

SALT IN THE SOUP?

This is very much an exploratory paper; it raises many questions which can serve to begin a dynamic conversation about how we can best retain 'the gifts of salt and light'. While I do not expect that the questions I raise below can be easily answered I am hopeful that an approach for future or continued exploration may emerge.

INTRODUCTION

What prompted me to select and explore this topic?

- not been motivated by a theoretical, academic interest this topic comes out of issues I have wrestled with in my capacity as both a teacher of Christian Studies and a leader of Christian Studies departments in two schools
- a suggestion by a member of my Christian Studies' staff last year, that we investigate how to engage the 'Christian' students in our lessons as many were disengaged and seemed to be of the opinion that CS classes were not for them
- returning, in my thinking, to the bigger picture of Christian education. *Why do we exist as schools? What do we hope to achieve? What are we forming in our young people? How do we accommodate the range of expectations and worldviews that confront us – parent, students, administration, ourselves? Wondering how CS fits in all this and what contribution I can make to the whole educational process and do justice to all members of my class?*
- having to deal with criticism from some Christian parents who question the ability of the curriculum to help their children grow into mature Christian people – what is my responsibility to these parents or at least the school's responsibility?
- having students who consider themselves to be Christian, instruct me as to what will make for a more viable and dynamic CS curriculum
- the dreadful recollection of a time I made a Year 10 boy cry because I demanded his support on the basis that he was from a strong Christian family and had been confirmed in our Lutheran congregation
- wondering, as a curriculum leader, where my responsibility lies for the students who come from a faith tradition and who, in the course of attending our schools, adopt a Christian faith tradition? Do I have any more responsibility to them than to any of the other students I teach, those for example who do may state quite openly that they reject adopting any particular faith position

The limits of the exploration

My initial focus was to interview students who identified themselves as Christian to find out their expectations and experience of attending a Christian school. I interviewed secondary students as well as students who had left school and gone on to other tertiary institutions. The exploration process grew in my mind and I began to see that there were many other key people whom I could interview, parents, principals, other Christian Studies educators, chaplains, primary aged children etc... Suddenly I realised that I had begun on

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an impossible mission, at least for the ACLE deadline. This was an enormous topic that needed background reading and solid research if I was going to do justice to it. Hence my decision to present the beginnings of a possible investigation and invite participants to share their stories, questions and reflections. I may then have a case to begin some serious study in this area or maybe not.

I personally interviewed 5 students with whom I spoke for up to an hour each.

- Two year 11 students were selected by a teacher of the school I visited
- Two students were brother and sister, the latter having left the school 2 years previously. These two were active participants in their local church youth group
- Another student had left the school 4 years ago. She is an active participant of the church group she attends

In addition

- I spoke to the parents of the brother and sister
- I received feedback from 4 educators one of whom also acts as a chaplain
- I interviewed a primary principal

The following pages are a summary of my limited exploration - questions used to interview students and other key people and a selection of different students' responses. I have also begun to record my reflections, the new questions and further issues and implications. Participants will have an opportunity to contribute their questions and suggest implications.

NOTE: in the course of speaking to people the discussion went wider than the questions. People who responded in writing were restricted to the questions. I also want to acknowledge that teachers' responses made me think about the questions I was asking and some of my reflections have been influenced by their contribution.

CONCLUSION

Input from teachers at ACLE 2 confirmed that the issue of the Christian student voice in the school is a reality that needs to be both celebrated and investigated so that this body of students can best be supported. Different schools have addressed some of the issues raised in the paper in a range of ways which further study could well explore and interpret to give further direction and support in this area of Lutheran Education.

Dominique Jaaniste
Acting national Christian Studies' Coordinator

Discussion questions given to STUDENTS seeking information on how Lutheran schools provide opportunities for students who are already Christian believers to deepen and educate their faith.

- 1) How would describe your relationship with God?
- 2) In what way is it different now to when you were in Grade 8?
- 3) List the qualities that best describe the Lutheran college you attend
- 4) What sorts of experiences at the school have helped you in your faith journey?
- 5) Of what the value have the following been in shaping your faith?
 - i. school worship
 - ii. Christian studies' lessons
 - iii. Pastoral care
 - iv. Extra curricular activities
- 6) Which of your subjects contribute to your faith journey? Can you describe the contribution they make?
- 7) What are the challenges that committed Christian students face in the school that other students do not face?
- 8) How well would you say that you have been supported in your faith journey at the Christian school you attend? Who or what has been your greatest support?
- 9) Do you think that a Christian school has a responsibility to give additional opportunities to students who have made a faith commitment and have disclosed it?
- 10) Did you go to a Christian primary school? If so, how differently do both contexts help a student's faith journey?

