

# Developing caring relationships in Lutheran education

## 1. Developing caring relationships in Lutheran education

Caring relationships are central to the life and work of Lutheran education. Many of our schools and early childhood communities include words such as 'a caring Christian community' in their brochures. This emphasis is also clearly illustrated in the core values for Lutheran schools and early childhood communities 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 or early childhood communities. 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 or early childhood community 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 and children need affirmation, guidance and attention.

## 3. Pastoral care in schools and early childhood communities

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 or early childhood 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 or early childhood community is involved in pastoral care.

Pastoral care is a way in which we see the love of God in action in the school or early childhood 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 or early childhood 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 or early childhood community. 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 or early childhood community. It is an expression of the nature and ethos of the school or early childhood community – the way in which the school or early childhood community '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 a school or early childhood community 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 or early childhood 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 or early childhood community, law and gospel are basic to the formation of the community. The sensitive use of law and gospel is also essential for pastoral care. Part of the care for people in the Lutheran school or early childhood 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 and children to work to the best of their ability. This will also require the provision of

consequences for inappropriate behaviour. However, such situations should not become merely an opportunity for expressions of power by those with authority in the school or early childhood community. On the other hand, the Lutheran school or early childhood 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 or early childhood may be the first community in which a student or child 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.

### **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 children. 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 or early childhood 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 activities and also reach out to the needs of the community. In times of particular stress or tragedy in the school or early childhood 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 or early childhood communities is the pastoral care of the staff. Within the school or early childhood 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 impact the community. 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 or early childhood community, 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. Staff need time, too, to recharge their own spiritual resources. 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 or early childhood 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. As Lutheran schools and early childhood communities 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.

### **Discussion questions**

- What makes a 'caring relationship' and how can such relationships be encouraged in the Lutheran school or early childhood community?
- What is your understanding of 'pastoral care' in a Lutheran school or early childhood community? Is there anything different about pastoral care in Lutheran schools or early childhood communities from what is done in other Christian, Catholic or government schools?