

# Elitist Lutheran Schools? Maybe - and So What?

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Charges of elitism are a concern for our Lutheran schools. In the current political climate they are viewed by the public as institutions in the private education arena. No matter that sweeping and inaccurate generalisations are thrown about in the press about the funds provided and the outcomes guaranteed by independent schooling, our schools can too easily be perceived as similarly privileged and exclusive. This article approaches the issue of elitism obliquely in connection with my current research interests, considers factors that have brought our schools to this point, touches on issues of distinctiveness, and finally asks, 'So what?'

Even within our schools, some have difficulty distinguishing between Lutheran schools and other independent or private providers.

In a small research project, I began an investigation of the 'construct' of Lutheran school in the minds of people in a community where there is one of our schools. I conducted interviews with two parents of children in a Lutheran school - one a Lutheran, the other a non-Lutheran with limited knowledge of Lutheranism. In the interviews I asked the participants to list the characteristics of a Lutheran school from most to least representative of their image of Lutheran school. The characteristics were taken from the school's own brochure and from the Lutheran Church of Australia's (LCA's) stated purposes for its schools.

Official documents of the LCA contain statements about the nature and purposes of Lutheran schools and the role of teachers within them, as well as the principles underpinning and practices expected of them. These documents are subjected to periodic evaluation and revision by Lutheran Education Australia. They then become the policy base for individual schools, whose practices are expected to reflect the church's position. The question remains: how true are these documents to the way our schools are perceived in the community?

Within Lutheran church circles in Australia there have been anecdotal perceptions of a blurring of the distinction between schools of the church, particularly secondary colleges, and other non-Catholic independent or private schools. There has been no specific research to validate these perceptions with their accompanying misgivings about the distinctiveness of Lutheran schools and the education they offer, although there have been some investigations of the climate and ethos of the Lutheran school. My initial, limited project began a continuing research journey.

For the two participants in the project, aspects of care, support and encouragement featured immediately as representative of the Lutheran school. Curriculum offerings, including the Christian Studies curriculum, were important to both. There was some divergence, with the Lutheran construct listing the area of Christian witness, which was placed lower in the ranking in the non-Lutheran construct. The other point of

comparison was that worship provision and preparation for service of God were ranked lowest in both constructs, although the order was reversed for each. The model of schooling represented by both constructs was that of a community of care and support, emphasising students' personal development and academic achievement, within their interest areas and according to their individual abilities.

In the interviews I also asked: Why a Lutheran school? Would any independent school be equally acceptable to you for your child's education? Both answers equated characteristics of the Lutheran school with those of other independent schools known to them, commenting on similar aspects of care, facilities, responses to wider educational movements and involvement of parents in the policies and practices of the school. So, in this small project, the parents interviewed agreed on the most important characteristics of a Lutheran school and saw similarities with other independent schools. And for both, the most important aspects were not those which we might expect, and have officially stated, to be prime reasons for the establishment of our schools.

In a recent published study, 'parents were asked to comment on what is different about particular schools, the strengths and weaknesses of the school selected, and the particular reasons for selection' (Sultmann, 16). Of all respondents, 100% of state school parents, 92% of independent school parents and 90% of Catholic school parents categorised care of students as 'absolutely essential'.

Within the group of parents who had elected for Catholic schooling, the more traditional criteria for Catholic school selection were rated comparatively low within the 'Absolutely Essential' category, including: faith development (46%), pastoral care and concern (47%) and religious education (39%) . . . Overall, the pattern of results from parents who had chosen Catholic education highlighted choice of schooling did not reflect reasons why Catholic school authorities have historically invested so much emphasis on school establishment and mission. (18)

Similar results might be found if interviewing Lutheran school parents. In the eyes of the general public our schools may not look and feel a whole lot different from other independent schools or even some state schools. If that is the case, we might reiterate Bartsch's question: Why Lutheran schools? We might also understand why our schools are linked with the concepts of elitism so often associated with all private schools.