VERSION 2.

1. How would describe your relationship with God?
2. In what way is it different now to when you were in Grade 8?
3. Which school did you attend in primary school?
4. List the qualities that best describe the Lutheran college you attend
5. What sorts of experiences at the school have helped you in your faith journey?
6. Of what the value have the following been in shaping your faith?
 - i. school worship
 - ii. Christian studies' lessons
 - iii. Pastoral care
 - iv. Extra curricular activities
7. Why did you choose to do Study of Religion? In what ways are SOR and CS the same? Complementary. How does either contribute to your faith and beliefs?
8. What are the challenges that committed Christian students face in the school that other students do not face?
9. How well would you say that you have been supported in your faith journey? Who or what has been your greatest support?
10. How might a Christian school such as the one you attend better nurture a Christian believer?

FOR EDUCATORS

Discussion questions seeking information on how Lutheran schools provide opportunities for students who are already Christian believers to deepen and educate their faith.

1. What are the *distinguishing marks* of students recognised to be believers? (in other words how do you know/judge that students are believers?)
2. What opportunities are provided in your school context to deepen and educate the faith of students who are already Christian believers?
3. Is this priority in your school context?
4. Is there any evidence that confirms that Christian students are in fact being nurtured in their faith?
5. Can nurture take place in the classroom, given that few students have contact with the church?
6. What are the greatest challenges that your school faces in making the nurture of Christian believers a reality?
7. What are the limits of what a school can do?
8. What extra resources does a school need to meet this challenge?

STUDENT INTERVIEWS

SURVEY QUESTIONS	SUMMARY OF RESPONSES	REFLECTIONS/IMPLICATIONS/ ISSUES ARISING
<p>How would you describe your relationship with God?</p> <p>In what way is it different now to when you were in grade 8?</p>	<p>4 of the 5 students stated that they were very aware of their relationship with God at the start of secondary education. What has changed for them to the present day is the extent of their knowledge about God and the deepening of their faith expressed through a stronger prayer life and dependency on God.</p> <p>The eldest (21) commented that she was very conscious of wishing to let her faith, to let God have an impact on her life, relationships and decision making. School was a time when she began to ask herself why she believed what she believed.</p> <p>The 21 year old reflected that her growth in faith was a combination of the youth group and family. She did not think that the school as institution contributed in any significant way to her faith journey.</p> <p>One student described her faith journey as being on a rollercoaster but now that she was older (19) she could see there was greater consistency.</p> <p>Another student said he began school interested in Christian things and this has grown over the 5 years of being at the school.</p> <p>One of the students came from Asian background and had lived most of her life in a Buddhist/Hindu environment. Her parents had become Christian before her birth. She said she had been exposed to Christianity 'from the womb'. She was home schooled till this year (Yr 11). Interestingly her faith has been deepened by the challenges posed by the range of views both Christian and non-Christian found in the school.</p>	<p>4 of these students come from strong Christian homes where parents have made a commitment to raising their children in the Christian faith.</p> <p>There is a great sense that school and home are in partnership.</p> <p><i>How large a role does this play in the continuity and growth of faith witnessed in these students?</i></p> <p><i>Which plays the stronger part – home or school?</i></p>

<p>Role of other subjects</p>	<p>It seems that any subject that makes a student think and engages them in the big questions of life can be a contributing factor to a student's faith journey. Subjects such as history, English, science, drama are mentioned.</p>	<p>Points to the importance of each teacher, person in the school.</p>
<p>Role of pastoral care?</p>	<p><i>What's that?</i> <i>We hear the memos (if we are lucky)</i> <i>Out of the window</i> <i>If you want authentic pastoral care and faith sharing then you need Christian teachers</i></p>	<p>There is confusion between what schools call pastoral care and the pastoral care that does in effect take place. Maybe it would be best to call the time students listen to memos etc. as roll call or briefing because that is what takes place. Pastoral care happens all day in a host of school contexts in ways that cannot be measured and quantified.</p>
<p>Role of teachers?</p>	<p>I heard many references to pastoral care in what students related but never once did they use that terminology. They spoke so much about the importance of teachers being there for them when they had problems be it academic or personal. All students had at least one teacher that they could call on if need be. One student said it was great that there was a youth worker on campus. One spoke of the importance of teachers being available to listen. It was important for student to know that there were trusted adults available apart from the school counsellor, outside of the classroom context. <i>Teachers are the greatest contributor to a student's faith journey</i> <i>The Christian ethos of the school and Christian teachers relating with students are more important than chapel or Christian Studies</i></p>	<p>Teachers have an enormous opportunity to be mentors for students. How much does a school acknowledge that and free up the school day, the lunch hour to allow that to happen?</p> <p>What emerges for me is the importance of teachers being salt and light.</p> <p>How and what must we do as a school system to empower teachers to be salt and light?</p>

