

REFLECTIONS ON COMMUNITY

By Ian Marks

Introduction

If one were to conduct a survey of mission statements of Lutheran schools, one word which would often appear is community. A number of our schools speak of a “caring, Christ-centred community”. Other schools include the phrase a “caring, Christian community” while another simply speaks of “a Christian community”. Although other schools do not use the term “community” a special environment which characterises the particular school is often referred to. This paper reports research which explored the culture of Queensland Lutheran schools. One outcome from this research is the identification of a strong sense of community in Lutheran schools. The first stage of the research involved interviewing *key informants*: teachers, parents and administrators at both school and system level within the Queensland Lutheran school system. Analysis of the data revealed six themes threaded through the interview transcripts: Caring, Christ-centred Community; Quality Christian Education; Worship as Celebration; Worship as Life in Vocation; Christian Relationships and Interactions and Christian Leadership. These themes are summarised in Table 1.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY COMMUNITY IN A LUTHERAN SCHOOL?

This paper discusses community within Lutheran schools based largely on the first of the cultural dimensions identified: Caring, Christ-centred Community. The Christo-centric nature of the schools is that common bond of Queensland Lutheran schools irregardless of how divergent other aspects of the individual schools may be. One administrator identified this central feature.

I think the big thing is that we have an absolute infinite variety of school communities. None of them are perfect. Each has its basic flaws. Some of them are educational flaws, ... What we do see in all of them ... is a genuine attempt by the people there to put Christ in the centre and then work through the issues that arise out of that.

Derived from the Christ-centred nature of the school is the nature of community and the caring which is apparent within this community. This is clearly described by an administrator who highlights the sense of community and its derivation from Christian beliefs.

What I hear where ever I go is this sense of community and that students are cared for as individuals. ... When you ask a parent why they want to enrol, what was it that attracted them, they will talk about the care that her students have got, that's what parents would say to me. The thing that characterises the school is this incredible care. ... For me it comes

back to the Gospel. That if Christ cared for me so much that he'd die for me. That's the inspiration for us to show care and love beyond that which is expected.

The dimension of *Caring, Christ-centred community* has four characteristics discussed below.

Table 1

The Cultural Dimensions of Queensland Lutheran Schools

<p>Caring, Christ-centred Community</p> <p><i>Forgiveness Acceptance</i></p> <p><i>Growing as Individuals</i></p> <p><i>Family Orientation</i></p> <p><i>Pastoral Care</i></p>	<p>Quality Christian Education</p> <p><i>Informed by the Gospel</i></p> <p><i>Striving for Excellence</i></p> <p><i>Holistic Education</i></p> <p><i>Learning for Life</i></p>
<p>Worship as Celebration</p> <p><i>Celebrating Christ</i></p> <p><i>Celebrating Community</i></p> <p><i>Celebrating Life</i></p>	<p>Worship as Life in Vocation</p> <p><i>Called by God into Vocation</i></p> <p><i>Service to God in Vocation</i></p>
<p>Christian Relationships & Interactions</p> <p><i>Flawed by Sin</i></p> <p><i>Informed by Christ</i></p> <p><i>Forgiveness Support</i></p>	<p>Christian Leadership & Management</p> <p><i>Open Collaborative Leadership</i></p> <p><i>Stewardship Management</i></p>

Forgiveness acceptance

The Christ centred nature of the community takes its focus from the gospel of Jesus Christ. The interview data suggests it is this gospel orientation of Lutheran schools which should be expressed as an attitude of acceptance of all people on the basis that all have been forgiven by God. Further as God has forgiven, so His people should forgive others. The overwhelming attitude expressed by the interviewees was one where individuals be accepted for the people that they are, and further that an attitude of forgiveness be extended to them no matter what may have transpired. This attitude was described by one interviewee when describing the characteristics of Queensland Lutheran schools.

A [Lutheran] school [is one] that sees the forgiveness of Jesus Christ as fundamental to our relationship with God and with each other. A school which attempts to invite students to a relationship with God. That side of it. And also a school which tries to nurture that relationship. I like the word nurture, to help that relationship to develop and grow. ... An attempt to have the area of forgiveness acceptance come through in a very real way in what the program is on about, reflecting the gospel in that sense.

