

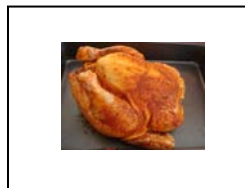
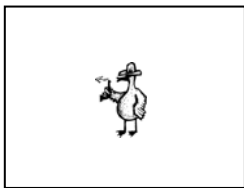
**Contemporary Spirituality for Lutheran Schools**  
**Elective Workshop**  
**Australian Conference of Lutheran Education**  
**MCG October 2008**

I want to start with the opening words of the abstract for this elective session ... “Lutheran Schools may well be at the Spiritual cross-roads ...”

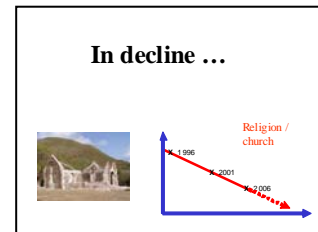
I want to suggest that there are three options that confront us at these Cross-Roads. We can continue on **Same Old HIGH-way** - note the emphasis on HIGH – the high road, the easy road; We can opt out with the **G.U. exit** (more about that later), or we can take **Luther Way** ... note the symbolism of the fine print, the small arrow, the low and narrow track. So let’s take a closer look at “**Same Old Highway**”.



I’m going to show you some images, to throw us right into a major reality check, followed by a contentious question ...



... and here is the contentious question ... How much do these images represent **church**? You see, some people would say that the CHURCH is a dead duck, or putting it even more bluntly ... it is stuffed! Before anyone starts jumping up and down objecting to that, let me attempt to put that into context. First of all please understand that this is of course a generalization – a massive sweeping statement. Secondly, when we say CHURCH here, we are not talking just LCA (or Lutheran Church of Australia.) we mean the Institutional Church. That is every main stream Christian denomination in every country right across the western world. The reality is the church has been in massive decline right across the western world for decades. All mainstream churches are suffering the same fate. Let’s look at some statistics for our own country. In the census papers there has been a question along the lines of ... “did you in the last 2 weeks attend a place of worship?” The last three Census results for that question reveal steady decline figures 9% in 1996 back to 8% in 2001 7% 2006. A frightening question ... If the current rate of decline continues, what will the church look like if we add a generation of time (25 yrs) to current congregations?



You may well ask, what has all this church business got to do with us in Lutheran Schools? Well time for another reality check. Our grass roots connection is to church. This is a quote from the model Constitution of LEA.

***Lutheran Schools have been ... “established to offer Christian education to children in the Church and in the community and serve as an arm of mission outreach for the Church.”***

Every one of our Lutheran Schools (Kindy / Early childhood, Primary Secondary / Combined) would have a statement similar to this in their constitution. We are strongly connected to church. We exist only because of church. We have been established by church. We need church.

I sometimes refer to the connection this way - “**We are chained to the church at Grass roots level.**” I certainly don’t mean that in a negative way, but rather to indicate the strength of the connection. Lutheran Schools are only what they have become because of church. There is a very proud heritage associated with the history of establishment of Lutheran Schools and in the ongoing relationship / partnership between church and school.

However in the 21st Century we have to face the reality of what that relationship means. So let's digress just for a little bit and focus our attention on Church. The cross-section of people sitting here I imagine would not be an accurate profile of Australian society when it comes to religious involvement. I presume for example, that there would be much higher than 7% of people here who would answer yes to that census question ... **did you in the last 2 weeks attend a place of worship?** If we were to randomly spread ourselves around Australian society, for many of us, **we would be the odd ones out!** You see that 7. something percent equates to only 1 in 14 or 15 of Australian people who attend church regularly. I've heard it said that United Nations no longer considers Australia to be a Christian country.

### **Time for some interaction ...**

When the call came out for presenters, it was possible to choose elective or workshop style. The Committee asked me to run this as a workshop, which would mean some hands on engaging of the people in dialogue. I was a bit concerned about this when I was told the group size would be over a 100 and that the participants would need to be seated lecture style, which is not ideal for engaging in discussion, but nevertheless we are going to have a go at this. So here's the drill. In the spirit of ACLE, we want to mingle and connect as much as possible. so I want to try some group discussion in groups of 4 or 5 optimum size. But there are a couple of RULES that you need to follow: You must have three states represented and because we are all friends here you should also aim to have three "decades" (year of birth) represented in your group.

At the end of 5 mins we will have some street talk to find out what's happening here at the MCG! Here is the question ...