SURVEY QUESTIONS	SUMMARY OF RESPONSES	REFLECTIONS/IMPLICATIONS/ ISSUES ARISING
<p>What are the challenges that committed Christian students face in the school that other student do not face?</p>	<p>One student was of the opinion that sharing your faith openly with other students did not necessarily make you an outcast, many other factors played into that. He felt that by year 12 you had to make choices and whether or not you shared your faith was one of those choices. However, he did say that he would not stand before the school and make a public statement- that would be inviting negative comment and some censure.</p> <p>While he was in favour of voluntary worship e.g. having Holy communion he knows that teachers would outnumber students significantly.</p> <p>Another student said that she would openly and publicly speak of her faith if she attended a state school, but she was not prepared to do it at the Lutheran school she is attending</p> <p>Another student remarked how it seemed to be easier in yr 12 to be a Christian as many students seemed to be stepping forward and showing their hand so to speak – students that he would never have dreamed were wanting to be Christian</p>	<p>How much does age and personal development play in students' willingness to speak about their faith?</p> <p>In what ways might we make students feel judged?</p> <p>Should we even be looking for declarations of faith? On what basis do we make judgements? Are we stepping into the realm of the law when we do that?</p>
<p>Does a Christian school have an added responsibility to its Christian students?</p>	<p><i>For many Christian students the school is the only place which can support them. Teachers can show them how to live the Christian life. There is so much growing up to do and school sometimes is the only place you are going to get the answers. Students need mentors, need individual attention. There should be up front Christian programs that equip students for real life, for life after school – it should be more than just being about having fun. It needs to provide Christian students with leadership skills, empower them to play a bigger role in the lives of other students, show them what to do, how to help the students who are depressed, hurting, struggling - empower them to be good relators. Evangelism is not about coercion or even speaking the gospel – it is about being which is ministry.</i></p> <p><i>Its good to have a Christian school with a Christian ethos, with Christian teachers living by example – that is what speaks most strongly to me. The school is really obliged to cater specifically for Christian students as the school has set itself up as a Christian school. It is different to a state school. However whatever a school does or sanctions must not become elitist and thereby exclude some.</i></p>	<p>I was impressed by the maturity of all the responses.</p> <p>Are schools failing to engage Christian students deeply with interface of faith and life?</p> <p>Are we ourselves sufficiently mature to deal with some of the needs of our students?</p> <p>What are we doing about our own spiritual growth?</p> <p>What is the chief aim of our schools?</p>

FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY BRIAN AHERN AT LUTHER COLLEGE IN 2001 AS PART OF A MASTERS IN EDUCATION STUDIES

**How would describe your relationship with God?
In what way is it different now to when you were in Grade 8?**

It is clear that a churchgoing Christian background was significant in establishing a Christian identity.

Two stressed the value of camps, church activities and relationships with significant people in the congregation as being important in the formation of Christian identity.

List the qualities that best describe the Lutheran college you attend

The majority of the group agreed on the same basic idea: **the value of caring for others**, looking out for people, respecting others and treating others as you would want to be treated. All felt that **the principal was strong on communicating and demonstrating this message.**

Comments from respondents now undertaking teacher training centred on the dedication of the staff: *“the teachers consider it part of their life rather than just a job”*. One indicated that this stood out in Lutheran and Catholic schools from the point of view of both personal and anecdotal experience.

The overall messages received from the school seemed to be ones of respect, caring for others, dedication in service and the value of being real in relationships. People who openly communicated a real and living faith and values were very effective in conveying those messages on to students. Perhaps there was a lack of these kinds of people on staff. Perhaps it is not the Lutheran thing to do, but what of other staff? **The principal and a handful of other staff were viewed by the group as being outstanding in giving expression to the school ethos.**

FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY BRIAN AHERN AT LUTHER COLLEGE
IN 2001 AS PART OF A MASTERS IN EDUCATION STUDIES

What sorts of experiences at the school have helped you in your faith journey?

