

# **The Reuther Oration**

**By**

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## **Big Waves, Tall Grass and Flickering Fires: The Plight of the Modern Lutheran Principal**

*The Lord rules supreme in heaven, greater than the roar of the ocean, more powerful than the waves of the sea. – Psalm 93: 4*

*As for man his days are like grass. – Psalm 103: 15*

*Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire which spread out and touched each person there. – Acts 2:3*

## **Titular Colonicity**

Excuse the long heading for my talk. It is an exercise in titular colonicity, the practice of using a colon in the title of an academic paper. Research has shown that if you use a colon in the title of a university thesis, for instance, you gain a greater chance of having it accepted. Titular colonicity is a signpost for academic excellence.

Besides the potential for impressing you with my erudition, I chose this title because it sums up the major themes I would like to talk to you about. Part of it has to do with the catchphrase adopted for your conference: *Keep the fire burning*. Now there are at least two nuances of meaning suggested by this slogan when applied to your role as school leaders. One has to do with resilience. As school principals you find yourselves in a demanding and stressful job. You need to tend to your own inner sources of comfort and strength. Another connotation of your theme has to do with inspiration. You need to look somewhere for illumination and vision. Maybe the two are related. That is my thinking anyway. There is a connection between what comforts us, and what inspires us. Everyone needs a source of power and light, to sustain them and to show the way.

It reminds me of that African tribe of bushmen you have probably heard about called the Heckawi. They inhabit a landscape covered with long grass taller than they are. As they wonder around they can be heard chanting their ancient tribal mantra: “We’re the Heckawi! We’re the Heckawi!” Contemporary Lutheran principals might echo their words. Lost in the thick undergrowth of a myriad of problems and responsibilities, uncertain in the jungle of changing times with their new fads and fashions, they too join the chorus: “Where the heck are we? Where the heck are we?”

I prefer another image for the plight of the modern Lutheran principal. One can imagine them waking up in the early morning half-light, feeling confused and befuddled as if they had been thrown up by a giant wave on some strange new shore. Lying, soaked and bedraggled, face down on the sand strewn with rough shells and smelly seaweed, you strive to address your situation. You stagger upright and rummage through the bag of belongings washed up with you. Hopefully there will be a box of matches so you can make a fire to warm yourself and shed some light on your surroundings.

## **In the Ebb Tide of the Second Wave**

The wave analogy is very apt. We are approaching 180 years of Lutheran schooling in Australia. That history has comprised two great waves. The pioneer Lutherans in South Australia brought their schooling system with them. They came from Germany where states like Prussia had chosen a program of universal schooling more than half a century before it was adopted in Britain. So when they set up their villages there was not only a church but also a school which was built in the main street. There was always the pastor as well as the teacher. These two men, and mostly they were men, were closely allied. They used the same buildings. They even filled in for one another. Those were the days when a Lutheran principal not only taught full time, often as the only teacher, but also filled a number of roles in the congregation, as a lay reader, organist, choir conductor, minute keeper, Sunday school superintendent and parish picnic organiser. They taught mainly in German, and enrolled only Lutherans, both boys and girls. Fees were minimal, the main costs being met by the congregation.

There were never more than a couple of colleges of higher education and they usually combined both secondary and tertiary, their main enrolments were boys and their staff members were dominated by the clergy. Their chief role was to train pastors and teachers for the church. The schools existed on their own resources with no government assistance. The first wave of Lutheran schooling in Australia came to its peak in the late nineteenth century. When the new state schools arrived, these Lutheran schools died out altogether in the north, and in the south the state schools took their toll as well. But more devastating was the Great War and the persecution of Australian Lutherans because of their German connections which almost wiped out the practice of Lutheran schooling in Australia.

By 1919 this first wave had almost ebbed into oblivion. But not quite. Despite the total demise of Lutheran schooling in Queensland, its decimation by government legislation in South Australia and significant diminution in Victoria and New South Wales there were still just over 400 students scattered over about a dozen schools still afloat. There was slow progress as they paddled through the waters of the Great Depression and World War II and by the end of the 1960s the second great wave of Lutheran schooling had begun to swell on the educational foreshore. In the twenty years after the war four new Lutheran colleges appeared accompanied by a sprinkling of primary schools, some of them in Queensland where there had been no Lutheran schools at all for nearly forty years. There was a demand for better schooling and an increase in the take-up of secondary education after the war, but it was the flow of government funds into the independent sector from the end of the sixties which really gave a huge boost to the growth of Lutheran schools. Firstly as a trickle, and then as a flood, the money tap kept running. The wave it engendered rose to its height in the 1980s when thirty-two new Lutheran schools were established, eleven of them in the one year, 1982, and produced the large system which you preside over today.

