

Staff New to Lutheran Schools : Indoctrination or Spiritual Formation?

*Dr Vic Pfitzner
Australian Lutheran College
North Adelaide S.A.*

A changed staff scene

My own experience of teachers as a student in Lutheran schools is a far cry from what students experience in such schools today. I am not talking about pedagogical expertise but about church affiliation. During six years of primary schooling at Loxton Day School I encountered only teachers who were long-standing members of the Lutheran church — one was even a seminary student interrupting his studies in order to help out in a time of teacher shortage. I imagine that it would have been unthinkable for the congregations that founded and maintained the school to appoint non-Lutherans.

That experience was repeated during three years secondary education at Immanuel College, Walkerville S.A. I can recall only one member of the teaching staff being non-Lutheran. Perhaps it was not only his poor performance in the class room but also his (non)church status that led to the general judgment of students and other staff members that the teacher in question was totally incompetent.

The staff scene today is quite different. While schools in all states of Australia operate within a system under the aegis of Lutheran Education Australia (LEA), the majority of teachers and administrative staff in Lutheran schools are now not members of the LCA. A relatively high proportion of staff members in pre-secondary schools belong to congregations of the LCA or are nominal members. On the other hand, it has long been the case in the secondary scene that principals are happy if they can hire competent teachers and staff who are professing Christians of any denomination!

A new challenge

It is quite possible that the number of non-Lutheran staff working in the Lutheran school system will increase in the future. My purpose here is *not* to argue whether that is a good or bad thing, nor to propose measures by which the ratio of Lutheran teachers can be increased. That is a legitimate debate for itself. My concern here is to reflect on the need to provide new staff with adequate and appropriate orientation into the nature of service in a Lutheran school, and then to continue to provide ongoing spiritual guidance and support for them once they have entered service in a school. Failure to provide appropriate orientation and support will not only contribute to staff dissatisfaction, it will also hasten the process by which our church schools become Christian schools in a generic sense or P&F private schools.

The question whether a school is Lutheran is not decided on the basis of student or staff statistics but on the basis of church ownership and supervision within a church system. Put simply, a school belongs to the church's system because the church retains responsibility for

staff and students. Such responsibility extends beyond academic and sporting considerations to embrace the spiritual welfare of the total school population. It is reasonable to argue that the distinctiveness of a Lutheran school should not merely be seen in terms of percentages with reference to personnel who make up the staff and student body. What is decisive is the pastoral care that is provided for all staff and students, for that is the church's specific task. To my mind it is quite feasible for a school to remain Lutheran with very few Lutheran staff and students provided that the key personnel (principal, chaplain/school pastor, and counsellors) are committed to providing spiritual guidance and support that is informed by the Lutheran understanding of the gospel and how it works in the school setting.

Doctrinal tests as qualification for service?

In the past, orientation of new staff has involved formal theological learning, with qualifications gained by means of various awards granted by Lutheran Teachers College/Luther Seminary/Australian Lutheran College or by completing a theological orientation program such as the TOPS program. Formal theological qualifications are still in place for those who assume leadership roles in Lutheran schools and who are responsible for teaching religious studies and Christian knowledge. But to require such academic qualifications for all new teachers flies in the face of reality. It is surely unrealistic to think that the backlog of teachers in service who still lack such qualifications will ever be removed, despite the efforts of the Australian Lutheran College to reach such people with its flexible education program!

More importantly, the requirement of formal theological studies for admission to service in a Lutheran school ignores the real differences between new staff who are either Lutheran (committed or uncommitted), Christian, or even non-Christian (especially in secondary schools). Further, it concentrates on admission requirements rather than on continuing pastoral care and support to people in vocation.

Service in a church school should not be conditional upon a formal test which certifies that a candidate understands Lutheran doctrine. Knowledge is not synonymous with faith commitment, and assent is not necessarily consent. In any case, to demand commitment to Lutheran doctrine on the part of new staff in order to gain service in a Lutheran school is inconsistent with the right of staff to remaining active members of another church.

Finally, our present system works on an intellectual or noetic level instead of an experiential level that informs and forms practical spirituality within the context of a specific vocation.

From qualification to ongoing support

The sub-title of this presentation is something of a misnomer, since it suggests that spiritual formation and doctrine have little in common. Any spirituality as the living out of a value system presupposes tenets of faith or 'doctrine'. Christian spirituality is not to be reduced to subjective opinions and preferences. If healthy, it is based on biblical realities. It involves 'doctrine'.

