The enduring colours of the changing tapestry
of Lutheran schooling in Australia

One of the great achievements of Lutheran education in Australia has been its ability to change over the last 40 years in response to emerging contexts and to adapt without changing values and beliefs. What are the essentials in weaving the tapestry of Lutheran schooling? What still needs to change? How do we maintain our essential and enduring colours? The workshop will draw on the presenter’s 40 years experience of Lutheran education and the experience of participants from across Australia as we identify and affirm the enduring colours.

I have experienced a wide range of the colours of the tapestry of Lutheran schooling in Australia. My association with Lutheran schools began in 1960 as a student at Concordia with brown and gold - and a strong brown and dull gold at that! In my last year at Concordia blue was introduced and since then my Lutheran school experience has been coloured with red and white, blue and gold. Today when we now put all the colours of Lutheran schools together, we are a very colourful tapestry.

The colours of Lutheran schools do create a magnificent tapestry – reflecting the reality that diversity abounds in Australian Lutheran schooling. There is diversity in size of enrolments, the SES of school communities and the families served, location of schools, subjects offered, global connections, local school emphases from the environment to social justice to students with special needs, background of staff and the list goes on. Lutheran Education Australia’s motto of Serving Australian communities through Christ-centred education means that Lutheran schools will reflect the diversity that is Australia.

However, it has not always been that way. Brown and gold were earthy colours, and they were taken up by other Lutheran schools as if they were franchise colours. In the same way Immanuel’s motto of Plus Ultra was taken up by St Peters and the name Concordia has been used frequently as the name for new schools.

As we look back 50 years and admire the tapestry of Lutheran schooling as it was in my student days we see some common colours and patterns. There are the German names of the principals and teachers reflecting the almost exclusivity of Lutherans on staff and indeed the student body; primary schools were closely connected to the local congregation and the secondary schools were the jewels of the wider church; preparation of students for service in the church as lay leaders, Sunday school teachers or pastors or teachers was a key focus; regular daily worship and religious education lessons with confirmation as the most important; the dominance of teaching German and a classical curriculum; music, sport and the Latin mottos also are quickly noted in the tapestry.

The diversifying of our school colours is symbolic of the growing diversity of Lutheran schooling of the past 50 years. Is our lively contemporary tapestry with its new colours and intriguing patterns a different brand from the one of 50 years ago or does it represent the work of a new generation of weavers working in the same tradition with the Master Weaver? Does faithfulness to our core strands call us back to brown and gold, as it were, or do we keep weaving with new colours?

Lutheran schooling in Australia is unique in that it goes back almost 170 years, whilst at the same time growing very significantly over the past 25 years. It is difficult to underestimate the changes that have occurred within Lutheran schools over this time. When I commenced teaching in Lutheran schools in 1970 there was a total enrolment of 5,000 students - this year there are over 37,000 students in our schools and early childhood education centres and services. This significant growth in enrolments has been sustained for over a generation and is unique in Australian education.
There are now Lutheran schools in every state and territory, except the ACT. There is now almost six times the number of teachers as pastors in the LCA, and each week more people hear the Word of God in the context of the Lutheran school than in our congregations. The tapestry of Lutheran schooling in Australia has indeed changed.

**Spotting the changing colours and patterns in our changing tapestry**

Lutheran schools have grown not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively. It is the colour and the emerging patterns of the Lutheran school tapestry that particularly attract our attention and call for closer inspection. Rapid growth brings change. Congregations and school councils establishing schools or growing existing schools focused primarily on the needs of their local communities rather than local church needs. If they had only focused on the educational needs of local Lutheran congregations there would have been little growth. Thus the most obvious change resulting from this focus is the fact that non-Lutherans make up 80% of Lutheran school enrolments and almost 60% of the teaching force and other changes ensued. The result has been a tapestry with new colours and new patterns.

The following new colours and patterns reflect some of the changes.

- The mission of Lutheran schools is primarily focused on serving Australian communities rather than Lutheran congregations, assuming that a congregation is present near a Lutheran school.
- We have seen preparing students for service in the community as just as important as preparing them for church service and have rediscovered Luther’s teaching on vocation at the same time.
- There is a very strong dependence on governments for funding – most Lutheran schools would close down without significant government funding. There is corresponding less dependence on the church at congregational and other levels.
- We have re-interpreted why we teach religious education and we now focus on encouraging young people to think about the great religious questions of meaning and morality.
- We have had indigenous thinking on the practice of Lutheran schooling and have developed a wide range of resources in vocational formation and Christian Studies.
- There has been an embracing of non-Lutheran teachers and leaders in and for our schools – these have brought a vast array of talent to our schools. The growth of Lutheran schools has only been possible with the gifts that Christians other than Lutheran have brought.
- In the 1950s the six colleges acted rather independently and the primary schools were linked by a tight church structure. Over the past 25 years there has been an evolution of regional and nation support for schools that allow schools to operate flexibly in response to community need with growing system support.
- Growing system support for schools at the regional level has been at the expense of the total dependence for support from Australian Lutheran College which is based in Adelaide when most of the school growth has been away from Adelaide.
- Lutheran schools now teach more than German, and indeed there has been a widening of the curriculum in response to the changing needs of students with different emphases.