But these schools are different from their nineteenth century counterparts in so many ways. The majority of students are not Lutherans, nor are their teachers. Many struggle to boast a critical mass of practicing Christian families. They are much bigger, more sophisticated and complex, serve a broader clientele, and are increasingly responsible to the governmental hands that feed them. In many ways they function as ecumenical communities within the wider church and they are becoming less distinguishable from the other schools around them. With the odd exception their principals are still regular worshippers in Lutheran congregations, but not as involved and less essential than their counterparts in an earlier age.

By the end of the first decade of the new millennium the second wave of Lutheran schooling had lost its momentum. In recent years there have been no new Lutheran schools established at all. And although the numbers are still close to record levels, there are lots of our schools experiencing diminishing enrolment pressures in these tighter economic times. More widely, there are also signs that support for independent schools has reached its zenith.

It is now clear that we have reached the ebb point of the second wave of Lutheran schooling in Australia. What lies ahead? Will we hold our ground? Or do we face a gradual decline? Where the heck are we? Where did we put those matches? We need to warm ourselves around the fire of true identity. We need to illuminate the path ahead.

## Diagnosing Our DNA

Each new generation does its own thing. But it also bears the characteristics of its past, either through genetic transfer or cultural osmosis. Part of understanding our current situation is to diagnose our DNA, examine our inherited legacy, both positive and negative, to sit around the fire which was lit by our ancestors. I would suggest that this inheritance features a number of significant attributes. We Lutherans, by tradition, are Outsiders, Splitters, Regionalists, Dualists, Lovers and Galileans. Let me explain.

For most of our history we Australians Lutherans have been Outsiders. For a long period we never felt part of the mainstream in Australia. We were the German church, with pinches of Baltic and Scandinavian for flavour. From the days of persecution in Prussia, to the separate villages with their own churches and schools in South Australia; from our persistence in the German language for much of our early history, to an emphasis on our confessions which separated us from other churches, and to the closing down of our schools and the internment of our leaders during the two world wars, we Lutherans have felt a bit different. We never had the numbers or the influence of the Catholics with their churches and schools on the most prominent blocks of land, we didn't have the solid, respectable British background of the Anglicans and Presbyterians and Methodists. We were mostly rural and provincial people, South Australians and Queenslanders, with a natural wariness of the big states and big cities and their churches and schools. We treasured our own schools, but we did not expect anyone else to acknowledge or understand this. We assumed that we would be overlooked and misunderstood. We often felt like pilgrims in a strange land.

And we have been Splitters. For 120 years of its history the Lutheran Church in Australia was divided by schism. There is an old saying that if you put two Germans in a room you will get three different opinions. We Lutherans have carried on this Teutonic tradition. The first Lutherans who came to Australia had been persecuted for their beliefs in Prussia. In Australia we kept ourselves quite separate from the other churches in order to preserve and practise our own distinctive beliefs. We also wanted the state to keep its nose out of our business as well. And we kept a close watch on one another to make sure that the purity of our confession and teaching was maintained. In no time at all our early pastors were involved in doctrinal disputes about obscure issues of chiliasm and church governance. Eventually two traditions of Australian Lutheranism emerged, one allied with the conservative Lutheran Missouri Synod in the United States, the other with closer connections to German Lutheranism. Each faction had its own schools and its own seminary for the training of pastors and teachers. Each viewed schools differently, one seeing Christian schools as secular institutions with an added dimension of Christian teaching and worship, the other embracing them as an integral part of the church's ministry. Since the union of these two synods in 1966, there has been an integration of their approaches, but both philosophical strands continue to assert themselves. This double identity makes for a richer tradition, but our thinking about the nature of Lutheran schooling can also be ambiguous or even confused. Sometimes one hand is doing the opposite to the other.

We have been Regionalists. There have always been two major Lutheran areas in Australia, the north and the south, Queensland versus South Australia and its satellite settlements in western Victoria and southern New South Wales. The first southerners with their background of persecution came to Australia with a defensive mindset. They set a pattern of separate villages like Hahndorf and

