

# Theological perspectives on pastoral care and relationships and care in Lutheran education

## **Introduction**

The biblical story is a story of relationships. We see this in the story of God's dealing with his people in the Old Testament. God is faithful to his people even though they repeatedly turn away from God and seek to form relationships with other gods. In the New Testament, the whole life, death and resurrection of Jesus centres on our relationship with God and each other. Jesus models loving and caring relationships for those whom he meets and much of Jesus' teaching, for example in the parables, explores our relationship with God and others.

## **God is a God of relationships**

God exists in relationship. While we cannot understand the mystery of the trinity, it reveals to us that God is three persons who are in constant relationship with each other. God Father, Son and Holy Spirit work together in love, because God is love and love comes from God [1 John 4:7-12]. God is one and we see the work of God related to the three persons as creator, redeemer and sanctifier, but all working within the one divine will, purpose and plan. Because God exists in relationship, human beings who were created in the image of God [Genesis 1:26] are also created for relationship.

## **Created for relationships**

As we have already seen in the previous Encounter [*Encounter 3: Learning and teaching encounter*], God created human beings to live in relationship with God and each other. This is shown so clearly in the second creation account in Genesis 2 where God is concerned that Adam should not be alone but have a companion, 'a helper as his partner' [Genesis 2:18]. Paradise is represented as the place of perfect relationships between God and human beings, human beings and the whole of the created world, and human beings with each other and within themselves.

## **Broken and restored relationships**

But this state of perfect harmony and perfect relationships was broken by human beings wanting to cross the boundaries in those relationships which God had set. Human beings wanted to be like God and put themselves in the place of God [as we still do as human beings today!] and the story of the advent of sin in Genesis 3 shows how relationships were totally shattered. It began with Adam and Eve suddenly being ashamed of being naked in each other's presence; hiding away from God because they were afraid; trying to shift the blame from one to the other and finally onto God himself; being in broken relationships with all of the creation – the soil, the animals, everything God had made.

But this isn't the way God wanted things to remain. While the brokenness of sin remains as we see in so many ways in our world and as we saw in the story of the paralysed man, yet God in Jesus Christ has dealt with the fundamental relationship between ourselves and God. Jesus' life, death and resurrection have made it possible for the relationship between ourselves and God to be restored. As the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, we can once again call God 'our Father'. While we will see perfect relationships restored again only in the new creation at the end of time when sin is no more, and while the whole creation 'waits with eager longing . . . groaning in labor pains' until such time [Romans 8:-25], yet in the church, the 'body of Christ' we already catch a glimpse of restored relationships. Through the forgiveness of sin as the Holy Spirit works through the word of God and the sacraments creating and nurturing faith, we live in fellowship with God and with one another.

## **Worship**

Worship is the context in which God comes to us with his gift of grace and gives us his forgiveness through the means of his word and the sacraments. And in our response to God, we are invited to bring our offering of prayer, praise, thanksgiving and intercession to God. Just like the men carried their friend the paralysed man into the presence of Jesus so that Jesus could meet his special needs of forgiveness and healing, so we are invited to respond to God's gift to us by bringing our needs and those of others to him. Caring for others includes handing over their needs to God in prayer.

## **The value of persons**

Each person is a unique individual with individual worth and value in the eyes of God. All people are valued equally by God even though we have a tendency to place different values on people. We find it easy to relate positively to some people but not to others. However, God loves all people because 'God does not show favouritism' [Acts 10:34, NIV]. In fact, Jesus showed very clearly that he was particularly concerned for those who were seen as outcasts or socially unacceptable such as the paralysed man in the biblical narrative.

## **The model of Christ**

While we need to be careful when speaking about Jesus as a 'model' so that we do not slip into the approach of 'moralism' which sees Jesus principally as a model to be followed and therefore give the impression that living as Jesus did can somehow earn us value [or even salvation] in the eyes of God, yet we need to also learn what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus. Once we recognise in faith that Jesus has restored our relationship with God through his death and resurrection, we can also see how Jesus showed his love and compassion for all people. Jesus healed the sick and suffering, raised the dead, fed the hungry. In the parable of the last judgement Jesus says to those on his right, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me' [Matthew 25:40].