### **What's the problem? WHY has church / religion declined?**

#### **Here are a few of the major changes that I have put together**

Massive social change has triggered much of this

- 7 days a week ... in many industries 24 hours a day used to be 5 and a half day shopping. Businesses all closed down at 11.30 on Saturday morning.
- Retail, Tourism, hospitality industries have all become very invasive of Sunday morning time
- The reality is many Christian people have had Sunday morning free time taken away just to make a living.
- HM churches in your area provide worship opportunities on a regular on-going, weekly basis at a time other than Sunday morning?
- Bad press of church (sexual abuse)
- Break down of family
- The "I" world that we live in
- Rapid moving / can't sit still
- Consumerism, capitalism
- Sunday Sport is the norm. Some would say this is the devil at work in the world, but how much has the church embraced the changes of society? In general, the church has not counter-punched.

Let's get back on track here now with the spirituality theme. The reality is that while church has been in decline, there has simultaneously been a massive surge in what is popularly referred to as spirituality. Again referring to the Australian Census figures ... 70% of Australian people said yes to the question on Spiritual experiences. Whatever that means!

One of the well known writers in this area Melbourne based David Tacey writes ...

**"Every day people are straying away from the church and going back to God." p30**

Gerard Hughes in his great little book "God of surprises" says **"Nothing masks the face of God more than religion"**

I would hasten to add that not all of these spiritual experiences are necessarily positive. Our challenge is to take these spiritual threads and gently channel them into a Christian framework.

I love this analogy (borrowed from Mike Middleton) to help us appreciate the implications of changing times. Imagine sailing into Sydney Harbour through the heads with a stiff Easterly Spinnakers set (big colorful billowing sail catching the breeze). We are “flying” along. But the wind has changed, we now have a gusty WESTERLY head wind. Are we still trying to sail with our spinnakers set? If so we are going to get smashed around. Times have changed. The context in which we operate has changed. We have to change tack.

### **Before we move on ... a footnote of hope: from Matthew’s Gospel**

The Church will survive. Jesus said it will.

Quoting from THE MESSAGE Matt 16:18

*“And now I’m going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out. “*

### **HOW DO WE RESPOND TO THIS SITUATION OF DECLINING RELIGION / CHURCH?**

MAYBE WE SHOULD ASK THIS QUESTION IN THE THREE DIFFERENT TENSES:

So how have we responded?

How are we responding?

How will we respond?

Yes the church will survive, but the challenge to us in Lutheran Schools is to help it THRIVE. Back to the spiritual cross-roads analogy. Our response cannot be to take the SAME OLD HIGHway  
We are in a difficult position ... (**recapping for a moment**)

1. A key reason why we exist, why we were set up, is to communicate the Christian faith to young people and their families
2. If we have any integrity at all – we **MUST** be serious about that task

We are left with the task of trying to promote a product that the world and our clientele largely do not want to know about. I don’t know if you have water restrictions where you are. It seems that most of Australia does. In SA we certainly do, and sprinklers have long been banned. So trying to “sell” the Christian faith is a bit like trying to sell a sprinkler to home gardeners. We cannot pretend that all is rosy. We cannot take the easy way out and just keep cruising down SAME OLD.

An even poorer option is to take the G.U. exit. In case you have not worked it out, that’s the GIVE UP OPTION. The GIVE UP exit. That’s a dead end, a No Through Road. Taking the Give Up exit is like saying it’s all too hard this Christianity stuff, people don’t want to know about it, so we’ll just opt out. Well if that’s the road that we plan to take, we may as well be just another one of those private schools that has the cross as a façade, but it doesn’t really mean anything. If we have any **integrity** at all, if we are going to be authentic Lutheran Schools true to our charter, there is only one way left to go as we approach the Spiritual Cross-roads. Yes, the low road, the winding track, complete with dangerous driving conditions. **LUTHER WAY!**

I've chosen the name Luther way for two reasons. Firstly it seems appropriate if we are going to be true to what we stand for as Lutheran Schools. Secondly, because it really reminds us of Luther and the stand that he took to initiate the Reformation in the 1500's. So too, we need to take a stand, just as Luther did. "*Here I stand*" says Martin Luther "*I can do no other.*" The low winding track is not going to be an easy road to travel

So let's really hone in on Contemporary Spirituality. I want to say though, that the term is a bit problematic. When we say contemporary it perhaps suggests something new and further, it implies that there was an old spirituality that needs to be replaced. So we need to be careful with terms. Maybe the term "new" spirituality, with new intentionally in quote marks to indicate that is not really new but rather it's a rediscovered spirituality, just as Luther rediscovered the truth of scripture at the time of the reformation.