Thus a better way of expressing the choice being set up is to speak of *ongoing, long-term, vocational formation versus completed, short-term indoctrination without vocational application*. What our school system owes new staff is the promise of support in the form of spiritual

guidance so that they are able to grow in their sense of being in a (divine) vocation, not just a job or a career, and are equipped to carry out that vocation with increasing effectiveness and satisfaction. Pursuing that goal would mean being true to Lutheran theology, for practical Christianity, discipleship, sanctification, piety, spirituality — call it what one will — all belong under the heading of vocation. Such a program would not mean the end of doctrinal discovery and application on the part of the staff. It would mean that end of formal indoctrination as an initial requirement for employment

Such spiritual formation for service in a Christian school can be personalised to meet the particular needs of the different people, also non-teaching members of staff.

- For non-Christians it would include help in understanding the culture and ethos of the school and the provision of a safe place in which to relate their own spirituality to that of the school and its Christian staff and, hopefully, to deepen their own spiritual life through exposure to Christian values.
- For non-Lutheran Christians would include an opportunity to grow in understanding the gospel of grace, in walking by faith, for the enrichment of their vocation as teachers.
- for Lutherans it would, hopefully, lead to a deeper understanding of the faith and more disciplined practice of the life of faith, informed by the Lutheran theology of vocation

The local, in-service provision of spiritual care and fostering of vocational formation would have a further important dimension: spiritual growth within community rather than merely personal growth. It is important that enculturation and nurture of new teachers take place within the school as a community whose values can be shared, affirmed and promoted. The formation of faith, Christian character, attitudes and values should not only belong within the school community. The school provides an immediate setting in which such things are tested and applied.

The formation of teachers in vocation should be communal and corporate in another sense. While our specific focus has been on helping new staff fit into a school, the ongoing or continuing nature of vocation formation would mean that orientation is only the first phase of *involvement of all staff* in a program of spiritual growth and vocational support.

In short, vocation formation would seek to apply theological resources and spiritual exercises for specific needs rather than rely on the delivery and acceptance of an initial doctrinal 'package'. It would seek to make 'doctrine' immediately relevant to the vocation of staff, answering such questions as:

- How is my justification by faith in Christ a call to extend justice to all I meet in a school?
- What does the fact that all children are created in the image of God mean for the way I relate to them?
- How can grace be operative in a school that must still have rules?
- How can I be part of a process in the school community in which faith is caught rather than taught?
- How can I best model faith to students and other staff?

Responsibilities and resources

Orientation in what it means to serve in a Lutheran school will be similar for all new members of staff because all schools in the system share common goals and a common ethos supported by

a common theology. *Responsibility* for providing guidelines and resources must rest with LEA and regional offices. Actual *resources* can be gained from people who have experience in leading spiritual and vocational formation workshops and in mentoring. The teaching staff of Australian Lutheran College can be challenged to provide resources. However, resources should be centrally approved and endorsed.

Orientation of new staff to a school will take the *particulars of the school* into account, for example, whether it is a primary or secondary, whether it is supported by a parish or a wider area. Resources for ongoing programs will need to meet the specific needs of *different kinds of people* entering into and continuing in school service, taking into consideration whether they are 'churched' or 'unchurched', mature Christians or novices in the faith. Resources will also need to be adaptable. Orientation on ongoing support will also need to relate to people in their *different positions* within the school community: eg principals, teachers, administrators, and support staff.

On the local level, responsibility for the implementation and maintenance of formation programs for all members of staff must rest with the principal. Onus of staff care, also spiritual care, rests on those responsible for hiring staff in the first place. The chief agent will, of course, be the school pastor.

Programs and processes

The primary experiential setting for spiritual formation is *worship*. Formation programs for staff should not only provide general introductions to the worship life of the school, both communal and in the classroom, but also provide a theological explanation of the relationship between worship (as God's service for us) and faith formation.

The second main setting for formation is *meditation and prayer*. That moments of quiet time will help to reduce the stress level of people who work in a stressful occupation needs no proof. That such disciplines also help people in maintaining a sense of vocation is equally clear, but practical guidance in the exercise of these and other spiritual disciplines is necessary.

Since ongoing formation is to replace mere orientation it would be best to include sessions in the regular time table and calendar of the school as much as possible. A formation and support program within a school might include:

- a one day opening workshop for all staff
- half day programs in the first month or two for all new staff
- occasional late afternoon and evening sessions for all staff
- ongoing mentoring, especially for new teachers
- periodic retreats (avoiding holidays)

Vic Pfitzner
August 2004