## **Loving as we have first been loved [1 John 4:19]**

As Jesus spent his final meal with his disciples before going to his death on the cross, he first washed his disciples' feet. He then gave them his new commandment [John 13:34-35]: 'that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

On another occasion when Jesus' disciples were disputing amongst themselves which of them was the greatest, Jesus pointed out that he 'came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' [Mark 10:45]. The challenge for all of Jesus' followers is to live this life of service to others.

This serving begins amongst those who are Jesus' disciples within the 'body of Christ' [the church]. We see this very clearly in the way the early Christians cared for each other [Acts 2:43-47]. However, this love and service is also to extend beyond the circle of believers and takes us out into the world to love and serve all of the people God has created. The parable of the 'good Samaritan' is instructive here [Luke 10: 25-37].

## **God's care of the creation**

Loving and serving all people takes us into the theology of 'vocation'. As God uses his two ways ['left hand' and 'right hand'] to care for the world, he uses people as his means ['hands'] to do this. We are his hands and feet to carry out his work in the world. As Christians we are called to serve and care for others in both justice ['law'] and mercy ['gospel'].

Vocation helps us to see the complexity of the caring relationships into which God has placed us. We are called to care in various areas of responsibility in our families, our places of work, in society, in our congregation. We are also called to care for ourselves so that we are able to care for others.

## **Responding to issues relating to theology and developing caring relationships in Lutheran schools**

### **1. Developing caring relationships in the school**

Caring relationships are central to the life and work of Lutheran schools. Many of our schools include words such as 'a caring Christian community' in their school brochures. This emphasis is also clearly illustrated in the core values for Lutheran schools where we find such values as love, compassion, forgiveness, service, justice, humility (*A vision for learners and learning in Lutheran schools*). Consciously implementing these values helps to create the caring relationships which are often identified by parents as a reason for selecting a particular school.

As indicated above, these caring relationships are built on the love which we have first received from God through the life and death of Jesus Christ. John says, 'We love because God first loved us' [1 John 4:19].

### **2. The importance of the individual**

Crucial for developing caring relationships is seeing every person as a unique, loved and respected individual person created by God. Each person has their own blend of strengths and weaknesses, gifts and abilities, needs and wants. Each person therefore needs to be cared for in ways that take this into account and reflect the Christian belief that all people are precious and loved by God. Even though individuals differ greatly and within a school context there will be those whom we may find difficult, frustrating and disruptive at times, we must be careful that personal reactions and judgements do not preclude certain individuals from our caring relationships. All students need affirmation, guidance and attention.

### **3. Pastoral care in the school community**

The concept of 'pastoral care' is firmly established in biblical language. The word 'pastor' is the Latin word for shepherd. There is a rich imagery of shepherds and shepherding in both the Old and New Testaments. Amongst other emphases, the shepherd is seen as the one who cares for, protects, leads and when necessary defends his sheep. Jesus portrays himself as the 'good shepherd' who is ready to die for his sheep [John 10:11]. Jesus searches for the lost sheep [Luke 15:3-7] to bring the lost sheep back into the protection of the whole flock. All of this is part of the concept of 'pastoral care'. It is caring for the needs of others at our own expense. It means being ready to serve and to sacrifice for others, recognising that when we share in the pain and suffering or the joys and successes of others, Jesus is identifying with us and with them.

Pastoral care is a crucial part of the school community and involves everyone within that community. It is not simply for the school counsellor, the school pastor, or some designated 'carers'. It is part of belonging to the community and even reaches out to those on the edges of that community. Every person in the Lutheran school is involved in pastoral care. Pastoral care is a way in which we see the love of God in action in the school community. It is a reflection of the special undeserved love ['*agape*'] which God has shown to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a strong and active, selfless and serving love which does not overlook injustice or sin or excuse inappropriate behaviour in the school community. It is a love which can show respect and honour for a student or member of staff even when there is the need to correct or reprimand that person. It aims to show something of the love of God in all of our interactions within the school. While all people can show sacrificial and selfless love to others, Christians are asked to show to others the kind of love which St Paul describes so fully in 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a.

