

# Supporting same-sex attracted students in Lutheran middle and secondary schools

Stephen Haar

---

An unprecedented national postal survey on marriage equality in August 2017 gave unstoppable momentum to pass into Australian law historic social reform. In December 2017, Australia's parliament passed legislation, almost unanimously, to allow two people, regardless of sex, to marry.

This full-recognition of same-sex relationships has had flow-on effects in the wider community; not the least being in schools and other places of learning. The removal of discrimination has promoted wider acceptance and celebration of diversity, particularly among young people. These changes in legislative, regulatory, and community environments—in relation to gender identity and sexual preferences—have direct impacts on and implications for Lutheran schools. Among these is the issue of same-sex attracted students.

In January 2019, the Department of Education (SA) approved policy that mandates *supporting gender diverse, intersex and sexually diverse children and young people*.<sup>1</sup> The policy gives expression to national early childhood, primary and secondary education understandings of inclusive education; a commitment to providing safe and supportive learning environments for all students. This includes: developing and promoting 'inclusive practices' to ensure that children and young people who may experience marginalisation feel safe and supported;<sup>2</sup> following '*Gender diverse and intersex child and young people support procedure(s)* to support gender diverse and intersex children and young people to safely affirm their gender identity within their education environment';<sup>3</sup> and compliance with legislative requirements pursuant to the *Sexual orientation, gender identity, and intersex status Act 2013* (Cth).<sup>4</sup>

---

1 Department of Education (SA), Supporting gender diverse, intersex and sexually diverse children and young people: <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/>; Compare: Department of Education (VIC) LGBTIQ Student Support policy: <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/>; Department of Education (QLD) Diversity in Queensland schools: <https://education.qld.gov.au/>; Department of Education (TAS) Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex: <https://www.education.tas.gov.au/>; Department of Education (NSW) Culture and Diversity: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/>.

2 Department of Education (SA), Supporting gender diverse, intersex and sexually diverse...people (1.2.4).

3 Department of Education (SA), Supporting gender diverse, intersex and sexually diverse...people (1.2.10).

4 Australian Government, Sex discrimination amendment (sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex status) Act 2013, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2013A00098>.

In its foundational documents on educational philosophy,<sup>5</sup> including its *Vision for learners and learning*,<sup>6</sup> Lutheran Education Australia (LEA) identifies the development of a clear sense of personal identity and worth as being core to student experience in a Lutheran school community. This outcome reflects widely held beliefs that quality education environments and learning experiences set a trajectory of lifelong outcomes for children and young people that impact personal achievements, health, wellbeing, and life opportunities throughout adulthood.<sup>7</sup>

The issue of same-sex attraction and relationships<sup>8</sup> is both complex and controversial within the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA), and its institutions. LEA does not establish positions on matters such as same-sex attraction and relationships. Rather, it is responsible for operating within the guidelines of state and federal law as well as official church positions.<sup>9</sup> Lutheran schools are committed to doing so responsibly and compassionately: distinguishing clearly between the expectations which the LCA might have for schools, and what schools are as educational institutions serving both church and state.<sup>10</sup>

Lutheran theology views the role of the state in education as growing out of the responsibility of parents for education.<sup>11</sup> The role of the state is to provide for its citizens the education

