

FUTURE OUTREACH THROUGH LUTHERAN SCHOOLS

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Introduction:

We live on a mission field. Lutheran schools are on the mission field. Lutheran schools **are** a mission field.

This reality takes time to take shape in our understanding and in our acting. But it is happening, and in many ways it is happening with some speed.

Coming to terms with this reality is preliminary to dealing with it. It is one thing to acknowledge our being on a mission field, it is another to being missionaries in the field. I think we have some idea about our context, and we are entering in new ways the exciting scene of the action on the mission field.

The topic "Future Outreach through Lutheran Schools" could be reworded in a number of ways. It could be "outreach **in** Lutheran Schools" or "outreach **by** people in Lutheran Schools" or "outreach opportunities **because of** Lutheran Schools".

Presumptions:

I am presuming that outreach includes evangelisation, that people "may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, that through believing they may have life in his name" John 20: 31.

I also presume that transformation is an expectation that we share. It is at the heart of the saving, redeeming and sanctifying acts of God. This is the work of God, the God who "makes things new" II Corinthians 5: 17.

I presume that we recognise the word of God and the sacraments as the means of grace given to the Church through which the Holy Spirit reaches into people's lives.

Story:

There is the story of a hard working farmer who managed to turn an arid piece of land into a fertile area in which there were trees and plants, fruits and flowers. His pastor visited him one day in the spring when the place was blooming. The pastor was impressed and carried on in glowing, almost liturgical terms, giving praise to God for his glorious creation as evidenced before him. The farmer responded 'Pastor, you should have seen this place when God had it all to himself'.

Partners:

In mission we are in partnership with God. Only God can germinate the seed of the Gospel, bringing life out of death. Only God could have decided to permit us to join him in his mission as the ones to sow the seed, water and fertilise the soil.

Whichever way you look at it, God has graciously taken us on board as his sent people through whom his mission is carried out.

You are the body of Christ in the world.

Post Moderns:

The people with whom we are connecting, the people to whom we are sent, are today generally not buying into things because of science or reason. Facts do not equal truth for post modern people. "To Xers it is feelings and relationships that matter, not dispassionate knowledge and logical arguments". (Kevin Ford 1996 p. 113) Or put another way "theological tenets will not convert the post-modern individual. A relationship will. We need to bring people to a relationship with Jesus Christ. Once that relationship is formed they will aggressively seek the truths that arise from that relationship". (Todd Alan Eckbad 1999)

This is no summary of 'post moderns', but a deliberate singling out of a significant characteristic relative to outreach in today's world.

Relationships

Vital for people today are relationships. It might also be claimed that this is especially true for Australians. In a major international research study carried out in the early 80's, inter personal relationships was identified as a key issue in the Australian psyche when assessing quality.

Christian outreach will mean bringing people into a relationship with Jesus Christ. This involves relationships with people who themselves are in a living relationship with Jesus. As we know from our own experience, relationships are more caught, than taught.

Maybe we have always seen it this way, but do we need to find new ways for these relationships to be sparked and spawned? How does this happen in a Lutheran school? Is this possible in the classroom? How does it happen in the worship life of a Lutheran school?

Experience

A key word which comes to my mind in this context is 'experience'. Relationships are experienced. Faith includes 'being grasped by a power that is greater than we are, a power that shapes us and turns us, and transforms us and heals us' (Gottfried Rothermundt, 1998 p.238). That's some experience! The bible abounds in the language of experience and some of us Lutherans need to realise anew that "Christianity has not only a doctrinal, ethical and social, but first and foremost an experiential dimension".(ibid p. 239)

This has to do with the heart. Head, heart and hands are taken over by the gospel. It is no news to speak of the cerebral (head) approach being over emphasized in our circles. It is therefore no surprise that touching the heart is something we are not good

at, in fact something we may be quite afraid of, if not something of which to be theologically suspicious.

This is not to suggest for a second that faith is based on our experience. There is an objectivity to the gospel, there is a God who acts, there is the Christ who comes to us, there is the Holy Spirit who “calls us and enlightens us”.

There is a challenge here for our school missionaries – staff, students, communities – a challenge to provide people with relational experiences connecting to Jesus, and reaching the heart.

It's not just word and sacrament (for some an overworked cliché) but also how you **do** word and sacrament, which needs consideration with imagination. Having the seed is one thing, sowing it (and in the best way) is another.

Of course there is also the question of who does the sowing? In one sense it is no question, this is the ministry of the whole church. “Every Christian is commissioned a missionary through Baptism” - Lutheran Church of Australia statement on mission 1990.

How does this impact the outreach strategy in our schools, eg in the area of worship?

Conversion:

The move “from darkness to light”, the new birth, is a miracle. This is the work of God, but a work which takes on incarnational aspects. We are involved. What are our expectations in this regard? Do we believe in the gospel as “the power of God for salvation”? (Romans 1:16) Are we anticipating new births in our schools? Are we planning ‘maternity wards’? And training the staff to help in ‘deliveries’?

We surely are not sharing the gospel in Lutheran schools expecting God to do nothing through His means of grace? We look for and plan for the impact of the transforming power of the gospel.

Birthing new missions:

It is said that generally ‘giving birth is easier than raising the dead’. This has some relevance in the area of Christian outreach.

It is not new to think of starting a new congregation on a school campus. A new challenge may be to start new congregations (plural) through outreach connected to a Lutheran School (singular).

There are a number of our schools graduating 100 or more students annually. Could there not be among these, some groups gathered which become the nucleus of a new community of faith? Such a move would require quite new thinking in regard to deployment of staff. Such new ‘congregations’ may meet on campus or off campus.

School pastors and non ordained ‘church planters’ may therefore also conduct off campus ministries from time to time. It could mean employing people part-time on

campus whose work with students and families leads them eventually into full-time ministry off campus, and maybe disconnected from the school, but with people who have been reached through the school.

All are aware of the challenge of linking people touched by the gospel in the school context, with congregations outside the school setting. Why not develop communities within the school which continue beyond the school. Sure in this way quite a diversity of communities of faith may be spawned. What a rich field this may become, reflecting the very nature of the trinitarian faith we confess.

It seems to me that through our schools God is putting us in touch with so many people, and 'church planting' becomes a very real possibility. Incorporating them into existing congregations is proving difficult, and in creating new communities we would be multiplying mission possibilities. Generally it is the unchurched who have the unchurched contacts.

Church planting is recognized as one of the preferred mission strategies of our time, and I believe that in our school communities we have God given opportunities for this development.

Conclusion.

In Lutheran schools we have many of the most creative and forward thinking people in ministry in our church. I am impressed and encouraged by the mission heart I find in the leadership of our school movement and I look forward to a variety of outreach ventures being explored and implemented in the new millenium.

References:

Jesus for a New Generation – Kevin Ford Hodder & Stoughton 1996

Todd Alan Eckbad (Internet) July 26th 1999

Rev. Dr. Gottfried Rothermundt

Report: LWF Consultation on Churches in Mission - Nairobi 1998