*(Note: Rev Dr Mike Semmler talked about the "slippery" nature of the word "Spirituality" and in the October 2008 edition of "The Lutheran, he talked about testing spirituality against scripture – very wise and helpful words as we set out to explore spirituality.)*

### **A flash back ...**

Norm Habel at ACLE 2 in Adelaide 4 years ago launched the 6 mysteries and the 6 challenges. I want to quote from **Challenge Two / Mystery Two:**

*"The youth of today have a very different sense of the spiritual – something that most of us never even considered spiritual. Do we ignore this difference? Do we throw our hands up in frustration? Or do we listen, learn and wonder – and listen again?"*

How much have we responded to that challenge in 4 years? Have we listened?

According to a number of writers in this area, a key factor in connecting people to Jesus, is the **image of God**. How often today do we hear of God being portrayed as the old man in the sky, the guy upstairs, the supreme authority sitting on his throne, looking down on the world, often in harsh judgment, with punishment a key message? The God that we need to promote, and the God of "new" spirituality (remembering that there is actually nothing new here, just a re-discovering) is far more personal, intimate and localized. The world itself can certainly help reveal God's presence. We tend to forget that the incarnation is on-going. (The incarnation – Jesus coming to us here on earth as a human.) He was here for around 30 years, did what he came to do, including his death, resurrection then ascension back into heaven, end of story. Rather the incarnation needs to be understood as on-going.

This leads us to a second key factor in helping to connect people to Jesus. Recent writers on spirituality, claim that a limiting factor is that the institutional church generally rejects as invalid, any spiritual experience that occurs outside of a church building.

- We should not ignore the feelings for example, of the person who says that they really feel the presence of God while in the outdoors bush-walking, in sunsets and the night skies, in waterfalls and mountains
- In the main the traditional church has 'pooh-hooed' this form of spirituality.

How guilty have we been of supporting the judgment that "Unless you are sitting in a hard pew in a church building on a SUNDAY MORNING ... you are Lost! ??

- The problem is that the traditional church and religion generally exercise a blanket rejection without pausing to engage in any dialogue with it.

David Tacey says "*Religion has stopped having a conversation with culture ...*".

*"The churches (schools?) should regard dialogue with popular spirituality as part of their ministry and mission."*

I am certainly no expert on indigenous spirituality, but my understanding is that the way aboriginal spirituality and Christian spirituality have been reconciled to fit together is a classic example of picking up a spiritual thread and weaving it into a Christian framework.

I want to graphically illustrate the changed setting in which we operate by trying to explain this rather complex diagram. Traditional church and all forms of modernization attempts is regular connecting with 7% (Census). We can add in the school environment, with further variations of format / style / certainly the advantage of familiar turf attracting a number of parents. Recent Christian market research reveals that at very best we have the potential to reach a max of 15% of Australian people. The rest are simply not interested in being **attracted** to any form of church situation.

I'd like to just quickly re-draw that diagram from a different perspective. Amongst this large OTHER group of people not interested in church there is a large proportion of people open to Spirituality. At which point I will introduce an acronym GOPOTS - Group of People Open To Spirituality. (The term has its origins with the staff at Redeemer Lutheran Primary School at Nuriootpa, SA) In a Lutheran School community it is not unreasonable to assume that almost every family would have some measure of openness to spirituality, otherwise they would not be enrolled. After we talk to them about what it means to be in a Christian environment, they still choose to come on board. This has to be an indicator of some degree of openness.

So what do these GOPOTS look like? They are happy to be loosely connected to a Christian environment, but not ready to make the commitment to any form of church scene and certainly NOT ready for worship. They don't have a relationship with Jesus, so it's not actually appropriate to talk about worship. So what are we doing to cater for this large group of people in our school communities? (both students and parents?) They don't want to be attracted into a formal church setting, but they have a definite openness to spirituality.

I have brought church back into here, but remember the strength and importance of the link!

Just an aside before we get into a bit more discussion. I'd like to emphasize a key piece of theological thinking. We are actually quite incapable of coming to know God and grow in our faith through our own efforts. We only come to faith and grow in our relationship with God through the power of the Holy Spirit working in us. Note also that God's Spirit comes to us through His WORD and through the Sacraments. How much do we use the power of the Sacraments in our schools? Maybe we could answer that question with a statement ... **How little we use the power of the sacraments in our schools!** How much do we deny ourselves access to the Holy Spirit? Both Baptism and Holy Communion are huge tools available to us. A toolbox that is rarely opened in our schools?