- 
- 5 Commission on Theology and Interchurch Relations (CTICR), *The Lutheran Church of Australia and Its Schools*, Lutheran Church of Australia, Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions, Volume 2, Section J, Church-School Issues (2001):1, <https://www.lca.org.au/departments/commissions/cticr/>; Lutheran Education Australia, *Growing deep: Leadership and formation framework* (Adelaide, SA: Lutheran Education Australia, 2016), <http://growingdeep.lutheran.edu.au/>; LCA, *The Lutheran school as a place of mission and ministry* (2016), <https://www.lutheran.edu.au/download/the-lutheran-school-as-a-place-of-ministry-and-mission/?wpdmdl=1057&refresh=6098829d1772e1620607645>.
  - 6 Lutheran Education Australia, *A vision for learners and learning in Lutheran schools* (Adelaide, SA: Lutheran Education Australia, 2013), 3, [www.lutheran.edu.au/teaching-and-learning/a-vision-for-learners-and-learning](http://www.lutheran.edu.au/teaching-and-learning/a-vision-for-learners-and-learning).
  - 7 Deloitte Access Economics, *The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving* (2012); Government of South Australia, *Supporting gender diverse, intersex and sexually diverse children and young people [Policy]* (Adelaide, SA: Department of Education, 2019), 3.
  - 8 This paper acknowledges the diversity of GLBTTIQQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, questioning and queer) but focusses on same-sex attracted school students.
  - 9 Commission on Theology and Inter-church Relations (CTICR), *Human Sexuality: Three Key Issues* (Adelaide: Lutheran Church of Australia, 2014). From time to time, the LCA produces statements that reflect its own understanding of various contemporary issues in the life of the church or society. The Commission on Theology and Inter-church Relations oversees this area of the LCA's work. At the request of the College of Bishops or the General Convention of Synod, it prepares statements for information and adoption. The theological statement with pastoral consideration, *Human Sexuality: Three Key Issues*, was released as a study document for the guidance of the church. The statement was not presented and adopted by a LCA General Convention of Synod; in this sense it does not represent an official teaching of the church. Its three-fold focus on marriage, being single, and homosexuality, means that significant areas of human sexuality and social realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not addressed. Furthermore, the emphasis on 'homosexuality' in the document comes from the fact that the document initially arose from widespread desire in the LCA to update the 1975 statement on homosexuality (adopted in principle by the General Synod, 1975 Convention).
  - 10 Malcolm Bartsch, *A God Who Speaks and Acts: Theology for Teachers in Lutheran Schools* (Adelaide, SA: Lutheran Education Australia, 2012), 193–206. Bartsch provides teachers with an accessible and relevant discussion of two ways God works in the world: ways that need to be distinguished but not separated.
  - 11 Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, trans. Friedemann Hebart, in *Luther's Large Catechism: Anniversary*

required for them to develop as individuals and to take their place in society and fulfil their responsibilities within society. Bartsch comments, 'Lutheran schools accept that such education must be relevant to the pluralistic nature of contemporary society, in spite of the difficulty of determining common values on which to base such education.'<sup>12</sup>

The LCA views its early childhood education and care services, primary schools, middle and secondary schools, as agencies through which it carries out its ministry and mission to the people of Australia and New Zealand: making available to its members and others in the community 'a formal education in which the gospel of Jesus Christ informs all learning and teaching, all human relationships, and all activities in the school.'<sup>13</sup> The church continues to operate its schools under government requirements, provided that meeting these requirements does not bring the church into conflict with the word of God and the teachings of the church.

This paper identifies needs and concerns in regard to same-sex attracted students in middle and secondary schools. Its focus is on inclusive education, child development, and respectful consensual relationships: how schools can respond in a consistent, responsible, and compassionate manner to the needs of students within Lutheran school communities.

### **The contribution of consensual relationships in adolescent development**

Perhaps many remember their early adolescence attractions and romances as being short-lived, tinged with awkwardness, and lacking depth. On some levels such an assessment may have an element of truth. Yet the characterisation of adolescent relationships as fleeting and superficial is demonstrably incomplete. For over fifty years, researchers and theorists have explored and further developed Erikson's writings<sup>14</sup> on identity, published in his landmark book *Identity: Youth and Crisis*.<sup>15</sup> Erikson identified the key developmental task of adolescence as the development of identity: developing a sense of themselves with their mothers, fathers, friends, romantic partners, and others.

Relationships are central in adolescents' lives. They are an ongoing topic of conversation, involving both real and fantasised relationships.<sup>16</sup> Also, rather than being trivial or ephemeral, research agrees that having any relationship experience in adolescence is consequential for young adult partnerships. As young people move from early and late adolescence, they develop psychologically and physically. This is when young people

---

*Translation and Introductory Essay by F. Hebart (Adelaide, SA: Lutheran Publishing House, 1983), 141–142.*

12 Bartsch, *A God Who Speaks and Acts*, 196.

13 CTICR, *The Lutheran Church of Australia and Its Schools*, section 1.2 and 7.3.

14 Elli P. Schachter and Renee V. Galliher, 'Fifty years since "Identity: Youth and Crisis": a renewed look at Erikson's writings on identity,' *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research* 18, no. 4 (2018), 247–250. Doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2018.1529267.

