



2014 T.T. Reuther Oration
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At the Edge of the Precipice: Fighting or Flying?

THE REUTHER ORATION

The Reuther Oration acknowledges the outstanding service of the Rev TT Reuther to Lutheran education in Australia from 1955, when he began duties as a chaplain at St Paul's College, Walla Walla, NSW, to 1993 when he retired from the position of National Director for Lutheran Schools.

Pastor Reuther's life within Lutheran schools commenced when he was a student first at Light Pass Lutheran Day school and later at Immanuel College.

After completing theological study at Immanuel Seminary he took the opportunity to undertake post graduate studies from 1950-1954 at Concordia Seminary, St Louis. Whilst on board ship (returning from the USA) he received a call to become chaplain at St Paul's College, Walla Walla, where he served to 1962.

After serving two parishes (Appila and Coonalpyn) from 1963-1968, he was called to be Headmaster of Concordia College Adelaide, where he joyfully served for fourteen years plus one term until 1983 where he accepted the invitation to become the inaugural national Director for Lutheran Schools.

During his outstanding service to Lutheran schools in Australia, he also completed Master Studies in Educational Administration.

He was an active member of the former Headmasters' Conference, member of the Australian Council of Education Administration, and honoured for his services to education by being made a Fellow of the Australian College of Education.

His ministry to Lutheran schools was highlighted by a professional approach based on a clear theological thinking. In the inaugural Reuther Oration, Pastor Reuther spoke of faithfulness, which was a characteristic that those associated with schools admired in him. He modeled faithfulness.

The Reuther Oration is designed to provoke and promote thinking about an aspect of Lutheran education. The Oration is usually delivered as part of the National Principals' Conference.

Reuther Oration

At the Edge of the Precipice: Fighting or Flying?

I invite you to join me, as fellow Lutheran educators, in a contemplation of the future. Here we stand together, looking out over the edge of a precipice, a future unknown. I wonder what you see.

From my Lutheran educational standpoint I see three things:

1. An educational landscape where technology is in the process of revolutionising schooling;
2. A need to rejuvenate and reassert the distinctiveness of our Lutheran culture and identity;
3. An opportunity to unite our capacities to build a bright new future for Lutheran schools.

The Revolution:

We are at the edge of exciting opportunities in education like we have never been before. Just as printing presses empowered and revolutionised schooling, so too will digital technology. Right now we have the technical capacity to personalise learning and provide opportunities for students, staff and leaders to connect and control their own growth and understanding in rich and powerful ways. The democratisation of learning is just beginning to emerge. Students and educators will have increasing capacity to access learning from a variety of sources and even different certification processes from around the world. Self-efficacy will be a determining factor for learners and leaders of all ages. Leaders who need to be led will not lead. Teachers who need to be taught will not teach.

A journalist in *The Australian* noted that education was one of the last industries to be disrupted by technology. We are at the edge of a precipice. We might see a beautiful majestic vista, or a black chasm of varying widths that needs to be negotiated, or we might be looking mystically, hoping that the future will look much like today. For each of us the view will be different depending on where we stand. Only if we look backwards will we be comforted by the familiar.

What might this future look like? What might 2030 look like? Going to be retired, don't need to worry? Too far away to think about? Perhaps, yet we quickly sign documents that commit our schools to debt to that period and beyond. A note of caution, or perhaps comfort, for those who may rightly believe that education will continue to be resistant to change. In the 1970s I was sure we would be Jetson-like and flying around in cars in my 50s. I am there but they are not. But in case you are feeling too comfortable, we do have the visual connectivity of the Jetsons, and Rosie the robot is well on the way, particularly in Japan, where they have the crisis of an aging population needing care. Like in *The Matrix* we can be transported to new places of reality. There is real learning associated with gaming, including discussion of how games can be used to shape values and beliefs. In some senses we are in the medieval era of digital culture. It is often unsophisticated and tribal. People are publicly pilloried, and early games often resemble tribal warfare. But we are moving on. Radio National recently featured a conversation with listeners around the ways in which young people's beliefs and values have been shaped and challenged by the games they have played.