Since their beginnings in South Australia and Queensland, Lutheran schools have claimed to offer an education distinct from that of other systems of education. As Hauser explains,

Part of this is because the philosophy which shapes them grows out of Lutheran theology. One example is the influence of the doctrine of the two kingdoms: the teaching that God cares for his creation through two dispensations, the spiritual and the civil. Lutheran schools prepare people for a life in both these worlds: for a role in society, and for faith in God. (Hauser, 16)

Given its theological grounding, schooling has been an integral and significant aspect of the life and work of the Lutheran church in Australia. For early German immigrants, the building of their church and a school went hand in hand. The importance of educating the young members of the community was embedded in their Lutheran world view, attested to by Luther himself in the preface to his Small Catechism, and seen as part of the vocation of a godly parent:

[T]ake pains to urge governing authorities and parents to rule wisely and educate their children. They must be shown that they are obliged to do so, and that they are guilty of

damnable sin if they do not do so, for by such neglect they undermine and lay waste both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world and are the worst enemies of God and man. (Tappert, 340)

Descriptions of the early Lutheran communities in Australia allow us to construct a picture of what the school meant for people and how they saw the nature and purpose of their schools. That construction emphasised acculturation into church and community, and the history of Lutheran schools in Australia for a considerable time after settlement in their specific geographical locations reflects those early conceptualisations of Lutheran school.

The twofold emphasis of Lutheran schooling - for church and society - has been challenged and represented in different ways over the almost two centuries of its history in Australia. The major debate has been whether schools are established for purposes of nurture within the Lutheran community or mission outreach into the wider community. The debate has been rendered more urgent by factors in the development of the education 'industry' in Australia as part of the effects of global movements and post-modern pluralism. The availability of government funding, the increased demand for non-government schooling and the excellent reputation Lutheran schools have established in the general community have contributed to an increase of Lutheran schools in Australia, leading to a large population of non-Lutheran students and the need to employ teachers from outside the Lutheran tradition. Consequently the nature of the Lutheran school has undergone changes. Conversations with people outside the Lutheran church who know of our schools raise the matter of perceived similarities and differences between state and Lutheran schools, as well as between Lutheran schools and other private schools.

Some people, even within our schools, see elitist aspects of the schools and the education they provide.

The names of certain prestigious Australian schools would conjure up in the minds of the general population visual images of old stone buildings set in spacious grounds in areas of high socioeconomic status. New buildings would be state of the art and expensive looking and would probably incorporate the latest technology. Students would wear expensive, conservative uniforms, and some staff might, on occasion, be clad in academic gowns. We could link to the visuals such words as prestige, elite, old-school-tie, exclusive, high achievement and wealthy. We would be establishing and building on a construct of private school or independent or non-government school which recent events have shown to be in the minds of very many Australians. To what extent would such images be in the minds of Lutherans about their schools? What about the general public's perception of a Lutheran school? Are the claims and fears about elitist Lutheran schools valid? Is the issue of choice a furphy when choice seems to depend on wealth and class?

It is not clear whether those who think about our schools - from within and without - see a distinction between the Lutheran school and the other non-government, non-Catholic schools in the community. In 2001 Middleton reported statements like the following as a result of research into student, teacher and parent attitudes within a sample group of Australian Lutheran schools:

- 'We're elitist. We want to be the best. We've lost what we stand for.'
- 'We're performance oriented. It's about appearances.'
- 'We are not an independent private school. We are an independent Christian school. The principal seems to forget that.'
- 'We've become like a business not a school. Anything to please the customer. The customer is always right.'(19)

These are worrying expressions of how some appear to be constructing Lutheran school in their minds. Is this also how members of the communities where Lutheran schools have been established see the schools? How valid are such perceptions? What are the mismatches between perception and reality? Concern is obviously being expressed, and by the people most closely involved in Lutheran schooling. There is a need to assess how different our schools are from other independent schools, particularly when it appears we are being painted in the same elitist colours.

The present situation has come about because of the development of our schools in the market economy.

Writers who trace the establishment of our schools in South Australia and Queensland in the time of white settlement look back from the current situation and reflect on changes and developments from earlier descriptions of the nature and purposes of Lutheran schools. They voice the perception of movement away from earlier reasons for setting up schools and express fears about the loss of distinctiveness.