15 E.H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968).

16 C. Feiring, 'Concepts of romance in 15-year-old adolescents,' *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 6 (1966), 181–200; C. Feiring., 'Gender identify and the development of romantic relationships in adolescence,' in *The Development of Romantic Relationships in Adolescence*, ed. W. Furman, B.B. Brown and C. Feiring (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 2000), 175–200.

experience and explore feelings, behaviours, and an evolving sense of sexual identity.<sup>17</sup> Throughout this time, however, sexual attraction and feelings are not always aligned. Teenagers who primarily may be attracted to girls may also be attracted to others, who may or may not identify as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, or asexual.<sup>18</sup> This fluidity is reported more frequently by girls.<sup>19</sup>

It is natural and common for adolescents to express their sexuality to others, but not all conversation or behaviours are wanted or welcome. Unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature which makes another person feel offended, humiliated, or intimidated is considered as sexual harassment.<sup>20</sup> The experience of unwanted sexual behaviours can impair the development of healthy relationships and is also related to symptoms of depression and anxiety.<sup>21</sup>

Teachers and parents in Lutheran schools want children to have an education that gives them the best start to a happy, healthy and fulfilling life. The introduction of respectful, consensual relationship education in all government and non-government schools—a program supporting students to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills to strengthen their sense of self, and build and manage safe and respectful relationships—is promising to deliver such educational and personal outcomes; leading to positive change in students' academic outcomes, their wellbeing, classroom behaviour, and relationships between teachers and students. Further, the respectful relationships initiative aims to support schools in building a culture of respect and gender equality, by looking at their practices and policies to drive meaningful change.

A key conclusion of the *Sixth National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2018*, was that both community and school can play a pivotal role in providing a supportive environment for the development of awareness, knowledge and skills to engage in healthy sexual relationships.<sup>22</sup> In Lutheran schools same-sex attracted students ought to have the same claim to a safe education and caring environment as

---

17 Ann Meier and Gina Allen, 'Romantic relationships from adolescent to young adulthood: Evidence from the national longitudinal study of adolescent health,' *Social Quarterly* 50 (2009), 308–335.

18 Diana Warren and Neha Swami, 'Teenagers and sex,' in *Growing Up in Australia—The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) Annual Statistical Report 2018*, ed. G. Daraganova and N. Joss (Melbourne, VIC: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2018), 48.

19 Francisco Perales and Alice Campbell, 'How many Australians are not heterosexual? It depends on who, what, and when you ask,' *The Conversation*, 11 June 2019, accessed 4 March 2021, <https://theconversation.com/how-many-australians-are-not-heterosexual-it-depends-on-who-what-and-when-you-ask-118256>.

20 Australian Human Rights Commission, 'A bad business—Fact sheet: Legal definition of sexual harassment,' Sydney: AHRC, 2003. Retrieved from [www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bad-business-fact-sheet-legal-definition-sexual-harassment](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bad-business-fact-sheet-legal-definition-sexual-harassment).

21 Mons Bendixon, Josef Daveronis and Leif Kinnear, 'The effects of non-physical peer sexual harassment on high school students' psychological well-being in Norway: Consistent and stable findings across studies,' *International Journal of Public Health* 63, no. 1 (Jan 2018), 3–11.

22 Christopher Fisher, Andrea Waling, Lucy Kerr, R. Roz Bellamy, Paulina Ezer, Gosia Mikolajczak, et. al., *Sixth National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2018*, ARCSHS Monograph Series 113 (Bundoora, VIC: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University, 2019). DOI: 10.26181/5c80777f6c35e.

other students.

## **Sexuality, inclusion, and theology**

Historically, Christian churches and their agencies—including Lutheran schools—have held strict if not restrictive views on sexual beliefs and behaviours. Sexual mores have been considered fixed, final, and absolute; despite the conclusions of medical and social sciences that there is more than one way of viewing sexuality and more than one way of being sexual.

