

## THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE

by Margaret V. Ames

My initial approach to this topic was to produce an objective assessment of the role of women in Lutheran education, perhaps looking at the historical developments within our Church and our Lutheran education system as they pertain to women. But in the course of consulting with other Lutheran women, both within South Australia and beyond, I began to change my approach, and when finally someone said: "Margaret, I think of you in Lutheran schools as a peoples' person, not as an historian, why don't you reminisce about some of your personal experiences over the years and leave the academic theory and historical perspectives for someone else?" I decided to adopt that approach. It didn't mean that I totally ignored historical material, but I spent a lot less time in archives and a lot more sharing with past teachers and Old Scholars some great reminiscences, occasionally of the lingering variety over a glass of Barossa red....

So, in order to explain how I began my teaching career in a Lutheran Secondary school almost 40 years ago, I shall give some background of my personal experiences as a boarding student at Immanuel College, Adelaide, in the late 1940s, and refer to the influences which I believe helped shape my personal development and my future career.

Our first two South Australian Secondary Colleges were established mainly to nurture country students in the Lutheran faith, by providing instruction for Confirmation and for training Lutheran pastors and teachers. Later, the Colleges provided a wider curriculum and Commercial subjects, like Book-keeping, Typing and Shorthand became popular. For country students to return home and find a job as a clerk or secretary, was a position of status, for both the students and their parents. This was partly the reason for my parents making financial sacrifices in order to send me to College in Adelaide.

As a new student at Immanuel, I found the school was essentially male-dominated. The headmaster was a Lutheran pastor, while the Classics master was an important teacher for the 25 pre-seminary male students. Two other male teachers had begun their teaching careers at Point Pass and had already established a formidable reputation as strict disciplinarians. I recall there also being several young male unmarried teachers; recent Science graduates, who created a good deal of interest among the 45 girl students in my first year. In total there were 121 students, only 8 of whom were day scholars. There existed quite clear stereotypes as far as subject choices were concerned. Girls were usually advised to do Commercial and general Arts-type subjects, while Science and Mathematics classes comprised predominantly boys, who needed these subjects for Tertiary careers: that is, if they did not have a calling to become Pastors.

There were several part-time female teachers on the staff who taught subjects like English, History, German, and Music, and held positions as Girls' Boarding House Mistresses. Until that time, in the late 40s, there had only ever been six full-time women teachers on the staff of Immanuel. They were single-women; University graduates who specialized in the Classics and German.

But what appeared to be regarded as the main female position, which was one of great honour and status as it seemed to us as students, was that of The Matron. She was highly regarded, particularly by Council members and the male staff, because she ran the kitchen and was the House Mother to the 71 boy boarders. Boys' laundry and mending was all done for them - girls, of course, were considered quite capable of doing their own and apparently did not need the same motherly caring.

Recently, I was part of an informal group where a female Old Scholar was recalling attitudes towards girl students when she was a boarder at Immanuel College, Adelaide. She related how blatantly the boys were favoured by being given not only larger but also often the choicest serves

of food - as basic as it was then. For example, she recalled that a pat of butter was cut into four cubes for boys, but the same sized pat was cut into six cubes for girls. Boys had the fresh bread, while girls mostly had the previous day's left-over bread; girls had the rind-end of cheese portions and the overcooked, burnt sausages. When apricot jam, made by some genuinely well-meaning Ladies Guild was sent to the College in large re-cycled kerosine tins which sometimes tainted the jam, who got the worst-affected batches? The girls! These were among the enduring memories of this woman's five years at College in the late 50s.

There was no doubt that the College Council relied on The Matron to keep domestic running costs to a minimum, which she certainly did, and she regularly received special commendation from the College Council Chairman when he gave his end of year report.

When I left school, four other young female teachers (all Old Scholars of Immanuel) had been appointed as part-time teachers while they completed Tertiary studies. They also served as Girls' Boarding House Mistresses. (I recall there being much fun made among the students of this sexist title of 'Mistress'...This term remained, however, until quite recently). Incidentally, it was one of these single female teachers who introduced the subject Physiology (the forerunner of Biology) to the College curriculum during my time as a student.

Several of these young women teachers became important role models for me. They epitomized all of the Christian virtues of the kind, caring and nurturing woman I had been brought up to emulate. They encouraged me academically and provided me with a strong basis for my development in Christian character. It was from these women teachers that I gained an understanding of commitment and a sense of service to Immanuel and the Church. It was also one of these women who wrote several letters to my parents after I had left College and had begun working in a bank, encouraging my parents to allow me to return to Adelaide to become a teacher. Such was this teacher's influence on my parents (my mother, particularly) that I returned to Adelaide to attend Adelaide University and Teachers College. Subsequently, in 1955, I joined the College staff as a full-time teacher, Sportsmistress and Girls' Boarding House Mistress! (I too was now to be a Mistress in two departments!). I believe that I was also among the first ten full-time women teachers to be employed at Immanuel since its inception late last century.