For Christians outside of the Lutheran tradition this understanding of the Gospel can be difficult to understand but once understood is perceived as an important aspect of the school's life. One teacher recounts their experience in regard to this doctrine.

I'd have to say this idea of Law and Gospel and this idea of forgiveness, especially in the early days was something that I found quite different and often hard to get a handle on. You would think that some of these kids were repeat offenders ... and you think why on earth don't you kick them out? They've done this enough, but it comes down to the relationship between the head and this person when they are discussing the situation, and why the situation keeps happening again, and whether the student involved is really trying to reform but keeps sliding back etc. And that all has its roots in the Gospel and that sort of thing and that's a hard concept.

Growing as individuals

The characteristic of forgiveness acceptance describes a forgiving attitude to be extended to each person. Associated with this is the belief that each individual is to be valued as a unique creation of God. As one teacher said:

Each child is a precious gift from God and that colours everything, everything that I do, everything I teach, every way I treat that child, the way I speak to the child's parents.

This understanding accords each individual their own value as a uniquely created and forgiven child of God. However at the same time the individual is limited by their own humanity, and the need to be recognised as a person who is not perfect and who will continue to be unable to live a perfect life. Within Lutheran doctrine this is referred to under the concept of saint and sinner. This was perceived by one participant as an important recognition in Queensland Lutheran schools.

Fundamental belief in the value of each individual in that community, ... I would say a fundamental belief in the sinfulness of humankind and what that means as we work that through and theologically then the concept of saint and sinner. So that means taking the individual seriously as a total person.

Having accepted people as individuals who are simultaneously saint and sinner, there is also the recognition that change and growth can and should occur within each individual. This growth can occur within all spheres of life, especially under the power of God, so that each individual can grow to maturity. This important aspect of this cultural dimension was identified by one participant.

I would believe that people can change, ... that there is an opportunity for them to grow and I also believe very strongly in the power of the Word, Christ, and the power of words to effect change.

Family orientation

The individual exists within the school which is at times referred to as the school family. The data suggest two aspects relating to a family orientation. Firstly in Queensland Lutheran schools both the students and their parents are part of the community, and the school is in partnerships with the parents, in fact the whole family. Thus the school is oriented toward relating to the families of its students. Secondly, the nature of the school community itself is that of a family.

Queensland Lutheran schools accept a wide range of students from a broad spectrum of Christian denominations as well as students from non-Christian families. Thus the acceptance accorded to the individual as described above is also shown to these families, while still providing education under the principles of Queensland Lutheran schools. One administrator described the importance of communicating clearly with parents about what Lutheran schools offer.

It's my view that in terms of parents we are different from so many other schools. ... we take in a whole range of parents. ... I think we have to tell parents that you will come here for a variety of reasons and we accept that and you see the education that we offer and you want that for your child but please understand these are the experiences they will have.

This partnership is seen as being important in terms of the education which the schools wish to offer support to these families. Relating closely with families was the aim of one administrator.

I would hope that somehow we really can develop what is definitely there in some schools which is the concept of partnership. ... I feel that we really do need to attempt to relate to the families as much as possible particularly given the sorts of developments which are happening within society and at the moment I think the school may have a very supportive function that it can play.

It is hypothesised that the nature of the Christ-centred, caring community leads to a sense of the school itself being akin to a family. All people who come into the school are in effect becoming members of that family. A parent remembers her initial impressions of a Lutheran school.

We walked into this one and we weren't going any further. It had an air, a difference, an atmosphere. ... We walked in and 'Welcome, come and join the family, the family atmosphere, come and join our family.' That was the difference.

From the parents interviewed, it was apparent that they desired open communication with the school and that they recognised the importance of a closeness between school and home and the relationships which exist. One parent related the special relationship desired between home and school.

I think as parents we trust our teachers. We've put a lot of trust in our teachers and I think that situation there, you do expect the teacher to ask you to come in to have a talk or relay something to you if a child is having difficulties or their behaviour is not right before it becomes a major problem. If you are going to keep your school and your church and your family as one that's all got to operate together.

