

# As a matter of principal— multicultural mission and ministry in Lutheran education

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## **Like no other**

Eighteen months ago I began to serve as College Pastor in a Lutheran school that was like no other in which I had previously served. My experience as a pastor in the LCA NZ has been somewhat unconventional in that my journey of pastoral ministry has been one of serving entirely as a teaching College Pastor in Lutheran schools. Along this journey, the Lord has led me to serve in school communities where the large majority of the student population were English speaking Anglo-Saxon Australians.

I now find myself serving in a Lutheran school community in which English speaking Anglo-Saxon Australians are in the minority. To my surprise and delight, the Lord has called together into community at Redeemer Lutheran College, Rochedale, a culturally diverse group of students and families to engage together in the learning journey of Lutheran education which incorporates within the learning environment the proclamation and the living out of the gospel of Jesus Christ on a daily basis.

## **Observation**

What does mission and ministry in a Lutheran school community look like where there is significant diversity of culture and language? As a newcomer to this dynamic within a college community, I initially spent some time observing the students and their interactions with one another in the schoolyard and in the classroom. I observed students eating together, playing together, studying together, engaging in group work and engaging with one another through a variety of daily routine interactions including music and sport. What I observed were students engaging with one another focussed on what they have in common, unphased by what could be said to be obvious differences. What they have in common is that they are all students and they are all part of the college community. The multicultural makeup of their community is their 'normal'. Occasionally in the Senior School context, students for whom English is not their first language gather together in small groups and engage each other using their first language. Again, other students are not phased by this. It is simply one dynamic of a healthy multicultural community.

## **God's Word**

How does God's Word engage a multicultural community context? With this question in mind I have begun to engage God's Word with a different mindset and continue to be amazed as the Lord reveals the multicultural nature of the gospel. Jesus was and continues to be a ground breaker and barrier buster with regard to age, gender, status

and culture. Jesus engaged tax collectors and sinners, lepers, demon possessed as well as Romans, Samaritans, Syrophenicians—Jews and gentiles on a daily basis. At Jesus' birth, foreigners, Magi from the East, travelled a great distance to be among the first witnesses to bring the news of his birth. Jesus' childhood years were spent growing up in Egypt, learning the ways of Egyptian culture. Jesus' Great Commission to the disciples was to make disciples of *all nations*... The day of Pentecost was a barrier breaker with regard to cultural and language barriers. In Acts, Philip was led by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the gospel to an Ethiopian eunuch. Paul's passion was to take the gospel message of Jesus Christ to the nations of the world. This is just a small sample of the ways in which God is reaching out to all nations through His Word. The Word of God calls us to ministry and mission through engagement and service to people of all nations, as the Holy Spirit leads.

### **The Redeemer experience**

Looking at the list of enrolments at Redeemer, here is a small sample of the diversity of national persuasions identified: Philippine, South Korean, Indian, Taiwanese, South African, Vietnamese, Hong Kong, Russian, Malaysian, Finnish, Chinese, and the list goes on. As College Pastor I ask myself 'What ought we be doing in order to help make the message of the gospel relevant for such a culturally diverse community?' I ask this realising that it is the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers and enlightens when it comes to matters of faith. The Lord who often moves in mysterious ways is answering this question as the year progresses. 2021 began with the provision of a new Deputy Principal who is Malaysian by birth, speaks multiple languages, has worked extensively with Indigenous Australians in the area of reconciliation and has a passion for recognising and honouring cultural identity. He has brought a more inclusive dynamic to the overall life of the college by intentionally acknowledging the festivals and events that impact on the lives of the students and families in our college community. For example, Lunar New Year is a very important festival for so many of our Asian families. Redeemer has, for a number of years, recognised this (not in 2020 due to Covid) with a whole college celebration, including a traditional Lion Dance, to the delight of the students, particularly the younger ones, no matter what their cultural origin may be. This year other significant festivals and sacred obligations have also been recognised—Orthodox Easter, the month of Ramadan, Songkran Festival, Holi Festival, Reconciliation Week and Mabo Day. Recognition of these events serves to build cross-cultural relationships within our college community. By doing this in the context of a Lutheran school, the intention is to assure the students that they are loved and valued by God for who they are, just as they are. This message is reinforced as we explore in our worship and devotion times the message of Jesus and the ways in which he was the living and active Words of God.

### **Reflections**

I wonder, given the reality of the multicultural nature of Australian society and community, if for the LCANZ and our approach to mission and ministry, there is a need to undergo a rethink which might be informed by the approach toward mission and ministry flourishing in our schools.

While our congregations are the backbone and the heart of the ministry of Word and sacrament, our schools are not fishing grounds for congregations and congregational

membership. It may be possible for those who have little to do with schools to become so congregational focussed that they struggle to see the remarkable ways in which mission and ministry is taking place in Lutheran schools every day. Our schools are communities where the mission and ministry of the Lutheran church extends to the wider community through connections with school families and other groups and organisations associated with the school. There are so many opportunities to partner in caring for people and sharing the gospel, particularly in schools with a multicultural family dynamic.

