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(Spiritual) Leadership in challenging times:

Moving on from a flat-earth spirituality.

Never in Australia has there been a more challenging time to be a principal in a Lutheran school. Surely though, it must have been hugely challenging to fulfil the multiple roles expected of a principal in colonial days, so let me qualify my opening statement. We are talking spiritual leadership. Lutheran principals in the 1800s in this regard, had it easy. They led educational communities that were fully supported by the church, typically and almost universally, made up of the children of the German immigrant Lutheran families of the local Lutheran congregation. Lutheran schools of the 1800s were indeed strong religious communities, almost by default.

Fast forward 150 years. It is now very tough being a Lutheran school in the 21st century. As David Tacey wrote more than ten years ago, the Western world generally has turned its back on the institutional church and is walking away from it in droves.¹ The problem is, that we in Lutheran schools are strongly connected to church and of course constituted by church. Like it or not, we are part of the institutional church that seemingly has lost its way in our society.

It is not actually quite so tough being an **independent** school these days, for never have funding levels been so high, while the demand for private education remains generally quite strong. The toughness lies in staying true to who we are and what we are here for as schools of the Lutheran Church. It is therefore the **spiritual leadership** component of being a principal, that more than anything is the real challenge of our times.

Demographers and educational researchers have alerted us to the toughening marketplace for faith-based schools. There is clearly a plummeting demand for places in schools that have as a significant primary focus, the communication of the Christian faith.

I believe that as we move towards 2020, our Lutheran schools in Australia are plunging deeper and deeper into a serious identity crisis. This current crop of principals and Lutheran administrators shoulder the huge responsibility of ensuring that our Lutheran schools remain genuinely **authentic**. Some may think that '**authentic**' is just a throwaway, trendy jargon word. I contend otherwise. To be authentic, is to remain strongly committed to leading and operating our Lutheran schools in a manner which remains true to their reason for being. Sure, we can continue to be a viable collection of independent schools that offer high quality, values-based education, but being a Lutheran school is much more than that. In the shadows of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation - **Here we stand** – poised to fight the battle.

Where do we start in exploring this matter further? I'd like to suggest the phrase – **centrality of the Gospel**. We are strongly challenged to take seriously this key over-riding statement in LEA and LCA documents ...**the gospel informs all activities of a Lutheran school.**²

But first a slight digression – that’s if it is possible to digress almost before starting. How and why has the church lost its way in the Western world and certainly in Australian society?

I find it a huge anomaly that apart from religion, we can look at every other discipline and academic pursuit, be it science, medicine, technology, engineering, education, economics, industry, banking, finance, or sport and observe that there has been massive change, growth, development, new directions – call it what you like. Religion generally has not progressed in its thinking or its manifestation in society for 500 years and in many respects since the early church of the New Testament. Ironically Jesus spent much of his ministry largely trying to dismantle religion. The unveiling of the new covenant, the new deal, through his death and resurrection largely failed to change religious practice. Religion clubs (churches), with membership criteria, strict rules and regulations were set up right across the world. If Jesus was to return today for another ministry stint, would He be attacking the church leaders and the religious people just as furiously as He was 2000 years ago?

Unbeknown to most, there has been bubbling away under the surface for the past two or three decades, a proliferation of writers who have somewhat silently put the case for reshaping a spirituality for the 21st century. Unfortunately, main stream Christian churches generally have not responded to these voices and remain captive to the thinking of the 1500s. As for us in the Lutheran Church, the work and writing of Martin Luther remain the authority, held almost on the same level as scripture and totally unchallenged in 500 years. Is it possible that Martin Luther got some things wrong? Perhaps what the world needs now is a spiritual revolution, another reformation, to shape an authentic spirituality for the 21st century.