**What are enduring colours?**

Clearly Australian Lutheran schools have experienced significant change over the past 50 years. There are new patterns and colours. The real question is whether the tapestry has been fundamentally changed or whether there are enduring colours that connect the contemporary Australian Lutheran school with the great Australian tradition of Lutheran schooling – are there common threads? The following enduring colours seem to be evident:

- There is an emphasis on quality education with a valuing of a love for learning – the sacrifice of the nineteenth century Lutherans for their schools is reflected in today’s significant commitment by the LCA to its schools.
- There is a commitment to quality pastoral care and the valuing of the individual – the care and nurturing that I experienced 50 years ago abounds today. Thus the name of Good Shepherd is now fittingly one of the most popular names for Lutheran schools.
• Lutheran schools continue to be communities where a genuine sense of belonging is cultivated.
• Worship where God comes to us and speaks to us remains focal to the Lutheran school and often distinguishes Lutheran schools from other schools.
• The passing on of the faith continues to occur on a regular basis, although pedagogy and methodology may have changed.
• Whilst the emphasis on schools preparing for service in the church has changed to a cultivation of service in a wider community, the emphasis on service remains a central Lutheran school value. The service value is enduring alongside the other values which are now described in Lutheran Education Australia’s Lifelong Qualities statement.
• These schools clearly state that they are Lutheran school and there is a real connection with the Lutheran Church constitutionally, administratively and in practice. The relationship and the understanding of schools and mission may have changed, but there is a clear connection.

A fraying tapestry?
For some these changes are confronting. Instead of using words like ‘enriching’ or ‘maturing’ or ‘new ways’ to describe the new tapestry, we hear of ‘weakening’ or ‘dumbing down’ or ‘loss’. There are areas where we are fragile, such as:

• It is increasingly difficult to find capable Lutherans for the positions that we have designated as necessary to be filled by Lutherans
• How do we communicate the mission and practice of Lutheran schooling to an increasingly diverse teaching population? How do we ensure that we have teachers in our schools who understand the mission of the Lutheran school?
• School governance – we find it increasingly difficult to find Lutherans with the time and skills required to fulfil governance responsibilities
• We are desperately short of Christian Studies Heads of Departments
• Our schools have to work hard to maintain enrolments in a competitive market environment with our communities feeling the significantly increased cost of living through interest rates, fuel increases etc.
• Have our schools increased fees at such a rate that they are not affordable for most Lutherans?
• What does it mean to be church schools when the church to which the schools are linked is struggling as an organisation and some congregations near schools are a shadow of what they once were?

Lutheran schools are not alone at working through these issues, as was seen in the 2007 Pastoral Letter of the Catholic bishops in NSW and ACT when they wrote that ‘Catholic education is at a crossroads. Changing circumstances have radically affected the composition and role of the Catholic school in recent years’. This letter provoked significant reflection and commentary on the essential question of what it means to be a Catholic school in the twenty first century. For one diocesan Catholic Education Office director the letter was a focusing on a choice whether ‘we want to make sure we’re all about preserving Catholicism or about engaging the Catholic church and schools with the world out there’ (Teacher Magazine August 2006,12).

Are Lutheran schools also at a cross road? Are the issues in fact the same for us? There is nothing wrong about being at a crossroad as long as you know you are at one and you know what the issues and choices are. If our schools are engaging with their communities and are true to their mission they are weaving faithfully.

The need to keep weaving
The tapestry of Australian Lutheran schooling is work in progress and what it looks like will be different again in 2020. The weaving that we do will involves addressing the issues and areas in which there is evidence of some fraying. There are also knots that we need to worked out and issues to be confronted that include:
1. We need to develop a fuller understandings of leadership in our context and explore how leadership can better be shared. Our leadership models tend too often to still reflect our male hierarchical past. We need to acknowledge that females are still grossly under represented in key leadership positions.

2. We need to further develop and nurture principals as spiritual leaders for the Lutheran school – otherwise management and educational leadership have priority in an increasingly policy, legal and market driven environment. The market provides us with enrolments but it also attempts to shape us.

3. Principals as curriculum leaders of teaching and leaders – in the growth phase our principals have been very good at driving projects and providing necessary infrastructure.

4. We will also have to get ready for the first non-Lutheran to be a Lutheran school principal.

5. There is concern about the general understanding of what is a Lutheran school in the new context and how the different components of school life fit together e.g. Christian Studies and Christian education. There are some philosophical issues to consider.

6. In an environment where we need to realise and contextualise the gospel we need to be more intentional in the nurturing and disciplining of Christian students.

7. We need to work through what it means for Lutheran Education Australia to be part of the global school network. And how we will better equip our student for their role as global citizens.

Since our theology is incarnational, we need to continue to respond more quickly to changing needs. The history of the Lutheran Church is actually a history of individuals, often rather idiosyncratic people, humble and not so humble at times, going about their churchly and educational business – there is no mould or cookie cutter for Lutheran education. Our schools will continue to reflect this reality and our tapestry will have some very interesting, challenging and confronting patterns. We will keep weaving and, with the Master Weaver, we will do so confidently and with some excitement, unsure of what the emerging tapestry will look like.

Reflection

1. How would you know a Lutheran school if you saw one? What are the enduring colours? What are the essentials?

2. Where is the tapestry of Lutheran schooling showing signs of wear and tear?

3. As we keep on weaving what are the knots that we have to work though or issues that we need to address?

Adrienne Jericho
Executive Director
Lutheran Education Australia