Pastoral Care

Pastoral care is evident in many schools. In Queensland Lutheran schools pastoral care is an aspect of school life which has a special meaning. The family orientation leads to a special relationship between teacher and student. At the base of this is the special care which is motivated by the Gospel of Christ for each individual. An administrator explained that pastoral care is not so much a program but an attitude.

Care and concern for other people, what we often refer to as pastoral care is critical. ... And I think that's something that's characteristic of Lutheran schools. That pastoral care is not a responsibility, again this is the ideal, but is a natural out-flowing of the Christian's love in response to God's love for us. It's a part of our service and as a consequence while we channel it specifically to the students we teach, and if you happen to be in a particular pastoral care structure you will channel it specifically to the particular group of students for whom you have responsibility, it will inevitably flow over to other people.

Being a part of the school family has implications for the care which is shown to students and their families. An administrator described the attitude of one pastor.

He [a pastor] regards all non Lutheran parents at his school who do not have a spiritual home of their own as under his spiritual care. If they go to the Uniting Church or Anglican church, that's their home. If they do not have a spiritual home he would regard them as under his spiritual care. That means he has to get to know them. It means he would probably want to intentionally make contact with them once a year. It would probably mean that because he's around and is known to them he's in a position to respond to their needs, whether it's family, emotional, personal, what have you. ... It's about supporting communities, building up communities, making links with the church community, that people can just walk across so comfortably, it's increasing that comfort zone.

The six dimensions of culture and their associated descriptors (see Table 1) were operationalised through a survey questionnaire which was administered to teachers, senior staff, board members and P&F executive members in primary, secondary and P-12 Lutheran schools in Queensland. The data collected were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The results from this analysis form the basis of the ensuing discussion.

Results for the whole sample who responded to the questionnaire are presented graphically in Figure 1. Scale scores for Caring, Christian Community (Mean = 21.79, Standard Deviation = 0.97) indicate strong support for this scale. On the five point Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, not sure, agree, strongly agree) this scale score is above the agree response. The small standard deviation indicate little divergence from the mean and thus strong agreement of this scale throughout Queensland Lutheran schools.

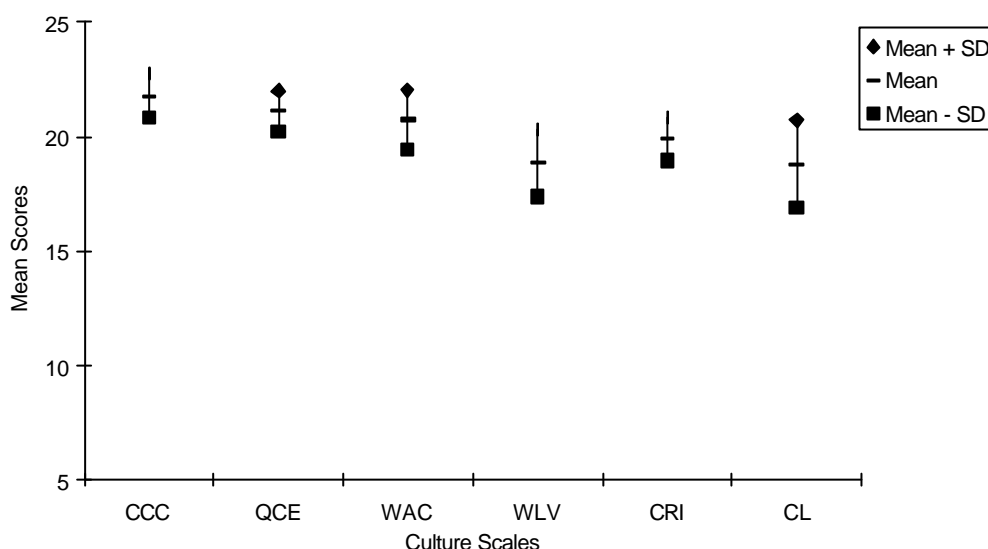


Figure 1 Mean scores and Standard Deviations for the six scales of the Lutheran Schools Culture Inventory

CCC- Caring, Christ-centred Community; QCE - Quality Christian Education; WAC - Worship as Celebration;

WLV - Worship as Life in Vocation; CRI - Christian Relationships and Interactions; CL - Christian Leadership

HOW DOES THIS SENSE OF COMMUNITY VARY WITHIN QUEENSLAND LUTHERAN SCHOOLS?

