

## Statement on School Worship

### What is Christian Worship?

Worship begins with the presence<sup>1</sup> and acts of the Triune God<sup>2</sup>. It goes from heaven to earth, from God to human beings. This is clearly seen in the way in which God conveys love, grace and mercy to human beings through readings from the Bible, forgiveness of sins, proclamation of the gospel, the enactment of Baptism, the celebration of Holy Communion, and the performance of blessing. Worship can be understood to have a strongly **sacramental** thrust, which consists in God's action towards us.

Human beings respond to God's presence and activity in praise and thanksgiving. This dynamic of the presence and action of God prompting human response is brought into focus in by Paul's teaching in Romans 12:1,

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God [God's presence and activity], to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship [human response].* NRSV

It is important to note that the human response of worship is not a result of a person's superior spirituality or stronger moral fibre. Human response is itself empowered by a gracious God.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the dynamic of Christian worship is God's action, human response. The common order of worship in the Lutheran Church affirms this flow of God's action (the so-called sacramental element) followed by our response (the so-called sacrificial element) of worship<sup>4</sup>.

The following table is useful to see this dynamic of God's action and our response at work. It demonstrates how each action of God (his sacramental activity) has a corresponding human action (our sacrificial activity).<sup>5</sup>

#### **Table 1 : The Dynamic of Christian Worship**

<b>God's Action</b>	<b>Human Action</b>
God calls to worship	We respond
He forgives	We confess
He speaks	We listen
He listens	We pray
He gives his gifts to us	We bring our gifts in an offering
He gives himself to us in the Lord's Supper	We give ourselves in loving service
He blesses us	We praise him
He sends us into the world	We go out

### The School as a Context for Worship

There have been many attempts to draw parallels between worship as practised in the congregations of the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA), and worship as practised in the Lutheran School. While these efforts have been intended to affirm the validity of worship in a school context, it must be acknowledged that there are some very real differences between **school worship** and **congregational worship**. The major differences are as follows:

#### **Table 2 : The Difference between School and Congregational Worship**

<b>School Worship</b>	<b>Regular Congregational Worship</b>
No presupposition of a participant's faith	Faith (or at least an interest in matters of faith) can be legitimately presupposed for the majority
No presupposition of baptism	Most of the congregation is baptised
No presupposition of involvement in congregational worship practices	Previous involvement in Christian worship congregational worship practices presupposed for the majority
No presupposition of biblical literacy	Some level of biblical literacy presupposed for the majority
Compulsory attendance	Voluntary attendance

The congregation is defined in this document as a community of baptised believers who together share a common confession of faith, hear the Word of God, celebrate Baptism and the Lord's Supper and are led by a called and ordained pastor.

This definition is distinct from the common understanding of congregation as a legally constituted organisation within the LCA or another denomination. Where a rightly constituted LCA congregation is intended, the term LCA congregation will be used.

School worship refers to a variety of worship contexts within the school where attendance is seen as part of the program of the school i.e. in whole school, in part of the school, and in class-sized contexts.

Both congregational and school contexts provide opportunities for public worship. It is therefore possible to have a congregation within a school.

### **Appropriate School Worship**

The context in which schools meet for worship means that certain elements are appropriate, and others are not. Due to the compulsory nature of school worship, care must be taken not to put people in situations where a conflict of conscience arises. Such conflicts can exist when a person is expected to make a confession or response which does not reflect their faith.

Appropriate elements for school worship may include the following:

#### ***Table 3 : Appropriate Elements for School Worship***

- ❖ Bible reading
- ❖ Telling Bible stories
- ❖ Relevant Gospel message based on the biblical narrative
- ❖ Prayers of request and thanks - for students, school and the world
- ❖ Blessing
- ❖ Singing - in a context of optional involvement
- ❖ Group silence for meditation and contemplation
- ❖ Appropriate ritual acts (eg candles, signing of the cross for blessing etc)

It may be inappropriate to include the following elements due to situations where a conflict of conscience may arise.

#### ***Table 4 : Possible Inappropriate Elements for School Worship***

- ❖ Confession of sins
- ❖ Confession of faith
- ❖ Responsive prayers
- ❖ Calls for commitment
- ❖ Celebration of Holy Communion

Worship in the school context must be done in a way which is accessible to students. It should be conducted in a language and style which communicates both the relevance of the gospel to the lives of students, as well as the sublime mystery of the Christian faith.

Furthermore, it is important to provide for a variety of expressions of worship as God works differently in different people at different times.

It is clear that the emphasis for school worship is on what God does for human beings, and not so much on human response to God.

