

Romans 12:1,2

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

There are times when need to know how to conform.

Look at us here this morning. How have we all managed to be here at the same time, registered, dressed neatly and professionally, so as not to embarrass ourselves or others. Fitting in like this makes it possible to work together. Students in our schools wear uniforms not to just to show pride in the school but to reduce the distinctions that would separate them and make it more difficult to learn. Timetables keep order so no one misses out.

Yes, we need to conform. But does our job done? I don't think any of us would say that. Conformity is only the first step on the way. The destination is transformation.

Conformity submits to the group mind. Transformation thinks for itself.

Conformity creates identity through group acceptance. Transformation gives purpose and meaning that transcends group think.

Conformity is subjective. Transformation steps aside from the mundane to make independent choices based on what matters.

Conformity is pressure applied from the outside. Transformation is change experienced from within. In the language of Lutheran theology it is the difference between Law and Gospel.

"Do not be conformed to this world," St Paul writes to the Romans, *"but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."*

How does this comparison help us set up the theme for this conference, *"Wise up – transforming mind, body, and heart"*?

Martin Luther once said, *"... what I value, I believe to be right."* If we do not know what is right, and what we value, then we should not be in the business of influencing the minds, bodies, and hearts of young human beings.

St Paul puts it into a Christ-centred perspective: *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."*

He writes from the viewpoint of transformation. We are not, primarily, in the business of buildings, facilities, grants, curricula, and systems. They are just tools. Christian educators offer so much more – their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.

Now that's a shock. I don't know what the WHS implications are, and how it looks on a risk register. I do know that some of you already feel you are making sacrifices that are too big, giving too much, and not getting enough back. When we're overworked it's tempting to feel resentful. We want, we need, to succeed. We must not fail, but how are we required to give? That's how conformity makes us feel. Yet transformation, real sacrificial living, goes deeper. It goes down, down, to find vitality we need to live a truly good life.

Take notice that when we can't give of ourselves any more, when can't be totally present to others, including our students, then we are stuck. We are just going through the motions. Survival habits kick in, but that's all. Real life eludes us. St Bernard of Clairvaux, often quoted by Martin Luther, wrote, *"When you begin to cease wanting to become better, you cease to be good."*

When our well runs empty and the dam is dry, we need transformation. We need to be born again, and one who does that is Jesus Christ. Our Christian faith always holds him at the centre. He is not just a model that we try to copy. He is the life we want to live – from the inside to the outside. That is how we are transformed but there's only way for it to happen – it's all or nothing.

St Paul writes, *“present your bodies – everything you are in this world – as a living sacrifice.”* ‘Bodies’ is plural, ‘sacrifice’ is singular. There are many of us but only one Christ. He enervates us all. Collectively he is the living sacrifice that we live out, individually, in our bodies. Little wonder, then, that we make so much of his death and resurrection. That is our pathway. It is the life that we lead.

Usually we think of a sacrifice as something that is dead. It leads us nowhere. The Old Testament shows how unsatisfactory dead sacrifices are. Bulls, goats, and pigeons – maybe that’s not us, but cash, property, and institutions are. They are dead, but Christ is alive. His is the only sacrifice that works for you. The original Greek word here is ‘reasonable’ – your living sacrifice is your reasonable worship. It’s the one God wants – not the dead stuff we usually play around with.

The most important component in a Lutheran school, therefore, is the living people – flesh and blood – who inhabit it: you; your students; their families; fellow teachers; the maintenance person; the receptionist; the IT guy; the delivery person; yes, even the Principal. Real, living, loved, regular transformed human beings...

As a system we stress the importance of being schools at worship. We express this formally through chapel, class, and staff devotions. We have. Sometimes these moments in the timetable make us rejoice. At other times we groan, and occasionally we doze off. But we are relentless. Lutheran schools are communities at worship. But it’s also a trap. If it means mere conformity we will lock that part of the day away – done and dusted, another obligation fulfilled. Another opportunity lost.

Transformation is totally different. It has its own internal logic which doesn’t depend on timetabling. Transformation invites you to be fully present to God and each other as you *“present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”*

Everything you do throughout the day is your spiritual worship. In the classroom, you worship. On yard duty, you are at worship. In the staff room, you are at worship. In a curriculum meeting you are at worship. In parent/teacher interviews, you are at worship. It’s not just a specified activity. It’s who you are – you carry it within you, in your body. Transformation infects everything. It can’t be compartmentalised.

Sounds dangerous? You bet! So wise up – God is transforming your mind, body, and heart. That’s what you are here to explore. You don’t know what adventure it will lead you on. Independence of mind, losing the shackles of conformity, and a transformed heart can have unintended consequences. Are you Lutheran educators ready for that?

Wherever it leads us, we must always know whose transformation it is. It is Christ in us. His transforming presence fills us with new life. He shows us the will of God, what is good, and acceptable, and perfect. He makes sure we are heading in the right direction, transformed people, living and loving to the full.

Have a great conference.

Amen.

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