

THE LUTHERAN SCHOOLS OF VICTORIA : NURSERIES OF THE CHURCH
(Presented by Dr Charles Meyer)

Introduction

During the second half of the nineteenth century Lutheran church congregations established around thirty primary schools in Victoria, mostly in the North West of the state known as the Wimmera-Mallee Region. Without exception, the purpose of those congregations was clear: despite the growing opportunities for children even in country areas to receive free education as provided by the state, Lutheran parents had a deeper and wider education in mind for them which seemed all but excluded by the state's insistence on secular education within school hours in state-funded schools. After the passing of the Victorian Education Act of 1872, all state financial aid was stopped to schools refusing to vest their buildings and land with the Education Board. Almost alone amongst the denominations the Catholic and Lutheran Churches refused to accept what amounted to money for conscience; congregations had a hard time of it over the next forty years, compounded by the experiences of the First World War.

The question arises as to why Lutheran congregations were prepared to shoulder the heavy financial and administrative burdens of their school system. Why not take the state grants and do as most other Protestant denominations had done, namely accept the money and seek solace in alternative religious opportunities such as the Sunday School system and the beguiling state offer at various times of a non-sectarian religious teaching within the congregational schools?

This paper describes the reasons why Lutherans in Victoria hung onto the education of their children at all costs and in so doing illustrating the very reasons why today, and tomorrow, similar outlooks continue to be vital to assure a growing education system within the now united Lutheran Church in Australia. Of course much of what is said parallels developments in the other states. I will trace developments up to the end of World War One, but with brief concluding comments that bring the scope close to the present time.

The early decades of Lutheran settlements in South Australia, Victoria and Queensland are fairly well known – the *Altlutheran* “prisoners of conscience” and their decision to emigrate to South Australia in the late 1830s¹; a substantial trickle to Victoria a decade later and, thanks to the efforts of Consul Heussler, several thousand German Lutherans to Queensland during the 1860s.² Common to all is that the Lutherans arrived at the time

¹ Not only to Australia but to other lands like America, Canada and South America.; around 55 000 German Lutherans emigrated to Australia between 1847 and 1912. W.Mönckmeier, *Die deutsche Auswanderung*, Jena, Fischer Verlag, 1912 has details of emigration; C.Meyer, *A History of Germans in Australia*, Monash University, 1990, Chapter One.

² Heussler was contracted by the new Queensland Government to bring out German rural workers. Between 1862 and 1872 some 11 000 Germans arrived in Queensland. For settlement patterns and details see E.Mühling, *Führer durch Queensland*, Brisbane, 1898; Meyer op cit, pp65 ff.

when the various states and colonies were being opened up and the Germans too can be recognised as significant contributors to establishment of urban and rural communities.

In Victoria two developments were significant. The first was the development of a separate Victorian Lutheran Synod (ELSVic) as a result of a doctrinal dispute between Victorian Lutherans and those of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod based in South Australia; Pastor Matthias Goethe became the leader of the ESLVic Synod.³ The second was the establishment from the early 1850s of state-controlled *National Schools* in urban and rural areas in response to gold-inspired population increases the result was a dual system of education and the seeds of future conflict.

The new Victorian Synod adopted its own education policies and we can see it in the 1856 *Synod Report*: it contains much that underlines Lutheran educational philosophy to the present day.⁴ ESLVic congregations set up several schools during the 1850s and 1860s in and around Melbourne but for various reasons these declined and had disappeared by the time the 1872 Victorian Education Act severed all connection, financial and otherwise, with the non-state schools.⁵ After 1872 Lutheran education was chiefly carried on in those areas of significant Lutheran settlement in the Mallee and Wimmera, areas in which German Lutherans originally from South Australia settled in response to generous Land Acts from the early 1870s.⁶ Faced with no aid, the congregational schools had a hard time of it, yet they continued, even prospered moderately, with non-Lutheran children finding it comfortable to attend.

Let us now follow in a little more detail the life and operations of these Lutheran congregational schools in country Victoria. We need to understand just why they accepted financial hardship and some degree of antagonism from the population at large, particularly during the War years.

