

# Why a Lutheran School?

## Education and Theology in Dialogue

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[Excerpt p92-95]

### **The Lutheran school and the committed Christian student**

While it would be possible to find committed Christian students within any school, state or private, the church school sees itself catering in a particular way for these committed students. As indicated in chapter two, Lutheran schools were initially established for the purpose of nurturing the children of committed Lutheran families, and this is still one of the stated purposes for Lutheran schools (Appendix C: 1:2). As was also suggested in chapter two, it is just these students who sometimes feel discriminated against in Lutheran schools.

One of the factors here is the failure of these Lutheran schools to recognise clearly that there are different levels of faith commitment within the school amongst both the students and the staff. In ignoring this, the impression is given that the school does not take seriously the level of individual faith commitment and the special needs of particular individuals, but appears to assume some general level of acceptance of the Christian faith within the community which can be addressed by a general and rather bland Christian nurture program. Lutheran theology, particularly the understanding of the Christian person as simultaneously saint and sinner, emphasises the need to help committed Christian students as, through the power of the Holy Spirit, they deal with the 'sinner' in themselves and try to develop the 'saint'. Within the Lutheran school, the Lutheran understanding of sanctification encourages Christian students and staff to allow the Holy Spirit to continue to develop responses of 'new obedience' and 'good works' in their lives as 'saints'. This will also provide an important model of Christian living for each other and for those community members who are not yet confessing Christians.

The Lutheran school also sees it as important to provide opportunities for these committed students to grow in their understanding of their Christian faith and in their confidence in living a Christian life. From this point of view, Lutheran schools

would see a role in the school for 'catechesis' - instruction in the faith tradition, by the church, of its committed members. As Groome remarks in respect to Catholic schools (1996: 118):

Catholic education should intentionally catechize its students . . . Beyond 'learning about', Catholic education intends students to 'learn from', and even, with ecumenical sensitivity and respecting students' backgrounds, to be personally influenced and enriched by Catholic faith. The Catholic school is to educate the very 'being' of its students, to inform, form, and transform their identity and agency - who they are and how they live - with the meaning and ethic of Christian faith. Beyond knowing about Jesus, it intends that they become disciples of his 'way' . . . Catholic catechesis must be marked by good education, education that brings people to know the data of the tradition, to understand it, to personally and critically appropriate it, and to come to life decisions in response to it.

While Groome seems to be suggesting this approach for all students in a Catholic school, in respect to which questions could be raised in the light of discussion in the previous section, nevertheless this does offer an appropriate approach for committed Christian students in the Lutheran school. Purnell contends (1985: 75) that 'a place should be found for [catechesis] within the school in a situation where pupils freely choose to attend', and Malone (1984: 11) has argued for voluntary groups in the school to allow this to occur.

Brian Hill (1990a, 1991) has strongly promoted such voluntary groups as a way to allow young people to interact with adult Christian role models as they seek 'a self-reliant, adult self-image, viable in the democratic society' (1991: 165). While Hill sees these groups as functioning outside of the school context and recommends that teachers may not necessarily be the most suitable persons to lead these groups because they may 'find themselves unable to doff the authority role of the working week in order to allow young people space to exercise the freedom and responsibility which are theirs' (1991: 167), it would seem appropriate to examine Hill's model also for use within the school context. Since the groups would be voluntary, nurture and evangelism approaches would be appropriate. Suitable adult leaders would need to be found: possibly here is a more appropriate role for some chaplains than teaching in the religious education classroom. Above all, if these voluntary groups were to have any chance of success within the Lutheran school, they would need to receive strong and deliberate

support from school authorities and a relevant and meaningful role in the worship life of the school.

Related to this is the opportunity within the school program for committed Christian students to 'put considerable emphasis on the practical living out of their faith commitment' by becoming 'involved in some form of service' (Purnell 1985: 71). Purnell suggests that by doing this, 'catechesis will then develop out of their reflections on what they are doing' (1985: 71). Michael Warren speaks of this as 'walking the way' rather than just 'talking the way' (1989: 119).

In order to help in developing this aspect of the school program, Lutheran schools may attempt to involve all students, and even all staff, in various forms of community service and helping others. However, Brian Hill issues an important warning against making such service part of an assessed curriculum. If this is the case (1990: 47), 'most students will sense an element of compulsion in such activities . . . This will inevitably taint, to some degree, the ideal of serving others of your own free will'.

Important in considering this issue of service is the emphasis of theology of the cross. This theological perspective looks for an attitude of service linked with living out theology of the cross, serving others as Christ has served them. Service from this theological viewpoint is not, then, simply a case of 'free will' or philanthropic attitude, but obedience to the call of Christ. Dykstra (1981: 103) characterises such service as 'a discipline of renouncing power in order to be present with others in vulnerability, equality, and compassion'. Moran (1966: 137) proposes that 'the task for our students, then, is not to dominate or condemn the world, but to serve God through helping man and giving witness to the reality of God's love'. Crucial in this regard will be the climate of service which exists in the entire Lutheran school and its program.

### **The Lutheran school and the non-Christian student**

The policy statement of the Lutheran Church of Australia states that through its schools, 'the church deliberately and intentionally bears Christian witness to students, parents, teachers, friends, and all who make up the world of the school' (Appendix C: 1:2). The question which this policy raises in a pluralistic society is one of possible religious discrimination. On the basis of Lutheran theology, the Lutheran school views each person in the school community as a special and unique creation of God and thus entitled to respect for beliefs and attitudes which that person might hold. Parents who choose a Lutheran school for their children, students who choose to attend a Lutheran school, and teachers who apply to teach in such a school can be expected to respect the aims and purposes of the school, which include the

Christian beliefs and practices of the school. To that end, information given during enrolment or employment interviews needs to express clearly the expectations of the school as an agency of the Lutheran Church also in respect to the religious education program of the school.

To be consistent with its theology, however, the Lutheran school would have to allow for a range of responses to the Christian message from the members of its community. Non-Christian students and staff may be led by the Holy Spirit to a personal faith commitment. Where such a student comes from a non-Christian home environment, the Lutheran school has a special responsibility of support for the student. The response of other non-Christian students may be one of a certain level of interest in religious matters, but not yet lead to a personal commitment. This may be a first step towards evangelisation and here peer influence may be particularly crucial. There may also be an attitude of complete indifference by these students and even total rejection. While this is not the hoped for result, accepting that response enables the integrity of the person to be respected. Decisions may have to be made in such circumstances about the advisability of the person continuing to remain in the Lutheran school. However, the Lutheran school needs to guard carefully against discrimination of any kind in respect to such an individual or against applying pressure to a student to make some confession of faith. On the other hand, as long as these students or staff choose to continue to remain in the Lutheran school, they can be expected to participate in all of the religious activities of the school.