At the heart of the demise of Christianity is a problematic view of the image of God. Historically this was based around the world being pictured as flat and at the centre of creation, covered by a dome-shape sky, above which is heaven where God lives.³ For many, particularly people on the faith fringes, God is perceived as an old man with a long flowing grey beard, sitting up in some remote celestial control room, looking down on us, in constant judgement and ready to zap us if we step out of line. We perpetuate the notion that God is absent, removed, remote and isolated instead of with us in us and around us as a 24/7 presence. I love the work of people like Rob Bell in *“Breathe”*, where he points out the link between breath and spirit and powerfully suggests that we should think of God’s presence as equivalent to the presence of breath. While we have breath and are still breathing, God is present in us.⁴ It is not helpful when in our Lutheran congregations for example, we open worship with statements like *“... and now we come into God’s presence”*. Meanwhile, our approved worship orders still contain the words *“let us draw near to God our Father”* ... The reality is we cannot draw any closer to God’s presence than we already are. It is rather, a matter of being aware, being mindful of his presence.

Still on image of God, there is a problem with the language that we use in our self-written prayers, where we often use the phrase *“... please be with”* ... This surely reflects a

misunderstanding of the fact that God is already with each one of us, is right here in the mix, in us, with us and around us.

The church generally has not done itself any favours by using language such as we do in the second article of the apostle's creed ... *ascended into heaven ... sits at the right hand of God ... he will come to judge...* which further reinforces the image of a remote, absent and judgemental God.

Aside from this, we are masters at perpetuating elements of Old Testament practice in our worship instead of having a strong focus on and celebrating the fact that we have BEEN forgiven (past tense)!⁵ With a careful reshaping and refinement of the way we think about, talk about and indeed worship our God, we can potentially make him more "marketable" to the digital world.

But enough of the digression! There is no doubt, that principals of Lutheran schools have a major role to play in shaping a spirituality for the 21st century for our context. If we have any integrity at all, we must embrace and give momentum to this task. Our role of spiritual leadership therefore cannot be passive. It needs to be dynamic, up-front and central to the principalship. We need to avoid the trap of thinking it is not worth the effort to strive for a close school-church (congregation) partnership. Working with the "body that birthed us", the church (LCA), is not optional but obligatory.

Paradoxically over the past 150 years, there has been a major about-face. From our Australian beginnings, Lutheran schools grew up under the wings of the mother-hen church and were totally reliant on it. But the young chickens have grown up and flown the coop. The church is struggling with the fully-grown adult, free-range "chooks", that are now vibrant, dynamic and highly autonomous organizations. Just as we cannot desert our ageing parents, we cannot abandon our parent organization the church. The church in fact needs us right now. It needs us to help redefine it and reshape it. There is no doubt that the church of last century is in serious decline. Yet we can be sure that church will survive, since Jesus said it would⁶, but it is unlikely that it will thrive in the form that we have known it in the past. Lutheran schools have a role to play in moving the church from survival to thrival.⁷ It is indeed very heartening to hear Bishop John Henderson publicly declare that "*schools are the church*"⁸, indicating that the door is very much open to shaping the way forward together.

Spiritual leadership as a Lutheran school principal comes back to a matter of integrity. We must work hard to ensure that our Lutheran schools do remain authentic. Failure to take this task seriously, gives us about as much integrity as those people who strive to get their daily smart phone health-data step-count to recommended levels, by strapping their device to their dog and sending the dog off to race around the park!

Inspired by Stephen Covey, I have defined four pillars of highly effective spiritual leadership.⁹ I have already dealt with the fourth pillar that relates to the body that birthed us. The remaining three pillars, all flow out of the basic under-pinning premise that the ***gospel informs all activities of a Lutheran school***. In taking further wisdom from Covey's

seven habits¹⁰, *Be proactive*, *First things first* and *Sharpen the saw*, the first pillar is **Looking after our own backyard**. It is critical that we attend to our own spiritual health. We should never under-estimate the power of the spirit working in us through the Word and sacraments. We need to intentionally set aside time for reflection and for looking after our own spiritual well-being. I can highly recommend the Ignatian Prayer of Examen as an exceptionally useful tool for the spiritual tool box.¹¹

Recently after an absence from the front-line of in-school life, I had the privilege to return to principalship in a Lutheran school. I found it challenging, at times burdensome, but ultimately immensely rewarding to commit to the practice of a weekly gospel reflection using the lectionary passage for the following Sunday. This I believe was an immense help for me, in keeping a focus on the importance of spiritual leadership, by intentionally giving a regular weekly opportunity to highlight examples of the gospel informing daily operations as well as future directions for our school community. As leaders, we need to optimise the possibilities for the spirit to be at work in our community. A regular unleashing of the spirit to our staff through the Word, is highly recommended.