To further complicate efforts by schools to provide quality education environments and learning experiences for sexually diverse students, is an evident confusing of sexuality and sex within the Australian community; especially when ‘sex’ carries the connotation of intercourse—as in to ‘have sex’. This misunderstanding is unhelpful because it narrows down the ‘very complex and many sided physical-psychological-social-religious-political aspects of being human to questions about the “how-where-when-why-with-whom” of sexual intercourse.’<sup>23</sup> The confusion of sexuality with sex is responsible for spreading the false assumption that being sexual involves being in a genital-sexual relationship: an assumption that excludes many people, including those whose life-circumstances, commitments, or disability prevents them from having a sexual partner. Again, such a narrow view gives little consideration to the personal-psychological dimension of sexuality, related to particular stages of emotional development as individuals, and the impacts of social and cultural backgrounds.

It is important for Lutheran schools, in their commitment and efforts to support same-sex attracted students, to encourage an informed awareness of what Christian theology has to say and to consider what wisdom that tradition has to offer for establishing faithful and pastoral responses. Further, it is important to bring theological tradition into conversation with contemporary knowledge and experience in order to foster—perhaps rediscover—Christian understandings of sexuality.

Traditionally, theological discussion about humans as sexual beings begins with Genesis 1–2.<sup>24</sup> Yet, throughout history, the questions, ‘What is human?’ and ‘What is the image of God?’ have been answered differently. For centuries theologians connected the image of God with subduing or having dominion over the earth—a conclusion that has come to be known as the functional view of the ‘image of God’. Others looked behind the functionality of humans to consider what made the subduing and dominion possible; and they concluded this was human reason located in the soul. This came to be known as the substantive or structural view of the image of God. The soul was believed to be made of the same substance as God and as such was also the source of human capacity to love and pursue holiness. Much less often have theologians considered ‘being fruitful, multiplying, or filling the earth’ as linked to the image; even less so being created male or female—although a number of them have believed males more closely reflect the image of God because they

---

23 Stephen Barton, *Life Together: Family, Sexuality, and Community in the New Testament and Today* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), 72.

24 CTICR, *Human Sexuality*, 4.

considered them more rational and more suited to being rulers.

It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that some theologians began to challenge the traditional understandings of the image as the soul's ability to reason, or the responsibility to rule over creation. Karl Barth looked at the creation of Adam and Eve as a symbolic picture, an image of the Trinity. In Genesis 1, God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image,' and then what does God make? Not one but two; a man and a woman who are to become one flesh. Just as God is a plurality and unity, three in one, so humankind created in God's image exists as two who are called to be one. This has come to be known as the social or relational view of the image of God.

So, contemporary Christian theology about sexuality begins in a surprising place: God as Trinity. The relationship between the persons of the Trinity is described as desire for unity with each other; a relationship of love and mutuality that is characterised also as faithfulness, interdependence, and trust that overflows into the creation and redemption of the world. The desire that humans have for connection and union with another—solidarity, friendship, tenderness, love, joy, intimacy, consensual sexual intercourse—is a desire that expresses our nature as divine creatures. While some in history have argued a sharp distinction between *eros* (sensual human love) and *agape* (divine love), there are other traditions—including the Song of Solomon—that claim 'where love is, there is God' (*ubi caritas et amor, ibi Deus est*).<sup>25</sup> Sexuality is a means for humans to glorify God and to share God's good gifts with others.

Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
as a seal upon your arm;  
for love is strong as death,  
passion fierce as the grave.  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
a raging flame.  
(Song of Solomon 8:6)<sup>26</sup>

In writing to Christians living in Corinth, the apostle Paul addresses questions of sexuality and sexual behaviours more than once. At the heart of this teaching was Paul's response against those who claimed that true reality was entirely 'spiritual', and, had nothing to do with human embodiment; therefore, it did not matter what you did with your body—that was a matter of no consequence. In response Paul gives the positive instruction: 'Glorify God in your body' (1 Cor 6:20). Paul's advice puts sexuality in its rightful place—namely, how we build one another up in relationships of love to the glory of God. This is the place

---

25 '*Ubi caritas*' or '*Ubi Caritas et Amor*' is a hymn of the Western Church, long used as one of the antiphons for the washing of feet on Maundy Thursday. Its text is attributed to Paulinus of Aquileia in 796AD.