### **The Distinction between Worship and Teaching**

In worship the emphasis is on proclaiming and experiencing God's word<sup>6</sup> with the aim to create or increase faith. However, worship may also involve some teaching or explaining as well. In teaching, the emphasis is on explaining God's word with the aim to increase understanding of the Christian faith. However, teaching may include some elements of worship.

It is important to be aware of these distinctions in planning and implementing school worship, and in planning and implementing the Christian Studies program in the school. While similar topics may be dealt with, they are dealt with in different ways according to their context.

## **Baptism**

Baptism is the sacrament of entry into the Christian church. It happens in the context of the people of God who gather together to grow in faith and love. Thus, in the LCA, baptism is clearly seen as belonging to the ministry of the congregation.<sup>7</sup> The congregation is the institution in which Christ's gathered community is to be found. The question which the LCA and Lutheran school communities grapple with is whether it is appropriate to baptise in the context of school worship.

Baptising a student in a Lutheran School setting can be simple or complex, depending on the structure of the school. It is a simple matter in a school where there is a direct relationship between an LCA congregation and the school. Any pastoral acts done in the school can legitimately be seen as pastoral acts of that LCA congregation, and one would assume that its pastor has oversight of the pastoral acts that are done in it. The issue becomes more complex when there are a number of LCA congregations which support it, or when the school is sponsored by a district of the LCA.

Baptism can take place in a congregation within a school. While the baptised person is at school, this congregation may be best placed to provide ongoing pastoral care. However, when baptism happens in a school, links need also be developed with the LCA congregation that is best placed to care for the person and their family beyond the time that the young person is a student at the school. Where natural links with an LCA congregation do not exist, the school should seek to build bridges, and develop links with those LCA congregations that are well-placed to meet the ongoing pastoral needs of the students and their families.

Baptism of a student or staff member in the context of school worship must be accompanied by instruction. Such instruction will go beyond the normal teaching of the Christian faith in the classroom and the proclamation that is part of school worship, because it presupposes commitment to the faith.

Where there is a direct relationship between the school and an LCA congregation, instruction prior to baptism and after it will normally be the responsibility of the pastor of that congregation. Where there is a worshipping community within the school itself, it is the responsibility of the school pastor to see that such instruction is given as part of his duty to provide pastoral care.

## **Holy Communion**

Communion may be celebrated regularly in Lutheran schools within a congregational setting. It is worthwhile restating that the congregation is a community of baptised believers who together share a common confession of faith, hear the word of God, celebrate baptism and the Lord's Supper and are led by a called and ordained pastor. This definition is distinct from the common understanding of congregation as a legally constituted organisation within the LCA or another denomination.

Attendance at such services must be voluntary. Participation in Holy Communion is available to those who share our Lutheran understanding of it.

The pastors who preside at such services are responsible for the instruction and ongoing pastoral care of communicants in these services.

## **Summary of practical considerations for Lutheran Schools**

- When worship is compulsory in Lutheran Schools, care must be taken to ensure that no one is asked to act against their conscience.
- Leaders should seek to make worship accessible to students in its language and style, so that it can positively communicate both the relevance and the mystery of the Christian faith.
- Since God works differently in different people, a variety of worship styles should be offered.
- Leaders of worship in Lutheran Schools need to understand the difference between teaching and worship. Appropriate professional development may be useful.

- Where there is compulsory attendance at worship in a Lutheran school, God's loving action should be emphasised rather than the demand for faith responses from participants. (see table 1 and table 3)
- Baptism and Holy Communion are to be practised with pastoral discretion, bearing in mind the issues outlined above.
- Schools should explore and develop strategic partnerships with those LCA congregations which are well placed to care for the spiritual needs of students and their families.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 18:20: “[Jesus said] where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them.” (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 2:18: “ through him [Jesus] we both (Gentiles and Israelites) have access to the Father by one Spirit” (NIV)

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 2:8-10: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do;” and 1 Corinthians 12:3: “Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit. (NIV)

<sup>4</sup> For a full discussion, see *A Lutheran Approach to the Theology of Worship*, (LCA Commission on Worship, Statement 24, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> See *Public Worship and its Environment*, (LCA Commission on Worship, Statement 14, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> See John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (NIV); and 1 John 1:1-3: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us - we declare to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” (NRSV)

<sup>7</sup> Note the earlier definition of congregation in *The School as the Context for Worship*: “The congregation is defined in this document as a community of baptised believers who together share a common confession of faith, hear the word of God, celebrate Baptism and the Lord's Supper and are led by a called and ordained pastor.”