Virtual reality technology has recently been used by the US to train defence personnel to rescue hostages from a multi-roomed facility. Even though they were in a flat-floored gymnasium without dividing walls, they had the experience of going into rooms, being shot at and working as a team. Their heart rates and emotions mirrored real life experiences. In the near future, high quality virtual reality could be used to bring real life learning experiences to students just as it does for defence personnel in the US. The utilisation of technology may even mean that learning could happen at

home, delivered from a variety of sources with students connecting with each other and teachers in a very real way through virtual reality. Imagine learning in the future where you were not tied to the progress and interests of, at best, twenty-eight other people, or at worst, the poor planning of the one. How much time would we save, how much more interested would we be if we were able to connect to a virtual learning group that suited our rate of progress and interest from anywhere in the world, where learning was connected to real life contexts that could be experienced? A place where rich learning and genuine social interaction could occur?

Technologically it can be done now. We have a generation of young people who will be the parents of 2030 who already value online connection as genuine social interaction. Maybe we are not consistently 2030, but are there opportunities for us to develop some unique learning experiences for our Lutheran students? Education Queensland schools are using digital technology to deliver specialist courses that include language instruction, leadership development and subject specific enrichment. How might this flexibility of offerings and the immersive learning opportunities of games inform, enhance and even challenge our conception of schooling in the future? Will our families be satisfied with a restricted set of offerings from a single site? As we enter this age and expect teachers to be working differently, how are our industrial conceptions of a teacher's work adapting? How is this change and connectivity impacting on personal and spiritual growth and wellbeing?

Our Distinctive Culture and Identity

Even more challenging will be the concept of the culture and identity of Lutheran schools, and who will hold the story. The Essence Statement that we worked on with Richard Hauser, Barry Kahl and Anne Dohnt highlighted for me the subtle nature of our culture that comes from the understanding that God created each of us wonderfully in His own image, that because of our innately sinful nature we are each constantly in need of God's grace which through faith He gives us freely. Because of that, we are able to see ourselves and others as both saints and sinners, gifted with the capacity to do good for others and called to do so, with responsibility to care for each other as well as for nature. There is a life to be lived in abundance in an environment of compassion, courage, hope, possibility and humility with Jesus at our centre. We pick up our cross, encourage others to do the same and walk, trusting that a loving God walks with us. There is a deep understanding that comes through the interplay of these core doctrinal statements. There is a jewel of head, hands, soul and heart powerfully at work through a deep gracious understanding of Lutheran theology and the work of the Holy Spirit. Deep appreciation of this grows through constant engagement over a life time. In the past this has occurred through conversations at home, through Sunday school, Confirmation lessons, Church services, retreats, dialogue with mentors and peers and, for some, theological study. In the past, the best and the brightest minds from Lutheran schools and homes proceeded from an immersion in this culture to go into ministry and teaching. This is not the case today. In my progress through Lutheran schools, and I suspect for many others, there was a sufficient critical mass of people who held the story, and I am fortunate to still be surrounded by people with that deep understanding who, graciously and with love, continue to grow each other and our Pacific community. However what our community and the majority of students, perhaps even some staff, take from this experience, is the valuing of the fruits which they see, rather than engaging deeply with our theological foundations. Where they do explore opportunities to grow in their faith, it is rarely in a Lutheran church.

Over the years there has been the debate about the relationship between the Lutheran church and the Lutheran school. We are generally sitting in communities where our Lutheran Church membership is shrinking. Our schools have not been the boon of outreach for the Lutheran Church. We do need to ask ourselves why, and focus on our actions that have limited the connection.

In our schools I would suggest we are delivering “Christianity lite”, and possibly not all that effectively. We do trust that the Holy Spirit will work through what we do, but are we doing what we can and what we should? Previously I would have argued that as long as young people were going to some Church, then that was great. Now I am not so sure.

There is a richness in Lutheran theology that is worth fighting for. It is time for Lutheran schools and Lutheran congregations to sit in the dirt together, to sit on the precipice and find ways to connect profoundly with people of our communities. We need to find ways so that people can grow deeply in their understanding of Christianity from a Lutheran perspective, and to encourage the best and the brightest into our schools and into ministry. There are conversations and dialogues that need to happen. People are looking for spiritual growth and connection. They are looking for purpose, are time poor and strongly drawn to emotional experience. Our young people are less orientated to accumulation and prestige and more to a quality of life. We heard from Nielsen at ACLE last year, and Dr Dan White yesterday, of the possibility of drawing people into joint service and then sharing the gospel. Schools have the capacity to be a bridge to congregations. Schools are important for only a short phase of someone’s life. As in all things we want to equip young people to a lifelong journey of learning and growth. We are an important part of the Lutheran Church, but we are not the totality of the Lutheran Church. In partnership we have the capacity to think and create congregations more effective than the norm. What are the forms that would bring connection to God’s word alive in your context for the unlikely and the improbable? Where are there avenues of joint service that bring people together and provide opportunities for the gospel to be shared from a Lutheran perspective?