26 An allegorical reading of the Song has given it meaning for countless generations of Jews and Christians, which reminds us that the biblical texts function as living word in a variety of times, cultures, and unexpected ways. Still, the best reading today is the literal one, assuming that the book is what it appears to be: poetry celebrating human love and sexuality, which biblical faith regards as good gifts of God in creation. The Song takes unbridled delight in the bonds of love, even while recognizing the pains and turmoil they can bring along the way toward their fulfilment.

where Christian theology has spoken also about the gift of marriage, as well as providing some reflection on the vocation of celibacy (1 Cor 7:1–9, 32–35). Paul's advice is also the place for equally rich theological reflections concerning the nature of friendships, such as the biblical examples of David and Jonathan,<sup>27</sup> Ruth and Naomi.<sup>28</sup>

Paul's overall concern in teaching about human sexuality is the building up of human community, bringing healing and transformation to peoples' lives, and so to bring glory to God. Paul does not focus on sexual matters for their own sake, but for their God-given purpose of creating an ordered, holy, life-giving community. There is wisdom here for our thinking about sexuality: sexuality as God's good gift enabling us to nurture one another in our life together. As we learn from God, and the people of God, disciplines, virtues, and skills for expressing our sexuality appropriately, we build one another up and give glory to God.

### **Providing safe education and a caring environment inclusive of sexually diverse students**

While historic legislative exemptions have allowed faith-based educational institutions in Australia to discriminate against students, teachers and staff, including on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity and other attributes covered by the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*, these exemptions are currently the subject of review and increasing challenge.

How prepared are Lutheran schools to respond to such challenges? In all likelihood, there is no one response that will satisfy all stakeholders in this matter—even not thinking of broader Australian society and culture but just the Christian community. A not uncommon faith-based voice in the discussion asks 'Where do we draw the line? At what point do we say, "We must obey God rather than any human authority"?'<sup>29</sup> Yet other voices respond, 'Must our faithful response necessarily result in drawing lines of *exclusion*? In what ways is this challenge that faces us about our learning how to draw lines of *inclusion*?' Further, 'How might Lutheran schools respond with faithfulness and integrity—from the core of their educational philosophy and vision for learners and learning—to provide learning communities characterised by welcome, inclusion, and hospitality; from the heart to the fringes?'

The following three propositions highlight some key points for ongoing conversation raised within schools regarding the provision of safe education and a caring environment inclusive of sexually diverse students. Each proposition is accompanied by observations from either scripture, theology, educational philosophy, or pastoral care, to encourage further informed discussion and responsible decisions.

---

27 1 Sam 18:1–3.

28 Ruth 1:16–18, 22.

29 Acts 4:19, 5:29.

1. *To provide quality education in a safe, supportive and inclusive environment for same-sex attracted students, there is a need for Lutheran schools to have a renewed appreciation for wisdom in Christian theology that informs thinking about sexuality as God's good gift enabling us to nurture one another in our life together, and to give glory to God.*

This wisdom emerges not merely from isolated biblical texts and commands, but from the whole witness of scripture.

It is not the purpose of this paper to critically engage the biblical texts and arguments regularly included in discussions of human sexuality. Readers are invited to study the extensive and conservative treatment these texts receive in the CTICR background paper on human sexuality.<sup>30</sup> The focus of this paper, however, is on how Lutheran schools on the one hand can respond in consistent, responsible, and compassionate ways to students, while at the same time avoid bringing the church into conflict with the Word of God and the teachings of the church.

There are two common approaches within the LCA, including schools, for interpreting and applying what the bible has to say about sex. First, an approach that focuses on those texts that are claimed to refer explicitly to embodied human sexuality and sees the bible as a guidebook on sex. Second, an approach which views the bible as a narrative about connection and intimacy, understanding sexuality as one moment within other expressions of relationship.