Here I want to explain how I was employed at Immanuel. Teachers then were "called" to service by the College Council. At no stage was I asked to submit a formal application for the teaching position - my standing in my local Lutheran community and my Pastor's knowledge of my teaching abilities and of me as a person were sufficient evidence for the Call to be issued. For me to have the opportunity to teach at my loved Immanuel where I had spent some of my happiest teenage years, among my own people, my extended family, was for me a great honour. And so began my future teaching career at Immanuel.

Councils then were all males comprising Pastors and some laymen elected by Synod from country congregations. In the late 60s the first woman, Dr Margaret Rilett, and the first Immanuel Old Scholar to gain an Arts degree, let alone a Doctorate, was permitted to be nominated and subsequently was elected to the Immanuel College Council. Then in the early 70s, another two women, Helen Schlenk (now Gordon, and well-known both in the national Church and here in Queensland where she lives) and Rhoda Heinrich, were elected to Council. Helen was subsequently asked to consider standing as the first female Chairman! But before accepting nomination she first went to the President of the SA District of the Lutheran Church and asked his opinion, or gained his approval, before her nomination was taken to Synod. She became the first female Chairman of a Lutheran College Council in Australia. She was also the first female on the Board for Lutheran Schools. Helen recalls an occasion when she attended the first national meeting for Chairmen of Councils. A Pastor asked her: "Are we to have a minute secretary today?" Helen replied, "No, I'm one of the Chairmen!" Helen later also chaired the Lutheran Secondary Schools' Council in Queensland for several years. (As an aside, one wonders how many females have chaired educational committees and Councils in Lutheran Schools in

Australia? What is the gender balance of our School Councils today? How many female Secondary school Principals has our Church appointed in the last century? I do not accept that in over one hundred years of Lutheran Secondary schooling in Australia there have not been women of sufficient merit to sit behind the Principal's desk.)

Returning to my early teaching years. My life as a teacher at the College was one of all-consuming commitment. This was the case for both male and female teachers, particularly for those who were also Boarding House supervisors and for a few of us who were also in charge of organization and coaching of sports teams. The rostered boarding house duties required us to be on duty for long hours, starting with early morning study for an hour before breakfast and then after meals, supervising the girl boarders on kitchen duties (clearing the tables, doing the dishes for all of the boarders then re-setting the tables for the next meal. This was seen to be work for our girl students only!). After tea in the evenings the mistress on duty led the evening devotions in the Girls' Boarding House and again supervised all of the study rooms (for up to 100 girl boarders) until 10.30 pm. During the academic school day, I recall teaching a range of subjects, sometimes in 3 or 4 different faculty areas. Then on most afternoons after school, I was involved in girls' sports coaching, and umpiring matches against other girls' schools on Saturday mornings. Though the hours were long and there was very little time for a personal social life, we considered ourselves privileged to be able to serve our Lord and our Church by teaching at the College. Our work on the campus was logically linked with our Christian beliefs and worship; that is, committing ourselves to a life of Christian service.

By the time the school moved to its new campus at Novar Gardens in the late 50s, there were almost as many females on the teaching staff as males. This was partly due to the fact that there was a growing number of women coming from tertiary institutions who were looking for short-term teaching contracts before they married. They were happy to take any teaching positions available, despite the abysmal salaries for women at that time, especially in our Lutheran schools. The inequalities in pay were substantial. I recall that in my first year of teaching at Immanuel I was paid £564. (Of this amount, I was charged £100 for my board in the Boarding House, but £60 was added to my salary for my boarding house supervision duties. I finished up with a salary of £524 per annum). A male equivalent received between £250 to £300 more! In addition, all staff forfeited 10% of their salary to the Church. Interestingly, this had already been the case in 1927 when it was stated in the report to Synod at the time, that a Miss Dorsch, the first full-time academic female teacher on the Immanuel staff, was employed for a year with a salary of £250 and that the "10% Abzug ist da schon eingeschlossen" - which essentially meant it was already deducted from her salary. This was, in effect, a form of compulsory tithing, which continued in our Lutheran schools until the late 70s. Superannuation was seen as a luxury item and was only introduced at Immanuel in the late 70s and at first with minimal input by the School.

One area of discrimination against women teachers affected me personally when in 1960 I married and was required to resign from Immanuel! This was applicable to all women teachers in State and some Independent schools at that time. A woman's career if she married, was to be first and foremost a wife and mother, and most women teachers did not return to their teaching profession until their children were at least of primary school age. When the pill became widely available to women, they were at last able to choose between having a larger family or re-establishing their careers.