For example, Hauser writes of 'a gradual change of emphasis in the schools' ethos' following the boom in the 1970s in Queensland as a result of government funding for independent schools. In relating the growth of Concordia College in Toowoomba, Queensland, he attributes the shift in emphasis to factors which 'made the college accessible to a wider clientele': the first lay headmaster, the coming together of the two previously separate branches of the LCA, the employment of non-Lutheran teachers, payment of award salaries for teachers and the retirement of very conservative key Lutheran administrators. 'All of these changes signalled a gradual shifting of the school's ethos away from its central orientation of producing church workers towards offering a more general Christian education to anyone who might desire it for their children' (Hauser, 36).

The trend noted by Hauser and the factors effecting it are mirrored in the stories of other Lutheran schools throughout Australia since the 1970s. Jericho adds as a factor influencing the expansion of Lutheran schools in the last decades of the twentieth century 'a general interest in alternatives to public schooling arising out of the weakening of the fabric of society - a by-product of the social revolution of the 1960s' (252). The popularity of Lutheran schools as a viable alternative, arising from their clearly stated Christian emphasis and long-standing history in the nation, may, of course, provide a temptation to be all things to all people and so lose something of that hoped-for distinctiveness.

Yet much of the allure of non-government schooling may lie in its ability to 'read against the grain of modern culture' (Coloe, 40). In an era when many are confronting the inadequacies of the modernist paradigm, church schools in particular remind us that their underpinning philosophy, as John Henderson has said of Lutheranism, 'does not grow out of a mechanistic, progressive world view, but one that is deeply counter-cultural' (39).

The Christian school with its underpinning theology presents a critique of modernism. Yet the forces of modernism, in particular the market economy, have affected the Lutheran school as every other independent school, and that may be a major contributor to the perception of the blurring of the distinction between Lutheran schools and other 'private' schools, and to the associated charge of elitism.

In discussing education and the new economic conditions - the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society - Beare and Slaughter comment:

Education . . . becomes integrated with the economy . . . education is spoken of in business terms . . . referred to as an export industry . . . Nor should it surprise us that the favoured mode for delivering the service is a privatized one, and that the public or government-provided schools are constantly being told to emulate the style of operation which has characterized the private, standalone schools. (31)

Lutheran schools have not escaped the influences of the market economy. The language of client, delivery, product and package is found in their discourse. Expansion has brought additional costs and the need to be competitive in the community in order to maintain viable enrolment levels. Middleton's report indicates the dilemma faced by Lutheran schools in a society with an economic rationalist approach to schooling: One of the major issues in a number of schools and colleges is the tension between being a Lutheran or Christian school, on the one hand, and marketing the school's image on the other hand' (19).

The provocative title of an article by Nuske, 'Doing theology in the marketplace of Lutheran schooling', also points to this tension. 'As an educational institution that assists the state by providing it with responsible citizens who contribute positively to society, the Lutheran school has found a niche in the market for private education'(53).

Partington raises additional aspects of the debate about schools and the marketplace on the basis of research into the reasons parents change their children's schools. Commenting on parental expectations of schooling, Partington notes:

Recruitment to the Lutheran Independent Schools from established government school students was partly fuelled by parental concern about religious beliefs and moral standards, but the considerations were less pressing for these parents as a whole than were their misgivings about the commitment of teachers in government schools and in the standards of work and behaviour achieved in these. (116)

That kind of comment aligns with the parent voices I heard in the interviews conducted:

- all teachers at a Lutheran school or at an independent school are accountable ...in a state school system I don't think all teachers care as much
- I think the kids are encouraged and probably pushed a little bit more to find their own abilities
- I know there are hassles at the Lutheran school, but they seem to watch out and, if anything happens, straightaway they are told
- caring, community, student focused, the children reaching their goals, friendship

Our schools may, like others in Australia and overseas, be perceived as moving away from the original purposes for their establishment and the kind of education that they were set up to offer.