We respect and value ecumenism and benefit greatly from it. One of the strengths of Lutheran schools has been our capacity to share the gospel with people from varying backgrounds and at varying points of their faith journey. Connecting and learning with and from people of other faith traditions has strengthened what we do as Lutheran schools and as individuals. One of the more transformational experiences I have experienced was a retreat led by a Jesuit, and Dr Dan White has certainly given us some important learnings to ponder. At the same time we need to find time to polish graciously the jewel we have. We have the great grandparents of the edge of the twenty-second century in our schools. What story are we giving them to take forward?

The Window of Opportunity

Systemically we have had the structural advantage of being loosely coupled. We are tied together through a foundation of common beliefs, values and ethos through being part of the Lutheran Church, and we are reasonably autonomous in how we might shape the educational experience to best suit the needs of our community. Such loose coupling has been reliant on a deep understanding of Lutheran theology that could support different interpretations with integrity. People who write about organisational health such as Fitzgibbon would say that such loosely coupled organisations are optimal for growth and development through enabling their constituent parts to respond flexibly to feedback. The future will require early learning centres and schools, like other organisations, to be agile and creative. As accountabilities grow, there is a danger of taking the artistry from our schools and early learning centres through centralising control, reducing places of learning to factories of compliance and leaders to technicians. Leaders need to be inspired to lead and learn, to be creative and support risk taking. We all have a rich array of leaders in our schools, among our staff, parents and students. We are aiming to grow a culture of shared leadership, and develop our schools as places of high leadership density. Optimally, Lutheran schools should be light and free and able to find ways to collaborate within schools and Districts, nationally and even internationally. A challenge for leaders of all types is to find time for collaborative creativity to flow

and for the theological foundation to flourish. This is something we need to be intentional in fostering.

Together we can think beyond our schools. For example, today we could decide to provide, as an initial opportunity, for our best and brightest middle years students to connect once a week for enrichment programs, delivered by inspiring mentors in powerful real world contexts. Immanuel Adelaide could be responsible for mathematics, Grace Queensland - robotics, St Peters - science and technology, Living Waters in Perth - history and philosophy, Luther - politics, Pacific - surfing..., Christian studies and theology, Lords - serving local communities, Yirara - working with indigenous communities, Eastside Tasmania - environmental action. Minimal cost; rich, unique experiences. Staff as leaders could dialogue across borders around issues as case studies with wise elders who are holders of the story. Across schools and districts we could try different models of formation for staff and students. Like departments or sections within our schools we need to find ways to break down the silos of individualism and sectionalism that exist within and between our schools and districts. Our optimal future will come from the glow of communal wisdom growing from a sure and rich theological foundation, rather than spatters of light that spurt from isolated bright sparks. We are light and humble enough to move together, and large enough to do it. We need to lift each other beyond the small landscape of the everyday to the landscape of possibility.

There will be change. We have the capacity to lead change. We have a pearl in our theology that enriches and enlivens the precious educational experience that is Lutheran. It is living and life changing. Through it we have the capacity to sit graciously with people, share their journey and inspire hope. We are the holders of the story. We need to ensure it is passed on in its full richness and colour by people with the capacity to enhance and shape it in an increasingly complex and ever-changing world. People with the hearts to recognise that in the midst of change, confronted by failure and frailty, our loving God remains unchanging and ever present. People with the wisdom to know that despite ourselves, what it means to be truly fully human has remained unchanged over the millennia. Our Lutheran Church is central to the sustenance and growth of the story. Here we stand. In the sixteenth century it was worth starting a Reformation for. In the nineteenth century it was worth leaving homes and countries for. In the twenty-first it provides the wings that will give us flight and reduce a precipice into an awesome, wondrous landscape of opportunity, possibility and hope. Not just for us but for all those we serve.

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