

A walk with Kelly

Mark Greenthaner

Kelly's request was not unusual. She wanted to meet the pastor at the school. Kelly and her husband were recent migrants to Australia and were about to move again—this time into our local area. They had a baby. They were checking things out. I was happy to give Kelly a tour of our school and explain a little about our history, what we offered as a school, our ministry and our links to the local congregation. She was also eager to know a bit about the secondary college with which we share a campus, and asked if we could visit the chapel which our congregation uses for worship.

There was nothing about our time together that was unusual...until we were walking back to Kelly's car and she spelled it out: 'Our friend told us we should look for a church to join because then we would feel that we "belong".'

Kelly and her family came to our school-and-church community looking to 'belong'.

I have been involved in ministry in a school-and-church community for thirty-five years. Initially I focused on developing confidence and skills working in a secondary school context. As I developed an appreciation of the ministry challenges and opportunities presented in an educational institution, I gradually learned that, alongside the various subjects of the formal curriculum, students focus intensely on the informal curriculum of 'identity', 'a sense of meaning and purpose', and 'belonging'.

As my own children began to engage in 'the education system' I saw them focus on that same informal curriculum in a similar way: 'identity', 'meaning and purpose', and 'belonging'. And I began to see how first-time parents were equally eager to 'fit in' and 'belong'.

These experiences helped to shape my proclamation, teaching, and care as pastor to 'my' community. Starting with John's simple statement 'God is love' (1 John 4:16) I began to engage with people with the phrase 'you are loved'—a statement that actually covers a lot of ground in relation to 'identity', 'meaning and purpose' and 'belonging'. The people in my community are loved by God.

I am currently a full-time pastor in a large and growing primary school. About 50% of our current families do not formally identify themselves, at enrolment, by any religious affiliation. The others have nominated Anglican, Assemblies of God, Baptist, Buddhist, Catholic, Christian, Christadelphian, Churches of Christ, Greek Orthodox, Hindu, Jehovah's Witness, Latter Day Saints, Lutheran, Muslim, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Reformed, Russian Orthodox, Seventh Day Adventist, and Uniting Church. It is worth noting that over 25% of our families speak a language in addition to English at home: currently listed are Cantonese, Greek, Gujarati, Hawaiian English, Hindi, Korean, Mandarin, Persian, Portuguese, Punjabi, Telugu, Thai; and we have also had families speaking Afrikaans, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese,

Latvian, one or more Papua New Guinean languages, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, Ukrainian, and Vietnamese. How do you cover all of this? 'You are loved' is a good starting point in relation to all of us learning about 'identity', 'meaning and purpose' and 'belonging' in our community. The people in our community are loved by God.

When I first took up ministry in a Lutheran school, I discovered that much of what seems so essential to 'my' church was suddenly different. Worship was held weekday mornings instead of Sundays. Christian Studies lessons were mixed in-between Maths, Science, and the Arts. Our ministry community learned, played, related, celebrated and lived together 40+ hours per week! Most of those for whom I was pastor did not have any significant prior church connection. Significantly, the language and cultural concepts of 'my' church were initially unfamiliar to many students (and their parents). 'Sin', 'forgiveness', 'grace', 'justification', and 'faith' are basic concepts for belonging to 'my' church. But many of those in my care had only vague or skewed understandings of these. They were polite, well-behaved, respectful and attentive even in unfamiliar settings. And they engaged in learning with a critical attitude, often drawing on a worldview and life experiences that were quite foreign to me. So I gradually learned to take up my ministry in a way that is somewhat counter-intuitive to Lutherans. In order to engage my teenage students, I started by skipping over 'justification by grace through faith alone' and, instead, focused on the biblical theology of identity associated with creation: 'You are the loved creation of the God who is love.' God made all of them as 'mine'—and even without many of the traditional trimmings, 'we' formed 'our' community of ministry. We belonged to each other.

Kelly's friend told her to look for a church to join because then she would 'belong'.

'Belonging' is a complex, two-way process. It often means giving up lots of well-formed presuppositions and expectations. It means understanding different viewpoints. It means lots of listening in order to facilitate sensitive understanding and learning. It means using new language. It means working out what is most important to share and then starting from that point. It means creating new, common understandings, rituals and experiences that are 'ours'. It means new insights and understandings that lead to growth and change. It means moving from tolerance to genuine, mutual appreciation, and acceptance. It takes time. It takes love.

Every year we welcome over a hundred new people to our community. At my first opportunity to meet the parents of new students I introduce myself and offer a simple ministry commitment—I tell them they belong: 'I am your pastor. My role at Good Shepherd is to help find ways of telling you and your children that you are loved by God—no matter what—it's His gift.'

Every morning I enter my ministry through a gate marked 'Good Shepherd'. Jesus says, 'There are other sheep which belong to me that are not in this sheep pen. I must bring them, too; they will listen to my voice, and they will become one flock with one shepherd' (John 10:16).

Over the past thirty-five years Mark Greenthaner has served as a pastor in changing roles across a campus shared by Luther College, Outer Eastern Lutheran Church, and Good Shepherd Lutheran Primary School in Croydon, Victoria.