In the United States also, changes in Lutheran schools have been studied and reported. Moser, for example, discussed 'seven significant changes [that] have occurred in [American] Lutheran schools over the past 50 years . . . in the spheres of purpose, integration, numbers, accountability, trust, educators and funding' (Moser, 132). Moser's article concluded with six predictions about the Lutheran schools of the future. He suggested a movement towards 'a less Lutheran and more generically Christian' school, increasingly split from its congregation and known in its community as a place where 'children will receive a safe, moral, quality education' (140,41). This is precisely how many parents view our schools today.

The increasingly pluralist school populations have affected the nature of such core components as the teaching of Christian Studies and the worship life of the schools.

Articles published in religious education journals over the last few decades have chronicled the movement in religious education away from a faithforming or catechetical approach in the face of the diverse religious and non-religious populations in schools founded on a denominational base.

Writers have also drawn attention to the rise of interest in spirituality and ethics in our society. Often unconnected with a specific denominational or even religious context, such interest is a mark of contemporary western society as trust in the positivist paradigm fades and postmodernist critiquing of the former meta-narratives of the western world view places emphasis on ways of knowing beyond the scientific and the objective.

The nature of Christian education and the religious education curriculum continue to engage writers for publications such as *Lutheran Education in the United States*, as they wrestle with the idea of the distinctiveness of Lutheran schools. Also Australian educators, including Mervyn Wagner, Adrienne Jericho and Norman Habel, have explored the educational and theological distinctives of our schools.

The same fears and concerns have emerged within the Catholic tradition. The impetus for Arthur's book, *The Ebbing Tide*, was that 'many Catholics, both clerical and lay, [were] deeply concerned about the direction that Catholic schools [in England and Wales] have taken . . . They believe that Catholic schools have lost their way' (Arthur, 1). Arthur undertook an investigation into 'the extent to which government legislation and action has threatened or eroded the Catholic Church's influence over its schools'. Issues of distinctiveness raised in the book include the countering of societal requirements, such as those related to discrimination, which would tend to erase many of the differences between church and state schools.

It is evident from Arthur's work that changes in the student and teacher profiles in Catholic schools in England and Wales are, as in Australian Lutheran education, more pronounced in secondary schools than in primary schools. The content and pedagogical approach to religious studies is likewise different for the more senior students, as it has been in Australian Lutheran schools, where the LIFE curriculum has operated from Years 1-10 and has then been followed by school specific courses or the state's accredited Studies in Religion syllabus. The recent development of an outcomes framework for Christian Studies in Lutheran schools will provide a consistent curriculum from Reception to Year 12.

Sullivan (2001) has more recently engaged the issue of a Catholic education which is both distinctive and inclusive. Drawing on the work of two philosophers, von Hugel (1852-1925) and Blondel (1861-1949), Sullivan outlines a philosophy of Catholic education which incorporates Catholic distinctives with educational inclusivity, thus arguing for the place of separate Catholic schools in a liberal and pluralist society. Our schools, too, can be seen as offering an inclusive education, grounded in a distinctive world view. But how distinctive, even for teachers in those schools, is that world view in the arena of elite independent schooling?

The definitive work edited by Cleverley, *Half a Million Children: Studies of non-government education in Australia*, gives an overview up to the late 1970s of non-government education in Australia. The book provides a detailed coverage of the development of the various types of independent schools in the nation and something of the history of particular schools within those groupings, with references to reasons for parents' choice of independent schooling for their children. Hayes, in the chapter on 'Education and the Lutheran church', comments:

Today the secondary colleges serve as secondary schools rather than as institutions for the training of church workers. In the last twenty years the colleges have begun to resemble those private schools whose history and traditions came from England. (Cleverley, 214)

A few years later, Maslen took the question of uniformity in Australian schools one step further by asking: How different are these [private] schools, really, from the great mass of state schools? His book is a tour of representative schools within the main groups of private schools across the country, and his descriptions of individual schools include the voices of principals, teachers, students and parents. He had a strong social justice emphasis and was quite critical of the inequality that is produced by the dual school systems. The issues he kept returning to were the degree of control students in the schools have over their learning and the perpetuation by these schools of the 'grossly unequal distribution of power and privilege' in society itself: 'Even amongst the small group of schools we have visited on this tour, it is clear that schools not only mirror the inequalities in society, but they also tend to sustain the social structure as it is' (Maslen, 224).