Lobethal, Bethany and Langmeil, each grouped around a Lutheran church and school. The schools were regarded as the nurseries of the church, integral to its life and ensuring its future. In the north the Lutherans who came to Queensland had not emigrated for religious reasons, rarely formed their own villages and became part of the mainstream population far more quickly. They had far fewer schools. With the advent of state education, the southerners strongly resisted government interference in their schools and continued to maintain their own. In the north the few Lutheran schools soon faded and Lutherans embraced state schooling. After World War II, two Lutheran colleges were established in the north at Brisbane and Toowoomba, and when serious government money became available, a trickle of parish schools began to emerge as well. This trickle soon became a flood. By the end of the twentieth century nearly half of the students attending Lutheran schools were in Queensland. There was growth in the south too, but the greater integration of Lutherans into the community in the north made them more open to non-Lutherans who were attracted to the schools in great numbers. In the south, their stronger Lutheran orientation and more closely knit communities made them slower to embrace others. Lutheran southerners became somewhat suspicious of the growth and orientation of the schools in the north. The major consequence of the northern expansion was that a new model of Lutheran school emerged late last century which, besides the nurture of its own people, was committed to mission outreach through schools into the community. Southern Lutherans eventually embraced this model as well.

We Australian Lutherans are also Dualists. We cherish a strong confessional tradition. Not only have we continued to pass on these theological understandings through our schools, but the theology itself has shaped our educational emphases. Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, for instance, is central to our approach to education. Luther taught that God cares for the world in two ways: through the church which is concerned with humankind's spiritual welfare where God works through his word and the sacraments; there is also the work of the state which is concerned with humankind's temporal welfare where God works through government and family. Both are created by God, and both are essential for our welfare. Our Lutheran schools, therefore, strive for dual excellence. We work to be genuinely Christian in our witness and care, but we also aspire to educational excellence. We want to produce faithful Christians as well as equipped citizens. Some Christian schools, like the recent low fee, faith-based ones, embrace a fervent spiritual life, but have been content with more modest educational outcomes. Other church schools, especially the elitist, expensive ones, produce great educational results but pay little more than lip service to their religious affiliations. We Lutherans, because of our two kingdoms doctrine, have staked out a strong claim in both areas. We fill that special niche.

Lutheran educators make great Lovers. Our church was born out of the Reformation after Luther had rediscovered the gospel, the good news that God is for us and not against us. We know that God is perfect in justice, that all transgressions must be punished, but that God is also perfect love and offers us forgiveness because of the sacrifice of his son Jesus Christ. The unconditional love of God for us is offered without any merit on our part. We know we have to keep a proper distinction between the law and the gospel, and that in the end the gospel prevails over the law. Lutheran schools, therefore, emphasise grace to all. We try to make our schools places of love. Pastoral care systems are a major focus. A warm, family ambience is what we all strive for. We see our students as being precious, to their parents, to God, and to us. We ask not what the student can do for the school, but what the school can do for the student. We look after people in need. We provide supportive working environments for our staff members. We love everybody, even when it hurts.

And we are Galileans. Like our Lord Jesus, those of us who lead Lutheran schools, have been the unrespected home town prophets. There is a declining number of Australians who belong to the official Lutheran Church. Except for a few places, mainly in the south, the local Lutheran population is too small to sustain a Lutheran school. Whenever we opened new schools last century, we usually did not have a home-grown, ready-made, client base. When you take into consideration that the majority of Australian Lutherans do not use their own schools anyway, because of location, finances or personal preference, the second wave growth rate of Lutheran school enrolments in Australia came from outside our denomination. And there is a tendency for other people to appreciate our schools more than our own members. Even some of our church leaders question whether the considerable human and financial resources we use in our schools can be justified. If you ask the delegates at a Lutheran synod whether they are the products or the parents of a Lutheran school, a sea of hands will indicate the affirmative. But the church has always been a little uneasy about its schools. Its leaders look with envy at their financial resources and their facilities. They question why the schools do not produce more converts. They are alarmed that less than twenty percent of our students are Lutheran. And that, in recent years, the number of teachers who are not Lutheran is in the majority also. At the local level pastors and principals have often come to loggerheads. We are like prophets who are seldom praised in our own country.

### **Surveying the Beach**

So, having been thrown up on the beach of the third millennium, and striking a light and looking around we see what we have become. The Lutheran school system in Australia has moved on from the pioneering era of the nineteenth century and the boom years of the twentieth century. We have moved away from our unique beginnings, lost some of our distinctiveness and moved further into the independent school mainstream. When it comes to purposes, there was a phase when we emphasised the nurture of our own, then, towards the end of the twentieth century, our schools also became agencies of outreach into the community. There is some thought that we are now entering a third phase when we see ourselves offering a quality Christian education for all Australians. Less consciously Lutheran, more ecumenical, in the ebb tide of the second great wave of expansion, it is a good time to take stock of ourselves and try to see, guided by the lights of the past, how we might proceed.