Lutheran and State School Systems Compared

In the very early years, when Government funding was available for churches and schools, some Melbourne Lutheran buildings were constructed of bluestone and brick. But after 1862, when non-vested schools lost most of their funding, schools were generally more modest, usually of wood, with roofs of thatch or tin, and one-roomed. In several instances teachers lived in a small section of the school curtained off at one end. All Lutheran schools taught entirely in German, mostly because the first teachers were of German birth, teaching children whose parents were German-born. Inspectors' Reports (the denominational Schools Board had the right to inspect all funded schools each year) regularly contained complaints about this. In one school at Berwick, on the outskirts of Melbourne, parents both German and English (for this being the only school in the

³ For theological details and background see A.Brauer, *Under the Southern Cross*, Lutheran Pub.House, Adelaide, 1956; T.Hebart/E.Stolz (Eng.version), *The V.E.L.C.A. in Australia*, Adelaide, 1938

⁴ Synod Proceedings (ELCVic) 1856. Much of the general structure was in turn based upon the revised *Prussian Education Regulations* of 1854. The ELCVic Regulations reveal some quite modern concepts in regard to teaching methods and ideas which today we would say reflected an outcomes approach.

⁵ C.Meyer, *Nurseries of the Church. Victoria's Lutheran Schools, then and now*, Monash University, 1996 contains short histories of all schools involved with both Synods.

⁶ See eg. S.Roberts, *History of Australian Land Settlement*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1924.

district, non-German children also attended) parents wrote a most unhappy letter to the Board of Education complaining not only about the poor quality of the teacher but also asking the Board to secure for them a teacher who could teach reasonable English when needed. Lutheran schools were administered by a School Committee entirely or almost entirely of German Lutherans, selected from the congregation, which legally owned the school. Individual congregations therefore had complete control over their church and schools. Thus the connection between Church and School, so essential in Lutheran eyes, was reflected in practical administrative ways as well as in doctrine.

In contrast, Government-established schools came under the responsibility of a single Board of Education, set up in 1862 by the Government. From that year state schools also had elected Committees of management but it was a condition that there be no majority of any denomination. The state owned all state schools and property.

Teachers in the Lutheran schools were “called” by the congregation exactly the same manner as that given to pastors. The first Lutheran pastor in Melbourne, Pastor Matthias Goethe, reflected the same close connection in his *School Regulations of 1856*: “As the pastor is the spiritual shepherd of the adult community, so the teacher is for the children. Both are united in the task of planting God’s kingdom within the community.”⁷ The Lutheran teacher taught the entire curriculum, plus religious instruction and, if required, acted as choir master and organist for the church; he might even be asked to preach the Sunday service if necessary. This the tie between school and church, teacher and pastor was extremely close, reflecting the desired integration of church, school and community as one united Christian whole.

In contrast, state teachers were selected and arbitrarily sent to schools entirely on the basis of academic qualifications, and no enquiry was made regarding religious affiliation. Nor were they required to give religious instruction, though until 1872 the Government had no objection to this so long as the basic secular subjects were taught for a minimum four hours per day and the religious instruction was general and not overly sectarian in nature. Certainly, like the first teachers in Lutheran and other denominational schools, the state school teachers were often ill-equipped for the job, for until near the turn of the century there was no permanent teacher-training institution⁸ and the only check on standards was the infrequent inspections made by overloaded inspectors, as they went from school to school, over thousands of miles, on their horses. There were relations about the qualifications needed but they were not closely observed in the early years.

The curriculum in the two systems differed in some respects and was similar in others. Both systems were expected to teach a basic range of secular subjects: English, mathematics, geography, history, science and perhaps some art, singing and a foreign language for an extra fee. Indeed, the Government made it clear that unless the basic subjects were taught no funding would be given. So, using the same textbooks as the state schools, the Lutherans taught what was needed, and did it quite efficiently. The difference in the curriculum was in the area of religious instruction.

⁷ Article XXIX, p.38, *School Regulations* (‘Schulordnung’) 1856 (part of the ELSVic Synod reports of that year). It should be said that although from 1862 all teachers in state-funded schools were to have Board-approved qualifications, in practice this seems not to have been thoroughly policed in the non-state schools.

⁸ In the late 1850s ‘Model Schools’ were established to provide secondary education for would-be teachers: this was done by both National and Denominational School Boards. But these remained small and non-compulsory. See Sweetman E. et al, *A History of State Education in Victoria*, Education Department, Melbourne, 1922, p.59.

