholic staff and students alike.

For staff and students of all backgrounds, the University’s Mission has provided a common ground for understanding the importance of social justice, human dignity and the common good.

Yet ACU National remains at heart a Catholic institution. “The new Vice-Chancellor is recalling elements of Catholic identity so that the Mission doesn’t just represent a general sense of social service,” Professor Ormerod said. “Even though the Mission is inclusive, it still has deep Catholic roots.”

ACU National was founded in 1991 through the amalgamation of Catholic predecessor colleges in Queensland, NSW, ACT and Victoria. The colleges’ doors had already been thrown open to lay staff and students to meet the growing needs of Catholic schools for teachers.

Change has continued in almost all Catholic institutions around the world, including hospitals, welfare agencies, schools and universities. Increasing numbers of priests and religious staff members are retiring and a variety of people are taking their places, many of them unfamiliar with aspects of Catholic identity. A survey of the nine Forum of Australian Catholic Institutes of Theology (FACIT) member institutions conducted jointly by FACIT and ACU National in 2007 found that half the full-time staff members were laypersons.

“The issue for the University, as it is for the whole Catholic education sector, is what constitutes a critical mass of people and their level of formation, so that the Catholic identity at the heart of the Mission can be maintained. That is, how do we ensure that our Catholic identity is not lost?” Professor Ormerod said.

While many Catholic schools were beginning to cater for greater diversity of staff by creating meaningful mission statements to which all could relate, at ACU National and many Catholic universities in the US, “we are going the other way”. ACU National has a strong Mission, but with the increasing diversity among its staff and students, “we need to ensure that the Mission is coming out of an authentic space”.

A fresh focus on the Catholic identity of ACU National by new Vice-Chancellor Professor Greg Craven is encouraging a re-examination of the role and the roots of the University’s Mission.

MINING THE MISSION

A fresh focus on the Catholic identity of ACU National by new Vice-Chancellor Professor Greg Craven is encouraging a re-examination of the role and the roots of the University’s Mission.
“What ACU National asks, and all it can ask, of staff and students alike, is a commitment to participate in the Mission of the University.

“There is a creative tension between our Mission and our Catholic roots. We can’t allow ourselves to lose either one of them. We might begin to talk more about our Catholic identity, but we have to still talk about our Mission.

“The Mission is about good works, but it is also about more than that. There’s a very deep intellectual tradition that needs for its own sake to be brought into dialogue with the world, and taken to the wider world for the sake of the world.”

Professor Craven’s renewed emphasis on Catholic identity is reflected in plans for the University and its activities, including an Institute for Public Affairs to present a Catholic perspective on current events, a new Faculty of Theology, and increased use of religious art to beautify campuses.

“Our Catholic identity has something to offer,” Professor Ormerod said. “You don’t have to be Catholic to appreciate the power of it. We have to make these intellectual traditions and moral positions available for consideration by our staff and students and by the communities we serve.”

Catholic identity is multidimensional, according to Professor Ormerod. There is a religious dimension, based on prayer life, liturgy and religious activities.

“There is a moral identity, which includes the church’s stance on stem cell research and abortion.

“There is a cultural identity. When we talk about 2,000 years of Catholic intellectual tradition, it is part of the cultural heritage of the Church and the University and includes theology, philosophy, art, music and architecture. This takes on new elements and develops over time.

“There is also a social identity. Catholics get together and socialise in communities, affirming their Catholic identity.”

Professor Ormerod believes the emphasis on Catholic identity varies among institutions. In a primary school, basic teachings about Catholic beliefs will be transmitted, for example.

“By the time you get to a university, it’s less appropriate to try to put these understandings in place. More will be presumed, and a more mature response to faith will be expected, including engagement with the world.

“Engagement with ACU National’s Mission transforms our self-understanding. I would suggest that it will never be the role of the University to seek to make students and staff Catholic, but there is a presumption that they will have some sense of commitment to the University and its Mission and an appreciation of its Catholic heritage and values.”

These ideas and more are explored in depth in *Identity and Mission in Catholic Agencies*, edited by Professor Ormerod after a colloquium held in Melbourne last year, organised by ACU National, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Catholic Religious Australia, The Catholic Institute of Sydney, Catholic Social Services Australia and the National Catholic Education Commission. The book, published by St Pauls Publications, is $24.95.