Not quite so straight forward is a commitment to regular celebration of Holy Communion. I found through my Spiritual Development role, that this was a contentious issue in some schools. Nevertheless, I stand firm on this. I believe that we are negligent in our spiritual leadership if we are not facilitating opportunity for the whole of staff to gather together to enjoy the benefits of his holy meal at least once per term. What we need to keep in mind, is the fact that across Australia, many Lutheran school staff do not have a regular worshipping home base outside of school. Remember, we are the church. An essential part of the definition of church is gathering together around Word and sacraments. As we move forward with a reshaping of spirituality for the 21st century, why wouldn't this become even a weekly opportunity in a school community?

If any one of the four pillars are central to the task of spiritual leadership, it is pillar number two, **building community**. Lutheran schools generally over the years have been good at this, but sadly in some contexts ground has been lost. Arguably the single most important dimension of building community and therefore of spiritual leadership, is the task of maintaining (reclaiming) a daily staff gathering across all sectors of staff as a fundamental part of school culture. There can be no excuses here. We need to stand up and be counted. We need to make it happen (or keep it happening). The pressures of Enterprise Bargaining Agreements and the bean-counting of work-load hours has made this difficult in some work places. It is however territory that must be fiercely defended if not reclaimed. Central to the daily gathering should be a time of spiritual reflection, punctuated by people telling their (spiritual) story, by the Word and with prayer. I would also advocate for taking on the challenge with staff groups, of reinstating the lost art of regularly singing together, which provides another powerful and positive way of allowing the spirit to work, through the Word integrated in and around music and lyrics.

The final pillar is an overview, a compilation, of much of what has been covered to date. In summary the willingness to **call the tune on spiritual matters**. There is also an important

corollary to this pillar- being prepared to **call a spiritual tune on all matters** – the gospel informing all activities of a Lutheran school in practice!

As we step back and consider broader leadership challenges, some serious operational and strategic implications arise for us as a result of society turning its back on things sacred. The rapid secularization of our world, has the potential to catch us napping. I want to signal two critical leadership matters for detailed scrutiny. The first is the area of marketing and promotions. If we are to secure inter-generational viability, while remaining authentic Lutheran schools which strive to bring the good news of Jesus to young people and families in our communities, we need to take careful stock of the way that we market ourselves. Religion generally is not a marketable commodity in the 21st century. In small doses, yes, to our vestigial, remnant congregations, but for the bulk of our enrolments, we no longer have people lining up for places in our schools to receive a Christian education. Anecdotally, I believe that the reverse is true. Families have left or steered away from Lutheran schools because our schools have been perceived as being too religious. This is where our integrity and authenticity are challenged to the core. We must not sell out to the world, as tempting as it may be to simply market ourselves as independent schools. This is a great challenge of our (spiritual) leadership in these challenging times.

What then is the answer? Put simply, religion is not marketable, but I believe that spirituality is. Statistics overwhelmingly point to this. The Australian census figures have revealed on one hand, a massive decline in Christian commitment, measured by regular attendance at worship, yet at the same time a spectacular surge in spirituality. Perhaps David Tacey had it right when he suggested that *“Every day people are straying away from church and going back to God...”*¹² Our immediate calling is to shape a spirituality for the 21st century that resonates with young people and families, remains true to our theology, yet breaks free from the constraints of institutional church.¹³ I believe that we can strongly market our schools around our quality of pastoral care, the well-being of the whole person, with an infusion of Christian spirituality that can be cleverly integrated into a highly sought after product.