After marrying, I decided, however, to continue my teaching at a Girls' School, Methodist Ladies College in Adelaide, having been invited to do so by the Headmistress, who apparently did not see my forthcoming marriage as an impediment to continued employment. Women with secondary teaching experience in the early 60s - in Adelaide, anyway - were still able to find jobs quite readily. And my salary at the girls' school was certainly quite a deal higher than what I had been receiving previously!

A number of personal reasons drew me back to Immanuel in 1966. By then, I had the sense of being respected as an experienced and competent teacher and I was also appointed as a "Senior

Mistress", which essentially meant that I was to be in charge of the girls. Then in 1973, the College Council established definitely the positions of Deputy Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress with equal status. These, with the Headmaster and Senior Chaplain, were to form the Staff Executive. This was a major milestone reached for the professional recognition and status of women in a Lutheran College, for it meant that I was now appointed as Deputy Head Mistress and I retained this position for the next 20 years during which time I was also Acting Head on a number of occasions, including one period for 12 months.

I must say here, that in my experience I never really felt undervalued as a woman teacher, by my male teaching colleagues. But I am well aware that there are women in our Lutheran schools who have not had the same generally positive experience. Many women, returning to teaching after bringing up a family, do feel discriminated against simply because they are also wives and mothers and possibly still also bearing the brunt of home duties and needing to be highly organized and efficient. I believe that such women are still perceived by some men as not being able to cope adequately by taking on senior positions. From my knowledge of female teachers, I think that such perceptions are grossly inaccurate; many women, by their very nature, simply work harder and longer hours, to fit everything into their day. Although women teachers have increasingly occupied various senior positions in our schools in more recent years. perhaps both women and school councils need further encouragement if we are ever to see a substantial shift towards gender balance among our Secondary Principals.

As our Lutheran schools become still more highly structured and managed I see it as important to have gender balance among staff. Women are generally very good team builders (of both males and females) and seemingly have an almost innate ability to work collaboratively and share responsibilities, recognizing the particular gifts and strengths of those in their team. I have found most women to be genuinely affirming towards others. They are generally very effective communicators, willing to share ideas, different approaches to learning, teaching and their student concerns, perhaps more freely than many men do. Dare I say it, that by their very nature, women especially are the sensitive carers and nurturers in our schools, not just with their students, but also among their teaching colleagues.

Changes in the role and status of women in Lutheran Schools in more recent years have seen a higher percentage of women undertaking advanced tertiary studies to further their professional competence and to give credibility to their own future career opportunities. This will certainly allow more women to compete on equal ground for senior administrative positions in our schools in the years to come. The opportunities for the advancement of women in our schools are now limitless, and reflect changes within our Church which have seen all positions, other than that of pastor, available to women, at least theoretically if not always in practice.

None of us needs to be reminded that teaching today has become increasingly concerned with goal setting, outcomes, teacher accountability and student academic achievement. Whether or not that is good or bad or inevitable is another debate for another time. Not only women but all who are a part of the education delivery process are caught up in a process of rapid change. But we especially, as educators in Lutheran schools, must ensure that we do not become so intoxicated with the adrenalin flow from riding atop the waves of change that we become the leaders and motivators and directors of what we are doing instead of Christ. We cannot leave Jesus behind us, trailing the field. At most times during my teaching years if at any point someone had asked, Why are you doing this? I think I could have confidently answered that the main motivation of the school and the Lutheran education system of which I was a part, was Jesus Christ and the Gospel, and importantly it went beyond words to be reflected in the way we as staff interacted with each other and with our students - we tried to live what we believed.

This theme has been taken up recently by the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Dr Harry Goodhew, who wrote this month of "the call to a renewed life where God and his glory are central to our personal aspirations, and where others are cared for as we would care for ourselves." He points out that in the world and the institutions in which we operate love is a frequent victim. But

he emphasises that a Christian community does have an obligation to be different. He says that such a community of people who are "freely loved and graciously forgiven" by Christ, has an obligation to represent the character of Jesus as its "Head and Example", for by this, Jesus said, "people would know that we are his disciples." He emphasises that Christian institutions such as Schools must be built on serving others in love, and he issues a timely reminder for us as educators and messengers of God's Good News when he says: "In the message of the Gospel we carry a divine word with its own power to convict and change... But the messenger is often the medium through which that word is either heard or rejected."

That reinforces my own experience when talking to past students -- their warmest memories are not of the curriculum, nor academic excellence or programs, but the people - those in the school community who showed personal concern and commitment for them, those who gave time to get alongside them and who gave them first-hand experience of how Christian love really works. Ensuring that our present and future students will experience for themselves how Christian love really works is one of the difficult yet exciting challenges facing our Lutheran schools as we leave one century behind and enter another.