

Service learning in Lutheran schools

Snapshot! Service learning stories from our schools Redeemer Lutheran School Nuriootpa SA

Background

Redeemer Lutheran School is located at Nuriootpa, South Australia. There are approximately 430 students from R-7.

Context

As part of the school's mission, the idea of 'peace' and developing 'intercultural understandings' is at the heart of the community. With this in mind the school has embarked on establishing a partnership with the Islamic College of South Australia (Adelaide). This 'snapshot' shares the planning and preparation that has gone into starting this partnership.

Preparing

- Redeemer's Teaching and Learning Coordinator led a workshop at the Islamic College and started a conversation with a staff member from the College about the possibilities of developing a partnership.
- Dialogue between the two Principals of the school led to an understanding of the kind of long term partnership they wanted to develop and what the partnership might look like both now and in the future.
- A process of working with the School Council and Staff for a number of months allowed the community to explore and discuss questions / areas of concerns etc The question was asked, 'If we are serious about living our mission what does this mean for our students, staff and community?' Workshops were held about spirituality (from a Lutheran perspective) and what a partnership with an Islamic School would look like. This helped staff deal with any faith based questions they may have had.
- The partnership was announced in the newsletter and by all accounts there was positive feedback and open minded responses. The newsletter article can be found below:

Breaking News – today we announce a very special partnership between Redeemer Lutheran School and the Islamic College of South Australia (ICOSA)

Lutheran Schools are open to all members of the community regardless of ethnic origin, gender, religion or ability, provided that through the enrolment process, parents agree to support willingly and freely the stated purposes of the school. Across Australia, close to 40,000 students are educated in Lutheran Schools, and they come with an array of abilities, ethnic origins and religions. It is true that a growing number of students are coming to Lutheran schools from religious backgrounds other than Christianity. This includes Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Baha'i and Confucian religions just to name a few. We celebrate the changing enrolment of many schools and acknowledge the incredible opportunity this presents.

Having said that, fears abound in all areas of life, and so it would be reasonable to suggest that fear may even exist within the Lutheran school community when it comes to the presence of other world religions in our classrooms.

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My experience would suggest that children rarely focus on the differences between themselves and their peers – in fact, most children are shining lights when it comes to acceptance, tolerance and showing genuine non judgmental interest in others' backgrounds, cultures and beliefs. For adults it can be a little more complicated sometimes!

We live in a media dominated world and often we form strong opinions about a broad range of issues – sometimes without any real level of firsthand experience. Often our opinions are based on what we see and are told through the media, which may not convey the whole story. The recent arrival of refugees in the Adelaide Hills is a prime example. While some applauded the move and welcomed the new temporary citizens, others protested. Some protestors suggest they have nothing against the refugees, but argued immigrants arriving by boat should be turned away because they have not followed the 'correct' procedures. Isn't it interesting that much of the political rhetoric is about 'boats' rather than about the plight of people? Recently I was told that 97% of all illegal immigrants actually come to Australia by plane, not by boat. That certainly adds a new dimension to the debate!

Just as opinion and acceptance of refugees in the Adelaide Hills varies, acceptance of those with different beliefs, backgrounds and religions in our schools, probably ranges from celebration through to fear. Interestingly, research tells us that studying a second language (such as Japanese) is the most effective tool for broadening the perspective of a single language / single culture community.

Furthermore, experience with another culture enables people to achieve a significantly more profound understanding of their own. We are then left with an important question... could this also be true if we were to ...

- study alongside,
- sit with,
- walk together with,
- play with
- eat with
- talk with and
- get to know personally – people from other cultures?

If we did this, imagine the growth in our understanding of other cultures. Imagine the insight we might have into our own culture. For those of you who have been associated with Redeemer for some time, I am sure you will have heard me talk about my desire that we in schools never become too insular – too inward looking. It can be so easy to give ourselves a pat on the back, tell ourselves we are doing well and quickly lose the desire to want to improve. At Redeemer, our efforts to continuously improve and learn from others is probably most clearly seen through the wide range of professional development activities we plan for our staff. While some of these activities happen within the school or within South Australia, we have also provided staff with learning experiences in America, Singapore, Hong Kong, Victoria and Queensland. It is through being outward looking and engaging with our world, that we develop broader and deeper understanding - an understanding that helps us to be the best we can for the children in our care.

We should never be afraid to engage with the world, and it is our duty to make sure that our fears do not prevent

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our children from engaging. As a Lutheran school, but also as an International Baccalaureate (IB PYP) school, we strive to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people, who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect.

Given that our Barossa community (and therefore our school community) is predominantly mono cultural, we have for some time been investigating ways that we can broaden the opportunities available to our students to experience other cultures. While books, films, guest speakers and excursions all assist in giving our students the experience of other cultures, we wanted to expand student opportunities and provide a longer term and richer 'real life' experience.

In 2010 the Redeemer staff, the Board of Management and the Lutheran Schools Association began the process of discussing the type of opportunity that might be of benefit to our students.

Today, on behalf of the staff, I am pleased to announce that from later this term, Redeemer will enter into a very special relationship with the Islamic College of South Australia (ICOSA).

The ICOSA is situated in West Croydon and has a coeducational enrolment of around 500 students (Recto Yr 12). The ICOSA has one of the most diverse student populations of any school in the nation. No less than 27 nationalities are represented across the student cohort. Allowing our students to experience the diverse backgrounds, cultures and experiences of the ICOSA students provides wonderful and unique opportunities. In a similar way, the ICOSA students will benefit from being associated with our school. The relationship that we hope to develop with the ICOSA in the years ahead is not based on an exploration of faith perspectives. The relationship is about building cultural understanding and respect and further exploring the IB PYP concept of Internationalmindedness. The relationship between our schools will exist at professional staff level, and at a student level.

If we dream of a compassionate Australia, if we dream of a society where love and care is the basis for all decisions and actions, and if we dream of a society where fear and phobia is replaced with understanding and acceptance, then maybe.... just maybe, our students are about to experience a profound learning experience which help them to grow into respectful, open minded, caring and knowledgeable inquirers.

At this stage we can announce that our relationship with the ICOSA will officially commence on Monday 21st March (Harmony Day). On this day, Year 5, 6 and 7 students from Redeemer will travel to the ICOSA, while the ICOSA Year 2, 3 and 4 students will travel to Redeemer.

On this day we will begin the process of encouraging our children to interact, explore and experience life beyond the relatively mono cultural experience within the school. In an interesting turn of events, when we initially planned the first ICOSA visit, we did not realise that this would also be the day that our Japanese exchange students arrive at Redeemer – so it's going to be a somewhat amazing and culturally diverse day!

In Week 4 of this term, Mrs Ali Thacker (Teaching and Learning Coordinator) will work with Redeemer students to begin explaining the intended ICOSA relationship. This will be an exciting time as children learn more about their new friends, about their culture, their clothing, their customs and their beliefs. These introductory workshops will

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prepare students for the ICOSA visit and allow our children to ask questions. We will of course be addressing issues such as the 'head wear' that the ICOSA students may wear, the different foods that we eat and so on. I, along with all of the staff, am excited about the opportunity for our children to form friendships relationships with children from another school. I am particularly excited that our students will have the opportunity to experience so many different cultures through this initiative.

Please do not hesitate to contact your classroom teacher or myself if you have any questions. We certainly look forward to keeping you updated as we continue to plan for Monday 21st March.

Steve Wilksch (Principal)