### **4. Structuring pastoral care**

Pastoral care is not simply a structure or program within a Lutheran school. It is an expression of the nature and ethos of the school – the way in which the school 'works'. However, this does not mean that pastoral care simply 'happens'. There need to be ways in which students and staff can develop and show care for each other. They may need to be informed about appropriate pastoral care approaches and issues. In the school this may mean specific structures such as vertical care groups, 'buddy' systems, house groups, peer care groups, etc. It may also mean appointing particular 'carers' such as pastors, counsellors, and ministry teams. Pastoral care is not simply for students who are having particular difficulties or problems although these may need to be the focus of special concern at times. All individuals in the school community need to feel that they operate in an environment of love, care, support and individual worth and value.

### **5. Pastoral care involving law and gospel**

In the Lutheran school, law and gospel are basic to the formation of the school community [cf *Encounter 5: Expression of freedom encounter*]. The sensitive use of law and gospel is also essential for pastoral care. Part of the care for people in the Lutheran school community will be based on the concern to provide a safe and supportive environment through the use of appropriate rules and guidelines. Such an environment will also encourage students to work to the best of their ability in the school. This will also require the provision of consequences for inappropriate behaviour in the school. However, such situations should not become merely an opportunity for expressions of power by those with authority in the school. On the other hand, the Lutheran school community also provides an environment in which the gospel of forgiveness and love is clearly evident in the practice of pastoral care. The Lutheran school may be the first community in which a student comes into contact with forgiveness and grace based on the love of God in Jesus Christ. This is also where reconciliation processes such as

'restorative justice' find a place in the pastoral care programs of Lutheran schools.

## **6. Teaching as pastoral care**

Teaching is in itself an essential part of pastoral care. Where teachers see their teaching as 'ministry' rather than simply a 'job' or 'career', they see their teaching within a context of pastoral care. Teachers strive to teach well, to prepare as conscientiously as possible and to maintain their own professional development because they care for the students they are teaching. They want to be able to provide the best experience they can for their students.

And this pastoral care will also extend to caring for their students as whole persons. They will be concerned for the academic, physical, emotional and spiritual growth of their students. Even in the mundane tasks or the challenges of report writing and marking, teachers will be able to see their vocation as part of their pastoral care for their students.

## **7. Pastoral care and prayer**

Christians within the Lutheran school community have been given a special resource for pastoral care – the gift of prayer. Christian teachers have the wonderful privilege of bringing their students and their joys, needs, sorrows and hopes to God in prayer. Students can be encouraged to pray for each other and prayer can enfold all of the school activities and also reach out to the needs of the community. In times of particular stress or tragedy in the school community, prayer can also be a powerful witness to our dependence on God for all things. And thanking God for success and achievements can also shift the focus onto God from whom all good gifts come.

## **8. Pastoral care of staff**

A key component of pastoral care in Lutheran schools is the pastoral care of the staff. Within the school community staff experience various levels of stress related to their teaching or administrative and support responsibilities. There are also health matters and other personal issues and crises which spill over into the school situation. If staff do not feel cared for, supported, appreciated, encouraged and affirmed as they face such situations, low morale amongst the staff will quickly have an impact on the care which they can extend to the students.

Staff may also need guidance in balancing the various areas of responsibility in which they carry out their vocation. The challenge will be to try to meet the demands of the school, home and family, social interaction, church activities, physical and mental relaxation, and so on. Staff may feel inadequate in meeting their own expectations in all of these areas of responsibility and also experience stress and burn out in setting unrealistic expectations for themselves or in meeting those imposed on them by others. Aspects of this are explored further in *Pathways: vocational focus*.

Staff need time, too, to recharge their own spiritual resources. Some ways of doing this were explored in *Pathways: spiritual focus*. Christian teachers need to draw on the strength which the Holy Spirit provides through worship, prayer, meditation on the Bible and so on to be able to continue to witness to their faith to the students under their care also through extending pastoral care to them.

## **9. Serving the community/world**

As well as developing caring relationships within the Lutheran school community, members of that community are challenged to reach out in service beyond that community as they function as God's 'masks' in the world [*Encounter 2: Two ways God cares encounter*]. As Lutheran schools participate in 'service learning' and other opportunities for witness through serving in the local and global community, it is crucial that this service is built on establishing mutually caring relationships with those with whom we relate through these service activities. This is to try to counter any sense of superiority in helping those 'in need' without realising what we can in turn receive and learn from them.

*Pathways: facilitator notes*  
Caring relationships encounter  
Facilitator theological notes