**Time for us to engage in some more discussion ...**

I invite you to quickly read the selection of three quotes that will be handed out ... use this as a catalyst for your discussion. (See APPENDIX) Find a partner ... someone to talk to about this question...

**WHAT can we DO in our Lutheran Schools to better cater for the G.O.P.O.T.S?  
(students and their families)**

A summary of responses ...

- Too often we think of the sort of thing that we would like but we lose sight of the fact that ... **It's not about us.**
- **Building of relationships** is the most critical factor.
- A key aim is to connect people to Jesus. We need to show people Jesus ... some one once said of a classroom teacher ... "You may be the only copy of a bible that a child sees"

- We have become so obsessed with trying to get people to come to church. If we get them along we think we've had success. But we've got that upside down ... you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink ... you can drag a person to church ... but you can't make them genuinely worship.
- For years we've had it upside down ... we have to build that relationship with Jesus first ... then we can talk worship.
- Let's try to meet people where they are at ... forget trying to attract people to our little patch ... what about the school car-park, the pub, the walking tracks, the footy, sexist maybe ... but blokes and their sheds, ladies in the shopping malls ...
- Why not offer communion on a Tuesday morning to a group of Mum's Dad's who drop their children off? If 2 or 3 come along ... fantastic.
- Why not have a 15 minute "reflections" on the Gospel reading for the week ... on another afternoon?

### **To wrap up ...**

Perhaps the most critical factor in all of this is the need for us to have our own "backyard" in order, or where we are at with our own personal spiritual journey. If we are going to make a difference as staff in Lutheran Schools, we need to be "in training". We need to work on our own spirituality. Further, we need a staff team who are all on the same wavelength, who are all serious about doing the work of spreading the word. We need programs in our schools to help staff with their journey to help build corporate spirituality. We need to help and support each other.

I don't profess to have all (any of) the answers. Hopefully though you will be able to take something away from this session to challenge your thinking.

I want to leave you with a great little quote, really in the form of a blessing and certainly in the spirit of on-going incarnational thinking.

***"Wherever we go, even if we are alone, we are travelling in a crowd. For the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are with us."***

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## APPENDIX

### “THE SPIRITUALITY REVOLUTION”

*“Religion in the past has been based on the idea of ministering to a gathered community. Today it has to work towards a new model, offering guidance, support and spiritual discernment to the scattered community. The post modern society is a plural, fragmented society, and it is doubtful that our society will quickly recover the cohesion and uniformity that it had even a few decades ago. The churches will need to think in more fluid, open and expanded ways about the future, not in terms of closely-knit stable and parochial communities, but in terms of loose networks, drop-in centres and small groups or “cells of evangelization”.*

*This is not to abandon the traditional notion of church, but to return to its beginnings. Christ did not direct everyone into sacred buildings or structures, but rather he moved into the world, going to the people, healing their ailments, and binding their secular lives to the sacred. Those lives were then transformed by virtue of their new relationship with the sacred. The way of the future will be the way of the founder: not to expect the world to submit to clerical authority, but to transform the world by revealing the presence of God where it least expects to find it, in the everyday and the ordinary.*

*The challenge is to allow all people to see that they are ‘chosen’ people, and to show that the sky under which they live, labour and love is a sacred canopy, ennobling their actions by a divine presence. For those who so choose, the holy sanctuaries will be ready and available, not only for devotional worship, but for quiet reflection, conversation and spiritual direction. In many ways, the task ahead for religion is to get connected with the spirit of the time and the spirit in the individual, showing people how and why religion is relevant to their lives.”*

**P198 “The spirituality revolution” David Tacey.**

### GATHERING IN GROUPS

*“Spirituality for a Christian, can never be an individualistic quest, the pursuit of God outside of community, family, and church. The God of the Incarnation tells us that anyone who says that he or she loves an invisible God in heaven and is unwilling to deal with a visible neighbour on earth is a liar since no one can love a God who cannot be seen if he or she cannot love a neighbour who can be seen (1 John 4:20). Hence a Christian spirituality is always as much about dealing with each other as it is about dealing with God.”*

**“Seeking Spirituality” Ronald Rolheiser. P 94**

### “Emerging Worship” by Dan Kimball

Kimball offers several models for how to reach this generation (our GOPOTS). These models are based upon a basic assumption:

*“We need to get away from the idea that the fundamental building block in the church is the weekend worship service, and we need to embrace the idea that the fundamental building block in the church is the church's mission of making disciples.”*