Hopefully we can retain an element of our Outsider nature. We do not want this to manifest itself in a cringe mentality where we are apologetic about what we do or feel insignificant about our place in the independent sector. Just the opposite really. Other systems already look at us in envy because of our commitment to co-education, pastoral care systems, our Christian Studies curricula, our outdoor education programs, the centrality of worship and our formation courses for staff members. But there has been a tendency in recent years for us to borrow from elsewhere and to be distracted by the latest fads and fashions. We become imitators and followers rather than independent thinkers and pathfinders. For instance there has been a great shift in the national perception of what constitutes a valuable education. In the middle of last century politicians like Menzies and Whitlam promoted education in Australia as a means of developing its people for a richer life through personal growth and understanding. By the end of the century leaders like Hawke and Howard were more interested in the role of education in developing the economy. We Lutherans have tended to

follow. Of course we want to equip our students for jobs and national benchmarks too, but more importantly we want to prepare them in a much broader way for life. Our Outsider mentality should encourage us to confess that in public places. In the last twenty years another huge distractor from the main game has been technology. It has produced certain benefits. It has consumed a lot of our resources too. It has also disrupted that precious relationship between teacher and student as the sage on the stage has abdicated to the machine and become the guide on the side. Our Outsider mentality should tell us that technology is always a means and never an end, that we focus on people, not gadgets.

In many ways we Lutherans have outgrown our traditional Teutonic tendencies to be Splitters. Thankfully. Although our membership is clearly divided over the issue of women's ordination, there seems to be a widespread reluctance to fragment the church over the issue. And there are no longer the debates of forty and fifty years ago about the nature of the Lutheran school. Some of you will remember the cake analogy. Was a Christian school a secular cake with Christian icing, or was it a different cake altogether? Since church union in 1966 we have chosen the middle ground claiming that Christian schools straddle both realms, the secular and the sacred. Just as the old debate about whether Lutheran schools should be agencies of nurture or outreach was resolved by saying that they can be for both. We serve the church and we serve the state. We serve Christians and we serve unbelievers. This involves considerable hat swapping and consciousness adjustment. And let's face it, we often get confused and our policies and practices can be inconsistent. We can easily do without the Splitter mentality, but we should try to embrace a culture of discussion and debate as we try to define our purposes and practices. We must have a generation of new gurus to write the papers and pose the questions and lead the conversations.

One senses too that the old Regionalist divisions in our school system are no longer in vogue either. The shaking of heads in Adelaide about what was happening in Queensland seems less common. The so-called Queensland model of Lutheran schooling with its practice of enrolling large numbers of non-Lutherans and even non-Christians is now emulated, if in a somewhat muted way, in southern climes. Perhaps the new focus on regionalism is the current debate about the relationship between the three schooling districts and the national headquarters. And in each region the concern about how much control over the schools should be exercised from headquarters in the capital. These matters will be difficult to resolve to everyone's satisfaction. There will always be a tension between the need for the church to guide and manage its schools and the initiative and efficiency of allowing as much local autonomy as possible.

In so many ways our Lutheran schools have emerged from a Dualist tradition: two Lutheran churches with two Lutheran school systems based on two different philosophies. There have been two major regions developing in different ways and employing different approaches to schooling. And there have been two major waves in our history. Internally, this dualism has embraced the concept of the two kingdoms and the Lutheran reputation for being genuinely Christian while pursuing high achievements in education. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that our schools continue to pursue educational excellence. Teaching and learning is an area of major focus in our endeavours to improve the performance of teachers and the outcomes of our students, and this is as it should be. It is in the area of maintaining a genuine Christian flavour in our educational cakes that seems more of a concern. Thoughtful Lutheran practice is giving way to a wave of bland ecumenism and syncretism as we enrol and employ so many people from other traditions. Worship and Christian teaching are



watered down to cater for the lowest common denominator. The latest nonsense abroad is the argument that only the gospel and not the law should be proclaimed to younger children lest they be traumatised by the experience. We talk about spiritual journeys rather than faith experiences. So it goes, when really our schools need to be places where distinctive Lutheran teachings and worship practices are maintained.

Yes, there is no doubt that Lutherans continue to be great Lovers. In our schools we do it in two ways, in our proclamation and in our practice. The Lutheran Church came into existence in order to preserve the Gospel. We talk about it a lot in our schools. Yet, so many of our chapel devotions get diverted into charity campaigns, moralistic admonitions or feel good stories. We make them Lutheran by tacking on to the end an assurance of God's love. We are less adept at preaching the law, particularly in its use as a means of helping people understand their lost condition and rebellion against God. That is where the Gospel gets its punch. It is God's answer to our sense of alienation and brokenness. Of course, having students at all sorts of different places in their religious development makes it difficult. The hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, entrusted to our schools is the Gospel. It has greater potential for the guidance and growth of our students than anything else we do. We need to agonise and sweat over how meaningfully we are delivering it to our students even more than our academic results.