Jesus said in the Great Commission, 'go and make disciples of all nations', not 'go and make congregations of English speaking Anglo-Saxons'. In order to effectively offer mission and ministry which is enabled to be culturally diverse, we need to shift our thinking from a congregational mindset to a community mindset.

Effective mission and ministry in Lutheran schools does not depend on the number of Lutherans in that community. Mission and ministry in Lutheran schools is not about filling the pews of Lutheran congregations. It's about living the gospel, being the gospel, creating a school environment through which the Holy Spirit is bringing the love of Jesus to life with the people of the community God has brought together, not once a week, but every day, in and through the ordinariness and extraordinariness of everyday life.

### **A real life example**

A principal of a Lutheran college in a rural setting, at the end of her first term on Sunday evening, received some tragic news. Over the weekend (the first weekend of the school holidays) one of her Prep students had been tragically killed in a car accident. The same accident also claimed the life of the student's grandmother, and her father and younger brother were hospitalised due to the seriousness of their injuries. Adding to this tragedy was the fact that the parents were separated. On hearing the news, the principal immediately made arrangements to care for the family. First thing on Monday, she and the Prep teacher (who was way out of her comfort zone) went to the hospital. The Prep teacher sat with and supported the girl's mother who was extremely distressed. The principal attempted to visit the father but ended up sitting by the bedside of the younger brother who was wondering what an earth had happened to his world. Interestingly, the family, now being cared for by the principal and staff of the Lutheran school, were Buddhist. Over the holidays and following weeks, the college continued to care for the family and the principal was invited to assist with the funeral of her Prep student.

For me, this reflects the paradigm of mission and ministry of Lutheran schools. It is not about filling Lutheran congregations but about caring for the community, bringing to life our Lutheran theology—Christ led, Holy Spirit filled, living the example of Jesus, being Christ to others, sensitive to others being Christ for us.

### **Concluding thoughts—are we there?**

When I was going to youth group back in my younger days, I remember a song that may well encapsulate the approach to mission and ministry through a multicultural Lutheran school community. The song is, 'When I needed a Neighbour'.<sup>1</sup> The words of this song

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<sup>1</sup> Words and music by Sydney Bertram Carter (1915–2004), © 1965 Stainer & Bell Ltd. (admin. Hope 100 *Hymns for Today: A Supplement to Hymns Ancient & Modern* (London: William Clowes and Sons Ltd, 1969).

set out a paradigm for mission and ministry as it operates in a Lutheran school with a diverse multicultural dynamic.

The words to this song are as follows:

When I needed a neighbour,  
Were you there, were you there?  
When I needed a neighbour, were you there?  
*And the creed and the colour*  
*And the name won't matter,*  
*Were you there?*

I was hungry and thirsty,  
Were you there, were you there?  
I was hungry and thirsty, were you there?  
*And the creed and the colour*  
*And the name won't matter,*  
*Were you there?*

I was cold, I was naked,  
Were you there, were you there?  
I was cold, I was naked, were you there?  
*And the creed and the colour*  
*And the name won't matter,*  
*Were you there?*

When I needed a shelter  
Were you there, were you there?  
When I needed a shelter were you there?  
*And the creed and the colour*  
*And the name won't matter,*  
*Were you there?*

When I needed a healer,  
Were you there, were you there?  
When I needed a healer, were you there?  
*And the creed and the colour*  
*And the name won't matter,*  
*Were you there?*

Wherever you travel,  
I'll be there, I'll be there.  
Wherever you travel, I'll be there.  
*And the creed and the colour*  
*And the name won't matter,*  
*I'll be there.*

### Theology of the cross

The great leveller in all of this lies in the heart of the gospel, revealed so succinctly through the theology of the cross. Jesus' sacrifice paid the price for sin for all humanity, no discrimination, no exceptions. This was the ultimate act of love as God the Son, through His death and resurrection, brought the saving grace of God to life, restoring the relationship broken by sin.

Jesus didn't discriminate. The cross does not discriminate. Are we there?

### The final word

The most important thing to say in conclusion is that at the end of the day it is all a matter of principal.

The key person in shaping the approach to mission and ministry in the multicultural environment that is Redeemer, is the principal. Where the principal of a Lutheran College understands and takes seriously what it means to be distinctively Lutheran, the mission and ministry that is embedded within the core business of life and learning reflects that. In other words, where the principal understands and lives the Lutheran understanding and focus on grace, the theology of the cross, creation theology and the human condition of sinner saints in Christ, others are informed, encouraged and empowered to bring this to life in the everyday experiences of the school. This is the gospel in action. It is

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Publishing Co.). 'When I needed a Neighbour' in The Church of England, *100 Hymns for Today: A Supplement to Hymns Ancient & Modern* (London: William Clowes and Sons Ltd, 1969).

Christocentric rather than egocentric. To take the paradigm of Lutheran seriously is not about indoctrination or recruitment. It is about engagement in partnership with and inspired and empowered by the living God.

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