HOW SOCIALLY JUST?

Here's to the kids who are different, the kids who don't always get A's, the kids who have ears twice the size of their peers, and noses that go on for days...

Here's to the kids who are different, the kids they call crazy or dumb, the kids who don't fit, with the guts and the grit, who dance to a different drum...

Here's to the kids who are different, the kids with the mischievous streak, for when they have grown, as history has shown, it's their difference that makes them unique.

This poem by Digby Wolfe is a strong expression of the uniqueness of each child and a reminder of the need to provide individual care to all children. We affirm its sentiment. But we also ask (maybe quietly, wistfully), 'How is such care really possible?'

How can Lutheran schools actually meet the specific needs of each child? These needs are often framed in terms of outcomes and schools face the competing interests of the child(ren), parents, teachers, the church, the government, society, potential school families, and the marketplace. Teachers and school administrators acutely feel the complex pressures involved in providing quality, Christian education. The complexities can be immense as competing interests impact on all aspects of school life. Compounding the situation further is the awareness that schools -- indeed most communities -- are constructions of perceptions that influence how the school is viewed, regarded, and engaged.

Lutheran school documents proclaim that the gospel of Jesus Christ informs all learning, programs, and relationships. Yet the pressure of the markets exists to impose image management so that whatever occurs in the school may be seen in the right light and be acceptable to a paying consumer. This is most acutely experienced in the issue of behaviour management and the school's response to activities it regards as wrong, dangerous, illegal, or immoral. Each incident will involve a constellation of students, families and staff and, depending on the perceptions at the time, may generate a host of comments or queries about the nature of the gospel, the concept of justice, the importance of community, harmony and safety, the nature of personal responsibility, and care for the individual. Reasons for expulsion have changed over the decades and seem to reflect social sensitivities rather than any objective criteria. What is fair or just is not easily determined or enacted.

The expectation of the church might guide enrolment practices, curriculum development, pedagogical activities, and a host of other things occurring in schools which exist through fees and government grants but there seems to be little or no direct economic support from the church to facilitate the provision of quality, Christian education. User-pay education is part of the fabric of our country (though that topic itself is a social justice issue) but the final word on the appropriateness of user-pay mission by a church has not been spoken.

The existence of industrial awards presents and constructs staff relationships in certain ways that seem to presuppose adversarial positions and can foster the ethos of career paths and packages at the expense of a collegial, service culture. How working conditions should be
determined so that they are just seems shrouded in mystery. Tensions can exist between meritocracy and egalitarianism whether it be on the sports field, at the enrolment interview, or in the classroom seating plan.

As social welfare networks are being dismantled or restructured, and as society redefines notions of 'at risk', 'care', and 'responsibility' so also schools are faced with increasing issues relating to disability, poverty, ethnicity, juvenile behaviour, and behaviour management. As society wrestles with the appropriate legal treatment of its citizens and juveniles in particular so also schools reflect and initiate responses towards students who are 'at risk' or who place other students 'at risk'. How far and to what extent should schools support individual students?

All this and more are faced by schools whose prime role is to educate young people at a time when they are exploring their identity and self image ... in all sorts of different ways! For whom do we educate? For the students? Their parents and family? Society? The Lutheran Church of Australia? The Christian church in all its denominational clothes? God?

While such discussions happen, schools are making decisions and enacting policies, acting in certain ways and expecting compliance. They have to do so because they live in the world and are dealing with people. School council members, administrators, and teachers act with the best intentions and juggle the needs of the individual over against the needs of the community and vice versa. As microcosms of society which reflect and teach a social connectedness, schools incultate students into a community which, to a greater or lesser degree, will reflect the social values and experiences that are important to those who administer schools and to those who pay for students to be educated in our schools. Again the final word has not been uttered on whether students involved in a school which selects its students can fully experience and participate in an education that will enhance their participation in a democratic society that seeks social justice for all its citizens.

In a finite world with finite resources, what is the fairest and most judicious use of the resources we have available and for whom should these resources be available? What is the best response to all the inequalities and differences that are encountered by schools? There are no simple answers to these and countless other questions and topics that may be raised.

The first thing that needs to be recognised and remembered is that the gospel does not have the answers. Now that is a provocative way in which to engage readers of a LCA school magazine! The gospel does not give clarity of vision in relation to the design or the supplier of the school uniform (and whether it should be simple and inexpensive or not); nor does it give unwavering guidance in terms of enrolment decisions, budgets, resource allocations, class sizes, curriculum development, the form and function of the P&F, salaries, duty statements, formal assessment criteria, and even behaviour management (the litmus test for church schools as to whether they practise what they preach). The gospel proclaims God's justifying act towards sinners because of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit uses the means of grace calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies those who are in Christ and unites them through faith given personally at baptism into a hidden community in which its members seek to live as disciples of Christ in all the circumstances and relationships (eg, child, parent, husband, wife, citizen, employer, employee, etc) in which they find themselves. It could be argued that if the gospel informs enrolments then a church school should only comprise non Christian students so that isolation may occur or a church school should only have baptised students so that nurture may occur.

A Lutheran school is not a hidden community; nor is it defined by baptism; it is a contractual community in which its members work towards a common goal (in this case, education). Lutheran schools are our creations – we decide (to a very large extent) what happens within them. Students benefit or are hurt by these decisions as are those who have invested in the school (eg, staff, parents, and church).

Schools are structures which teach students to support and participate in the created orders of our world – family, politics (government), and work. The decisions regarding how to live in the finite world of the school would be well made in response to the questions: What promotes good order and justice in the world? What is in the best interest of Australia? What is in the best interest of the child? Answers to such questions would help inform us as to the just use of all the resources church schools receive and would be in keeping with the fact that God is left handed as well as right handed (if you think in two kingdoms terms). Possibly this might mean going into the educational 'markets' that are difficult (eg, working with children who have special needs or supporting children who continually exhibit 'at risk' behaviour) so that the social fabric of this country and its citizens are enhanced and enriched.

The question whether a church should be involved in the enterprise of schools (as opposed to being involved in a chain of supermarkets, petrol stations, or privately run prisons) is moot. However given that Lutheran schools are an increasing component of the Lutheran Church of Australia and within the Australian society it is important for the church to genuinely and continually ask the questions of how to best serve the citizens of this country through the provision of education. After over 20 years of recurring government funding, perhaps it is a good time for schools to consider what values of citizenship they are inculcating and for the congregations and parishes of the LCA to seriously consider how best to support such work (eg, with additional finances and human resources) so the children in our schools receive the best possible education and sense the free gift of God's grace ... for even the most different child.

Social justice? Nah, a Lutheran turanny of grace. Whatever it is, let's keep talking, struggling, and wrestling in this finite world.