Of what the value have the following been in shaping your faith?

school worship

Christian studies' lessons

Pastoral care

Extra curricular activities

How well would you say that you have been supported in your faith journey at the Christian school you attend? Who or what has been your greatest support?

... the role of chapel was very positively viewed by the majority of the group: "*Chapel was a great way to start the day – to reflect and pray – it gave a faith home – continued through Chapel on Sunday.*" Bartsch (1993: 25) argues that this is a fundamental component of the program in the Lutheran school, and the respondents affirmed this view. Several in the group made specific reference to the **reality of faith and open expression of that faith by the current principal**. All talked of the **importance of a school pastor with whom they could relate**, several naming our long-standing school pastor.

Did the school provide adequately for the development of the faith of Lutheran (Christian) students while not offending the unbeliever?

There was quite a lot of contradictory material in the discussion that ensued from the more committed Christian students: "*Unfortunately it was very uncool amongst students to want to know more and there was little opportunity to extend your faith knowledge.*" "*The Year 8 Scripture Camp was the worst thing I've ever done – portrayed Christianity as boring, uninteresting and not fun. Not a good way to promote Christianity. You need to get teachers who are enthusiastic about Christianity and with a desire to share their faith and to show that it is exciting. Kids are too young to stand up for their beliefs and appear uncool even if they want to be involved in Bible study at Year 8.*" "*Teachers need to explain what Christianity is and share something of how it affects their lives.*"

The committed Lutheran of the group closed off by adding, "*My faith didn't develop a lot in the school as a Lutheran – I got it from other sources – church and relationships with church people.*"

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION WITH OTHER STAFF, TEACHERS OF CHRISTIAN STUDIES

**WHAT ARE YOUR MAJOR CONCERNS/HOPES FOR
THE STUDENTS WHO IDENTIFY THEMSELVES AS
CHRISTIAN IN YOUR CONTEXT?**

IS THIS A MINORITY GROUP?

DO THEY HAVE A PRESENCE IN THE SCHOOL?

**IN WHAT WAYS DO YOU (AND YOUR SCHOOL)
ADDRESS THE ISSUES PERTINENT TO THIS
GROUP OF STUDENTS?**

**WHAT DO 'CHRISTIAN' PARENTS EXPECT FROM
YOUR SCHOOL?**

**IN YOUR OPINION WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING
WOULD BE THE MOST SIGNIFICANT
CONTRIBUTOR TO A STUDENT'S FAITH JOURNEY
IN YOUR SCHOOL CONTEXT?**

- SCHOOL WORSHIP
- PASTORAL CARE PROGRAM
- CHRISTIAN STUDIES
- TEACHERS
- GENERAL SCHOOL CURRICULUM

**READING THROUGH STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE
QUESTIONS WHAT DO YOU FIND**

- SURPRISING?
- CONFRONTING?
- COMFORTING?
- ALARMING?
- REASONABLE?

HOW MUCH DOES AGE AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAY IN STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS TO SPEAK ABOUT THEIR FAITH?

IN WHAT WAYS MIGHT WE MAKE STUDENTS FEEL JUDGED?

SHOULD WE EVEN BE LOOKING FOR DECLARATIONS OF FAITH?

ON WHAT BASIS DO WE MAKE JUDGEMENTS ABOUT FAITH?

ARE WE STEPPING INTO THE REALM OF THE LAW WHEN WE DO THAT?

ARE SCHOOLS FAILING TO ENGAGE CHRISTIAN STUDENTS DEEPLY WITH INTERFACE OF FAITH AND LIFE?

ARE WE OURSELVES SUFFICIENTLY MATURE TO DEAL WITH SOME OF THE NEEDS OF OUR STUDENTS?

WHAT ARE WE DOING ABOUT OUR OWN SPIRITUAL GROWTH?

WHAT IS THE CHIEF AIM OF OUR SCHOOLS?

Relationships are at the heart of the Christian gospel, and they are at the heart of Christian nurture within the Christian school. Paul blends these twin aspects of truth in instruction and a godly interaction with students in his comments in 1 Thessalonians 2:8, “We loved you so much that we shared with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well.”

Christian schools will fail without teachers who clearly understand, teach and live a radical, biblical worldview perspective. This requires sustained, school-wide, biblically authentic professional development.