A number of independent variables were investigated to determine their effect upon the sense of community in Queensland Lutheran schools. These variables included school type (primary, secondary and P-12), school size, denominational background of teachers, proportion of Lutheran students, position of respondents and theological professional development of teachers. This paper briefly discusses the first two of these variables.

School Type

Analysis of the data indicated two main findings in relation to the variable school type. First, perceptions of community are higher in Lutheran primary schools, than secondary and P-12 schools. Second, in P-12 schools, the primary and secondary sections report results

corresponding to the primary and secondary school results. Thus, this discussion can focus on the differences in perceptions of community, and implications of the different perceptions between primary and secondary schools.

Results of this study of Queensland Lutheran schools are consistent with research conducted in Canadian Catholic schools (Ahola-Sidaway, 1988). This research brought to the fore the concept of community and relative differences in relationships in the primary and secondary Catholic schools studied. The sociological concepts *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* (Tonnie, 1955; Sergiovanni, 1994) were used to analyse the differences in community evident. These two concepts are defined:

gesellschaft - an association of people that is based primarily on the members' rational pursuit of their own self-interests.

gemeinschaft - an association of people that is based primarily on shared purposes, personal loyalties, and common sentiments (Conway (1994) cited in Johnson (1990)p. 3).

The research suggested that primary schools display *gemeinschaft* characteristics in that interpersonal relationships within the primary school between students and staff are more intimate and maintain a sense of balance. By contrast, secondary schools tend to display *gesellschaft* characteristics where experiences are transient and interpersonal relationships are often impersonal and lack balance (Ahola-Sidaway, 1988). These conclusions are consistent with results for this study which display higher perceptions of a sense of community and the nature of relationships in primary schools than secondary schools.

Other research also reports differences between primary and secondary teachers' perceptions of school life (Lieberman and Miller, 1992). While issues for primary teachers included the balance between the personal (being familiar, liking, caring, sharing warmth) and the professional, and, grouping for differences while maintaining community, secondary teachers revealed a more formal and bureaucratic organisation. Furthermore secondary teachers related primarily to one or two subjects and teachers within their own faculties.

School Size

School size is an issue which affects all schools. Many factors impinge on this issue such as: finance and marketing the school, breadth of curriculum opportunities, educational achievement, and pastoral care impacting on the community of the school. Within Queensland Lutheran schools, the last twenty years has seen a pattern of growth as primary schools have increased from one stream (200 students) to double stream (400 students) often with a pre-school attached. There has

also been the development of P-12 schools with the associated increase in the total size of the school.

Results from this study are consistent with the literature and research on school size that generally an increase in school size leads to a lowering in effects for students and teachers (Conway, 1994; Oxley, 1994; Raywid, 1996; Rivera, 1994; Yatvin, 1994; Yeager et. al., 1985). Much research on school size has investigated the relationship between student outcomes or achievements and size of school. It is evident that a positive relationship exists between school culture and student achievement (Purkey & Smith, 1985; Beare, Caldwell & Millikan, 1989; Bamonte, 1992). While little research on school size has also investigated the culture of schools, it is hypothesised that a correlation exists between student outcomes and achievements and community. Thus studies which report positive student achievement effects are assumed to correlate to a positive view of community.

Extensive studies of school size effects (Fowler and Walberg, 1991; Fowler, 1992) in United States high schools reported that increased school size has negative outcomes on student outcomes and an adverse effect on school climate. Small schools were found to be friendlier, "capable of involving staff and student psychologically in their educational purpose" (Fowler and Walberg, 1991, p. 200). Also suggested was that *manning* (Fowler, 1992), or *undermanned settings* (Sergiovanni, 1996) (when few students are available for many activities and marginal students are able to participate), enhanced concern for persons and the community of the school. Interestingly, it was contended that small schools offer curricula as comprehensive as large schools (Fowler and Walberg, 1991).