Those who read the bible as a guidebook view what they read as offering clear laws about sexual behaviour: as a 'how-not-to' guidebook, although the bible also provides some general principles for understanding God-pleasing expressions of human sexuality. One fundamental belief about sexuality, according to this viewpoint, is that sex is a gift when used in proper contexts and dangerous when practiced in the wrong context. One basic model for the practice of Godly-sex occurs in the creation stories.<sup>31</sup> The model of Adam and Eve is understood as God providing the template for rightly ordered sex: without shame, with restraint, shared with one other person (of the opposite sex) in marriage. Anything that deviates from this pattern is viewed as questionable.

Another approach to interpreting what the bible has to say about sex focuses on reading it as a narrative on connection, intimacy, and relationship. The bible tells the stories of relationships: creation's relationship with God; human relationships with one another; God's election of a nation for a particular relationship, and, of the extension of that covenantal relationship to the world in Jesus Christ. As the bible narrates these relationships, which focus on episodes of grace and incidents of sin, the reader encounters their place in the grand story of scripture and God's invitation into further layers of connection, intimacy, and relationship. Read in this way, many of the bible's supposedly non-sexual texts have much to say about sexuality.

---

30 CTICR, *Human Sexuality* (see footnote 9 for the full reference).

31 For example, Gen 2:24–25.

One example is in the response of Jesus to the question: ‘Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?’ Jesus said, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (Mat 22:36–40; Mk 12:28–34; Lk 10:25–37). We need the full witness of scripture to teach us what love for God and love for our neighbour look like in practice. Another example from the gospels is when Jesus is portrayed as one who regularly preferred the table—community of the poor, the sinners, the tax collectors, and prostitutes—welcoming those who were traditionally excluded by barriers of physical, cultural, and sexual purity regulations. On one occasion, in defence of his associations with tax-collectors and sinners, Jesus said to his accusers, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners’ (Matt 9:12–13).

This challenge of Jesus is a challenge to us also. There exists a tension between sacrifice and mercy today in conversations about the need for *inclusive* learning environments in schools. *Sacrifice*—the purity impulse—defines a zone of holiness, admitting the clean and expelling the unclean. *Mercy*, by contrast, crosses boundaries. Mercy blurs the distinction, in bringing clean and unclean into contact. For Jesus, the presence of God’s kingdom was evident by inclusive wholeness more than exclusive holiness. God’s command for his people ‘to be holy as God is holy’ included, at its core, hospitality toward the vulnerable—the poor, the alien, the deaf, the blind, the widow, the orphan.<sup>32</sup> When applied to the question of what stance should be operant in Lutheran schools in regard to same-sex attracted students, what foundation do we have for concluding that the norm of hospitality does not apply to sexually diverse children and young people?

2. *To provide quality education in a safe, supportive and inclusive environment for same-sex attracted students, there is a need for Lutheran schools—operationally and as a wider community—to have a critical appreciation of research into sex and gender, and to be able to cope with the disclosure of gender dysphoria and same-sex attraction among students who experience it.*

The provision of a safe, supportive, and inclusive school environment includes having the courage to share what students are going through: the experience of an evolving sense of sexual identity during the stages of physical, psychological, social, and spiritual development. In doing so, school leaders, teachers, chaplains, and other staff within their various areas of responsibility are called to serve students to the best of their ability. Far from making judgements about the complex realities of students’ lives, the school will continually seek to follow the example of Jesus in his dealings with those who experienced marginalisation and sanction within their community.<sup>33</sup> Pastoral care values and commitments will bear in mind what Jesus said to his disciples when

---

32 See: Lev 19:33–34; Ezek 16:49–50; Matt 25:31–46; Lk 14:12–14; Rom 12:13; 15:7; Gal 6:10; 1 Thess 3:12; Heb 13:2; Jas 2:5,14–26.

33 For example: Lk 19:1–10; Jn 8:2–11.

their first consideration in relation to a blind man was ‘who is to blame?’ Jesus saw this situation as an opportunity for the work of God to be seen in the man’s life.<sup>34</sup>

Often leaders, teachers, chaplains, and other staff in Lutheran schools will live in creative tension as they fulfill their various vocations: respecting the requirements of education and state authorities, while at the same time living and working under God—as witnesses to the gospel and as those who bring care and compassion to those in need. Among the characteristic features of Lutheran schools provision of caring, safe, supportive, and inclusive school environments, will always be the prayers of staff for students in the school. Such prayers will be inclusive of asking God for their protection when tempted to sin, for discernment in making choices, for friendships that are mutually encouraging and give glory to God, to desire respectful and consensual relationships.