If Christian schools are doing their job properly, then their teachers and students should be salt – and – light beacons of hope in this postmodern nightmare by representing God and his way as they have taught and learnt it in school, they have the opportunity to stand tall themselves and reach out with God’s shalom into all areas of this desperate and needy world.

Dr Richard Edlin *Why Christian Schools?*

Is this too large a burden to lay on our students or is it a hope expressing our hope that God will work his grace in their lives?

The **parents** I interviewed made a deliberate choice to send their students to a Lutheran school although they are not Lutheran themselves. More than anything they were looking for a supportive environment for their children, a school that would

- support their Christian values (they did not want a school with a secular approach)
- support their children in their education – no unnecessary interruptions to their learning from a lack of discipline or conflict of values

They were not looking for the school to be the entire support for their children. They very much saw that they themselves had a significant role in the nurture of their children in their lives and faith.

They were convinced that they had made the right decision as both of their children had received care from teachers and had been supported by a positive friendship group.

They made the comment that the strong academic thrust of the school had placed some undue pressure on their children. They were after a well rounded education rather than strong academic results.

A PRIMARY PRINCIPAL'S PERSPECTIVE

- The younger the children the more spontaneous, eager and expressive their involvement in the 'god-stuff' whether it is volunteering answers, ideas or praying.
- Primary school has a significantly different context and culture to secondary school.
- Nurture of students is a strong element of the primary classroom – one teacher for the whole day for the whole year
- Nurture is most possible when there is the support of parents
- Effective nurture is highly dependent on a healthy Christian environment driven by the school leadership
- Importance of authenticity of staff
- A students' journey of faith needs to be seen in the context of all of life for their whole life

Realities/ potential barriers to helping student grow in their faith

- ▶ only see students for 6 hours of the day
- ▶ non support of parents
- ▶ competing ideas and events in society and lifestyle (*why should faith stuff matter in light of what society offers?*)
- ▶ massive expansion of Lutheran schools – *what happens when you cannot place committed Christian teachers?*
- ▶ a weak Christian context which makes it more difficult to engage students

"Dad, when I have children I am going to send them to a state school. At least there they will be taught by a committed Christian in their RE lessons" Year 12 student after 12 years in a Lutheran school.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF QUESTION(S)

What are the *distinguishing marks* of students recognised to be believers? (in other words how do you know/judge that students are believers?)

Is this an ethically and theologically viable question?

Is it a question that stems from the desire to measure and quantify the success or viability of Lutheran schools?

What are the suppositions of such a question

that the primary role of Lutheran schools is to bring students to faith?

to develop a Christian lifestyle?

to boost church membership?

Does such a question foster an *us and them, in and out* mentality where school population is concerned?

Is this a question that sits in judgement of students?

Does such a question limit how faith can be expressed and revealed?

Is this a law oriented approach?

Does such a question discount the life long and far reaching effects of the gospel in students' lives?

Is such a question discriminatory, predetermining the work of the Spirit of God in students' lives?

“The question has its origins in a ‘outcomes framework’ mentality, and seeks observable, identifiable signs of the Christian life in the world. Faith is hidden –always hidden...For example, infants are baptized and are given faith -yet there are no observable signs either in words or behavior that faith is indeed present. I believe that what is true for infants, is also true for adolescents and adults because faith can often be hidden beneath the experiences of suffering.”

“ Indeed, some students choose not to make their faith known –for all sorts of personal reasons. A homosexual student may choose not to reveal that s/he is Christian for fear of being ridiculed - as has happened. To require them to do so would be turning the gospel into law. The experiences of suffering in their lives also can cover faith up such that it is not an observable phenomenon. Quite often a person believes they do not believe but in reality they do because faith has been shrouded in doubt.” Responses to parts of survey from Neal Nuske (August 2004)

4. Is there any evidence that confirms that Christian students are in fact being nurtured in their faith?

“No. What would it be given there is not any empirical evidence for the existence of faith? There are bible study programs and prayer groups and chapel etc. happening on campus, but these do not constitute evidence that Christian students are being nurtured in their faith. They simply testify to the fact that there are bible study programs and prayer groups and chapels etc. What may be said during these study groups, prayer groups and chapels etc could cause offense to some Christians –as has happened.”.....

The problem is we want to satisfy our own human need to see when and where and how the Spirit is at work in the midst of schools. We don't have to be concerned about the when, and the where, and the how concerning the work of the Spirit in our midst. Teaching in religious and non-religious schools is an act of faith for the Christian teacher.”

Responses to parts of survey from Neal Nuske (August 2004)