The results of this study are also consistent with research in US Catholic schools (Bryk, 1996; Bryk, Lee and Holland, 1993) which concluded that small school size provides a significant advantage in facilitating greater sense of community through personalism and social intimacy. By contrast larger schools develop more formal methods of communication and greater specialisation. This impacts upon the community of staff as well as students and parents. Other research (Royal, DeAngelis & Rossi, 1996; Royal and Rossi, 1997) reported that teachers in small school had higher perceptions of the sense of community in their schools. Specific areas reported are Goals, Beliefs, and Expectations; Governance Procedures; and Collegiality and Cooperation.

The effects of leadership are important to the development of community within schools. Smaller schools display more *gemeinschaft* characteristics and as a school grows in size this changes to a more *gesellschaft* orientation (Sergiovanni, 1993, 1996; Royal & Rossi, 1996, 1997). Sergiovanni (1993) contends that leadership to build community be based upon two sources of authority embedded in shared ideas: moral authority which emerges from the joint responsibility of

community, and professional authority in the form of a “commitment to virtuous practice” (p. 18). A correlation also exists between the leadership of the principal and a school’s religiosity (Bamonte, 1984). A further conclusion, consistent with the results of this study, is that small schools have a higher level of religious atmosphere than large schools.

The results for the variable school size have important implications for Queensland Lutheran schools. Literature (Swanson, 1991, Fowler, 1992, Howley, 1996, Imsher, 1997) presents a range of views of the optimal size of a school from 300 to 400 up to 900 for a high school (Lee & Smith, 1996). Howley (1996) suggests that the optimum size of a school varies from place to place, with the main factor for consideration being socioeconomic status. Small schools provide achievement advantage for lower socioeconomic status while higher enrolments assist more affluent students (Howley, 1996).

An important consideration from this research is that schools; primary, secondary and P-12 seek to optimise the sense of community within their respective schools. While many factors impinge on this, a number of suggestions arise from the results of this research. It is acknowledged that the different organisation of primary and secondary schools impacts on the sense of community within the school. Given this, it is important that both primary and secondary schools seek to optimise the sense of community within the school amongst students, staff and families. The author contends that this is achieved through strong leadership developing a vision of the school as a Christian community, through a focus on Christ as the basis of all relationships. An emphasis on pastoral care and a relevant and dynamic worship program are essential elements in strengthening the sense of community. The *gemeinschaft/gesellschaft* dichotomy is a useful analytical tool to assess the impact on community of new developments.

The relationship of Lutheran primary schools to secondary schools also requires further investigation. One popular model for development has been the large Pre-school to Year 12 school on one campus. While this model presents a number of advantages for continuity of place as well as economies of scale, the negative effects of large size need to be considered. An alternative model, for instance a secondary school surrounded by a number of primary schools, may present important benefits for maintenance of community in Lutheran schools.

It is clear from the results of this research that an increase in the size of school has a negative impact on the sense of community within the school. One method of overcoming the effects of a large school is to form sub-schools within the overall school organisation (Raywid, 1996: Meier, 1995: Sergiovanni, 1993). Sub-schools need to exhibit two characteristics (Raywid, 1996): each sub-school requires definitive separateness in terms of facilities, instructional style, organisational

arrangements and school climate. It is important that each sub-school be delegated the autonomy necessary to achieve this distinctiveness: identification of goals and priorities, deployment of staff and other resources, the organisation and presentation of the curriculum, assessment and reporting methods and student expectations. Second, sub-schools need to exhibit distinctiveness which become cultural features to which students and parents can identify and be affiliated. Whatever the size of a school or sub-school, it is important for administrators to *think small* (Sergiovanni, 1994).

Summary

Research suggests that Lutheran schools have a distinctive sense of community which is derived from the Christ-centred nature of the schools and expressed through a focus on the individual student, involvement of families and the pastoral care exhibited by the schools. This sense of community is influenced by the type of school (i.e. primary, secondary or P-12) and the size of the school. The sociological concepts *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* provide a framework for analysis for these differences as well as for future developments. It is important that all involved with Lutheran schools seek to optimise the distinctive sense of community apparent in these schools.

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