This leads us to red-flag number two: Worship. Historically, a distinctive of Lutheran schools has been centrality of worship. For today, here lies problem number one. Worship is an activity for believers in response to what God has done for us. Worship does not make sense when our target audience in the main, is made up of young people other than committed Christians. We have a lot of work to do with our approach to connecting young people to Jesus. We cannot continue for example, to use a style of worship that is much the same (albeit slightly schoolized) as what has been used down the road in a local congregation for centuries. If we as Lutheran schools are to remain viable and at the same time retain our authenticity through into the next generation and beyond, we in our school communities must actively engage with the task of shaping church for the 21st century digital world. The topic is too big to address in meaningful practical detail, but perhaps there is no better philosophical starting point than that suggested by Dan Kimball: *“We need to get away from the idea that the fundamental building block of the church is the*

weekend worship service...".¹⁴ Potentially then, our school communities gathering together as God's people on a daily basis are the future building blocks.

To conclude, some thoughts to encourage us in our spiritual leadership. We can learn much about spiritual leadership from good gardeners. It is worth putting the time and effort into improving the soil – the environment in which we aim to grow our staff. Rich soil with all the nutrient requirements, leads to strong, fruitful growth. We must not give up on the unfruitful fig tree. While some pruning of dead wood may be required, we need to help people to blossom where they have been planted.

Finally, the importance of modelling. There is a fabulous little anecdote in the opening chapter of Mark's Gospel where we read from verse 35:

Jesus Prays in a Solitary Place

³⁵ Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. ³⁶ Simon and his companions went to look for him, ³⁷ and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

³⁸ Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."¹⁵

The fascinating thing about this incident, is that Jesus does not say to his disciples – “*hey come on you blokes – you need to spend some time with God – find a quiet place for some prayer time.*” In fact, he does not say a word to them about this. He just gets up and goes off to a solitary place and in so doing powerfully models to his disciples the fundamental importance of spending time with God. What a powerful message and reminder also for us today about the need for us to set aside priority spiritual time in our busy working days.

Yes, these are challenging times, but they are also exciting times. May the spirit be furiously at work within and around us, as we go about the task of being the spiritual leaders of our school communities, of taking up the wonderful opportunity that we have to help reshape and refine what it means to be church in the 21st century.

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REFERENCES and END NOTES

¹ *"The spiritual revolution"*. David Tacey: Harper-Collins; 2003

² *"The Lutheran school as a place of ministry and mission"*. Adopted by LCA General synod; October 2006.

³ *"Teilhard de Chardin – The Divine Milieu explained"*. Louis M. Savary: Paulist Press; 2007

⁴ Section of transcript from the Nooma series of DVDs *'Breathe'* by Rob Bell

⁵ *"Seeking Authentic Spirituality"*. Nev Grieger: Blurb inc 2012

⁶ See Matthew Chapter Ch 16 v 17-18 (The Message)

⁷ I realize that thrival is not a recognized English word. It is a word that I have made up to describe the movement of an organization from a situation where it is struggling for survival, into a state of operation where it is thriving!

⁸ These precise words have been variously used by Bishop John Henderson in addresses to gatherings of Lutheran Educators, regionally and nationally.

⁹ *"Authenticity again"*. Nev Grieger: Blurb inc; 2015

¹⁰ *"The 7 habits of highly effective people"*. Stephen R Covey: Free press; 1989

¹¹ The prayer of exam can be found at www.ignatianspirituality.com

¹² P 30 *"The spiritual revolution"*. David Tacey: Harper-Collins; 2003

¹³ Proposition 6 of *"Seeking authenticity"* postulates that a Lutheran school is a place that models authentic spirituality. The sequel, *"Seeking authentic spirituality"* expands this into eight propositions that shape a spirituality for the 21st century for our Lutheran schools.

¹⁴ *"Emerging worship"*. Dan Kimble: emergentYS Books; 2004

¹⁵ Mark Ch 1: 35-39 (NIV) Used with permission.