Identifying and discussing what is understood by a safe and inclusive learning environment will undoubtedly expose needs for change and growth within the school, as well as points of contention. For students it will regularly mean recognition, acceptance, support, and celebration. For the wider school community it will encompass—to varying degrees—policy and facility limits, social and religious values and morality, as well as affirmation of heterosexual practices.

3. *To provide quality education in a safe, supportive and inclusive environment for same-sex attracted students, there is a need for Lutheran schools to create inclusive policy with the goal of allowing students to focus on their education; and, to identify best practice in providing sensitive pastoral care.*

The development of policy that allows students to express and value their identity, needs to be appropriate, safe, intentional and inclusive. Policy needs to consider matters such as:

- Do staff use chosen names and pronouns?
- Does the student dress code account for all gender expressions?
- Are options for bathrooms, change rooms, and other traditionally gendered spaces accessible to and safe for students of all gender identities?
- Who are students allowed to bring as guests to formal events and dances?
- The provision of educational curricula that aim to ensure students feel included, valued, and learn what they need to progress in life, needs to consider:
- Does health and/or sex education include different reproductive options?
- Is safe sex for non-heterosexual relationships covered?
- Are students learning about community attitudes towards GLBTTIQQ people, including marginalisation and violence?
- Are students learning about the positive contributions of GLBTTIQQ people?

---

34 Jn 9:1–3.

The provision of quality education in a safe, supportive and inclusive environment for students in same-sex relationships, needs to consider how diversity and inclusion are represented:

- Do promotional materials and visuals throughout the school represent diversity and different family compositions?
- Are different identities and life scenarios incorporated in lessons?
- What clubs, groups, and other social opportunities exist for a range of student identities, beliefs, or interests?
- What actions can be taken to celebrate differences and minimize the effects of bullying?

The provision of quality education in a safe, supportive and inclusive environment, will ensure best practice in sensitive pastoral care that considers:

- How is the connection between student and school being cultivated?
- Do students know where to turn to and feel comfortable asking for help?
- What systems are in place for identifying students in need of interpersonal support?
- What systems are in place for meeting students' needs for interpersonal support?
- How can the school provide opportunities for students to build relationships and have meaningful interactions with their families? People and systems in their lives? The wider community?

## Closing comments

This paper gives focus to the question of how Lutheran schools can respond in a consistent, responsible, and compassionate manner to the needs of same-sex attracted students within their school communities. At first glance, some may consider this topic too narrow in focus given perhaps other pressing issues related to sexuality that impact a greater number of students in Lutheran schools? Other readers, however, may appreciate how the paper provides fresh starting points for discussion in schools about safe education in a caring environment inclusive of sexually diverse students, evident in the attempts to integrate matters of inclusive education, child development, schools policies and structures, with traditional biblical and theological considerations.

The provision of safe inclusive education for sexually diverse students is an important and ongoing discussion that deserves more than local consideration. As communities of practice, it would be beneficial to share local questions and reflections with others in regular and intentional ways. While this paper does not provide answers, it does attempt to articulate the characteristics of a consistent, responsible, and compassionate response to the needs of same-sex attracted students in schools.

Consistency of response by schools to the needs of same-sex attracted students is evident through ongoing informed dialogue between the very complex and many sided physical-psychological-social-religious-political understandings of human sexuality, and the expectations the LCA has for schools, and what schools are as educational institutions

serving both church and state.

A responsible response by schools to the needs of same-sex attracted students is evident in renewed appreciation for the wisdom in Christian theology and tradition that informs thinking about sexuality as God's good gift enabling us to nurture one another in our life together, and to give glory to God.

A compassionate response by schools to the needs of same-sex attracted students will be evident in the courage to share with students the complex realities of their lives; the development of policy that allows students to express and value their identity; the provision of educational curricula that aim to ensure student inclusion and preparation for respectful and consensual relationships at home, work, and the wider community; and by the provision of best practice in sensitive pastoral care.

*Stephen Haar is the academic dean and vice-principal at ALC*