In the debates between church and state from the 1860s on, different concepts were being used. The churches saw education from a perspective that included as essential a religious fundament based upon that denomination's beliefs. The Royal Commission of 1867, dominated by the Chairman, George Higinbotham, a leading political figure of the time who was convinced that the dual system was wasteful and divisive, saw the very concept of denominational or sectarian teaching as a major block to a fair, well-distributed school system for all children. It is important to distinguish – as the leaders of the time did – between *sectarian* teaching and general *Christian* teaching. For at no stage did the pro-state system representatives demand that the state schools not be based upon Christian teachings and ethics.⁹ Replying to a comment in the Victorian Parliament in 1867 Higinbotham expressed a widely-held view as to the sort of moral base important in the state schools:

Because the State has abandoned the patronage of any one of the sects, it (has) therefore been supposed to have renounced religion altogether...Those who advocate a purely secular system appear to me...to separate from education that which cannot be separated from it...I do not think...that you can communicate even secular knowledge without imparting to it either a religious or an irreligious tone...if you attempt to separate two things which cannot be separated, and endeavour...to exclude a religious tone from your secular institution, I say you maim education of a portion of its chief value.¹⁰

So to be fair, for most of the nineteenth century few individuals claimed education should be entirely secular: what was continually recommended was a general Christian as opposed to a narrow, specifically denominational form of religious education in the schools. Outside of the mandatory four hours of secular instruction all Education Acts provided for religious instruction before or after school, according to whether it was wished for by the school community. If anything, much of the move towards less state funding for denominational-controlled schools was driven as much by fear of Catholic domination as by anti-religious attitudes. In many respects, Catholics and Lutherans found themselves in unlikely alliance in their attitudes towards the state's education and religious policies: in World War One the parallel was not lost on some commentators.

Such vague and general policies were not acceptable to the Lutherans (or Catholics). In his *School Regulations* of 1856 Pastor Goethe emphasised the primacy of the spiritual content in instruction: “The task of a Christian education is to bring the child to Christ, Who will redeem him from sin and, through the power of His Holy Spirit, will sanctify him and lead him to blessedness.”¹¹ Secular training was useful, but the essential element remained the salvation of the soul of the child. The Lutheran Church published several regular journals in South Australia and Victoria and frequently commented on public matters, giving the official ELSA or ELSVic synod views. The criticism was

⁹ There were a few individuals at the time who advocated a completely secular system, such as the prominent writer and bookseller E.W.Coles, and the writer H.K.Rusden. But the mainly practical difficulties in agreeing upon the content of religious instruction in schools and the intransigence of the denominations were perhaps more important than theories about secularism or rationalism. See e.g. Gregory J.S., *Church and State*, Cassell Australia 1973, pp.132-3.

¹⁰ *Papers Presented to Parliament* (Victoria) 4, 1867, p.1175; see also Gregory (1973) pp.96-97.

¹¹ *School Regulations* 1856, Article 1, p.26.

made that the state schools were Godless, materialistic, even immoral and that it was crucial for Lutheran parents to continue to support establishment of Lutheran schools for the sake of their children's souls. As the South-Australian based *Lutherischer Kirchenbote* thundered after the passing of the 1875 Education Act in South Australia (following closely upon the regulations of Victoria's Education Act 1872): "Such a wide door has (now) been opened that one can only throw oneself upon God's mercy. Whatever (the teacher's } religious stance – as long as he can push in information on the 'three Rs' and as long as he is a good drill master, everything is alright."¹² The Victorian ELSVic *Christenbote* lamented after 1862 that any religious instruction given by teachers in the state schools – for until 1872 it was not forbidden, only restricted to certain times – was doomed to "sink to the level of misshapen moralizing."¹³ As for the 1872 Education Act, the ELSVic expressed concern about the appointment of teachers by qualifications only:

A teacher may well possess the necessary talents to teach secular content, yet be someone to whom conscientious parents would not wish to entrust their children. He may be a ridiculer of religion, a drunkard, immoral in many respects.¹⁴

The allowing of religious instruction by the state at certain times before and after school was simply not enough. In fact, since for the Lutherans, as for the Catholic Church, education was an entity where all teaching, in all areas, was suffused with the Christian ethic and outlook it would only lead to a separation of the two spheres, temporal and spiritual, in the minds of the children. Lutheran journals lamented the growing signs of spiritual and moral decay all around them : crime and violence were increasing and all of this was seen as a result of the state's destruction of religious instruction in the schools. The *Christenbote* saw how "Our time is a time of decline: a growing coldness, weariness against God and holy things has become an undeniable characteristic of our time" – and this as early as 1862.¹⁵

¹² *Kirchenbote*, 2 August 1878.

¹³ *Christenbote*, June 1867.

¹⁴ *Christenbote*, October 1872, p.74.

¹⁵ *Christenbote* September 1862.