From the very beginning of our history we have claimed that our schools are the nurseries of the church. Yet, at the very time when our schools have burgeoned and prospered our church has wilted and withered. Is it because of the Gallilean syndrome, the church's proclivity for keeping the schools at arm's length? Ideally the church and its schools should live in a symbiotic relationship. The church depends on the schools to nurture its young and train its leaders. The schools look to the church for the nourishment of its theology and an understanding of their purpose. If the Lutheran church fades, so will Lutheran schools. They might survive as independent entities, but could easily lose their Lutheran character. And a rich educational tradition would be lost to the future. It has been suggested that the schools can be the rallying point for a revival of Lutheranism, but no-one seems to understand how to make this happen. Perhaps, among the intelligentsia in Adelaide or the emerging leaders of our schools there is someone already mulling over an answer. Maybe, when the next great wave of Australian Lutheran schooling surges into life, this will be its focus.

### **Keeping the Fire Burning**

There may come a time when schooling as we know it passes away. It could be in the form of a new Dark Age born of a nuclear holocaust. Pray God that he protects us from that. Or it might be that technology will prevail and students of the future will transition completely to learning from machines. Realistically though, most parents will still want to send their progeny to places where they can be supervised and socialised. Thankfully, I would say, schools will remain an important part of the future landscape. And while there are schools, they are ideal settings for the church to teach its beliefs and proclaim the Gospel. It will be a good thing if Lutheran schools continue to operate and prosper.

But one worries about their survival. Last time they fell into decline it was because state schools were cheaper and more convenient, but mostly because Lutheran schools were deemed to be un-

Australian. What are the threats that confront us in the ebb tide of the second wave? Some are alarmed at the prospect of losing enrolments as our society comes to terms with tighter economic times. There are signs too that parents are turning away from the independent sector. Others would point to finances and the decrease in government spending on education at the same time as real costs increase, putting independent schools out of the reach of more and more people. But I side with those who see the greatest threat to our Lutheran schools in terms of a loss of identity. Recent studies show that our principals retain a strong sense of loyalty and commitment to the Lutheran brand, not out of blind allegiance but because they treasure what it stands for. But the majority of our clientele, and indeed some of our teachers, are not as committed to a distinctive Lutheran approach to schooling. Even more threatening is the gradual demise of our Lutheran Church of Australia. If that light flickers out, so will our identity. We will simply merge into the grey fog of the independent sector and share a common fate with them. Our schools will continue to exist, but will no longer have any claim to be Lutheran. Our tribal mantra would change from: Where the heck are we? to Who the heck are we?

If Lutheran schools are to survive in an authentic manifestation, one cannot avoid the conclusion that a huge, historic responsibility lies with their leaders, including, and even especially, principals. To help in this onerous task I have devised ten points of practice, commandments if you like, for you to hold on to as you confront the modern age of Lutheran schooling.

1. *Dare to be different:* Think for yourself. Retain your authenticity.
2. *Apply your theology:* Let God be your guide. Base practice on principle.
3. *Embrace both worlds:* Tune the left and right hand. Welcome tensions. Avoid contradictions.
4. *Love like crazy:* As you have been loved. Until it hurts.
5. *Guard your autonomy:* Take advice. Be free. Big Brother is there to help, not control.
6. *Cherish mother church:* Make the symbiotic connections. Practise mutual service.
7. *Cultivate your colleagues:* Debate and discuss. But don't be a splitter.
8. *Get some gurus:* Nurture your own thinkers. Hone your own thoughts.
9. *Beware of fads:* Test before tasting. Light your own fires.
10. *Strive for salvation:* Salvage the church. Save the world.

Bonus Point: *In order to achieve an aura of erudition, utilise titular coloniality.*

Currently there are eighty-four Lutheran schools in Australia which enrol over forty thousand students and employ over three thousand staff. We operate fifty-six early childhood centres as well. Cast up on the beach by a great wave, this is what we see about us. What we do not see but carry in our hearts are the tribal memories and the values and beliefs which have been at the core of our educational endeavours. As ever, the future is uncertain and even threatening. We can make big plans, but God will have his own. As we gird up our loins to negotiate what is to come, we can be assured of God's care for us. Our history and traditions will provide us with some insights, but it is God's grace which will provide us with real power and light. We commend our schools and our endeavours to his sustaining and enlightening power.