In the current climate of the renewed promotion of public education and the polarisation of state and independent providers, our schools need to be very clear about their particular identity and how that understanding is worked out in practice.

Our schools still hold Christian education in the broad sense and religious education as a curriculum offering to be core components of their nature and function, and have defined and developed those components in varied ways.

The policy document, *The LCA and its schools*, talks of the gospel of Jesus Christ informing the school context. This interesting statement invites and requires interpretation. Over a number of decades discussion of this concept has occurred in various articles and in the two major books about Australian Lutheran education published so far. In the first of those books, Janetzki writes:

In a world that is interested chiefly in things, in the impersonal, I expect the Lutheran school to manifest and to inculcate the supreme value of persons who think and act and feel for others; and who do this because they are intimately and personally related to the Person, Jesus Christ, in whose Person God became man and did not merely think about and feel for us, but who in love gave himself up totally for us. (95)

Lutheran theology frees staff and students to engage in teaching and learning about the whole of God's creation, as Bartsch affirms in the second of those two books:

[The Lutheran confessions emphasise] the continuing creation of God in God's world, working for the creation of new life, for the preservation of existing life, and for maintaining peace and good order in society through the so-called Orders of creation' of family, government and the economic order. According to this theological perspective, there is no separation of the 'sacred' and the 'secular', because everything is under God's governance. Therefore all God's gifts in creation are appropriate subjects for inclusion in a broad educational curriculum because God can be seen at work both as creator/preserver and as redeemer/sanctifier. (107)

On teaching the subject Christian Studies within that total curriculum and its relationship to the gospel-informed school, Eisenmenger has written:

Christian Studies . . . needs to find complementary expression in the whole school experience of the Christian life. The wider arena becomes that place where much of the theory of the classroom can be put into practice, and, conversely, it is the place

where issues come to life that may be referred to the Christian Studies classroom for fuller study, evaluation and appropriation. (23)

Indeed, what happens in the Lutheran school context should be a validation of what is taught in the Christian Studies classroom. Kahl put it this way:

A school that espouses Christ is one that practises Christian education . . . [which is], in a broad sense, everything that the school is . . . By all that the school does, it is voicing that all things come from God and each person is encouraged to find his or her place in the big picture, to discover the talents that God has provided, and to return those talents to him through a life of service to others. (1)

Jericho also discussed this concept when commenting on the reasons parents seek out Lutheran schools, including non-religious reasons such as the quality of the educational program, the values base and good discipline:

However, they soon have the opportunity to understand that the basis for these qualities is the motivating love of God in Christ. . . In the Lutheran school, the excellence dimension is underpinned by a desire to teach Christ. (257)

In essence, then, we understand the school to be offering Christian education in a broad sense through the wider curriculum of the school context: worship, pastoral care, behaviour management, church connections, family connections, staff-student relationships, student-student and staff-staff relationships, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities - the entire structure and ethos of the school. At a second level it is possible to teach and learn in the Key Learning Areas from a Christian perspective. That is, the world view into which the various school subjects speak is a Christian paradigm. One of the Key Learning Areas is, indeed, Christian Studies, where an academically rigorous approach is taken to the study of Christianity as a significant curriculum offering.

Features of our schools, such as holistic education, worship, the sense of community and ideas of care and service, are reason enough for their continued contribution to education both in society and church.

The holistic nature of Christian education has been central to the work of prominent religious educator Gabriel Moran, who has written consistently about the formational aspects of religious education during the latter part of the twentieth century and into recent years. Through his visits to Australia and courses at Australian Catholic University, Moran has had a significant influence on Catholic education here.

The significance and power of the educating community have been consistent and developing themes in Moran's thinking and writing:

From the earliest days of the church there has been some realisation that the way to understand Christianity is to live it. Education in Christianity has been provided by contemplative and liturgical prayer, the guidance of the family, the experience of the community and action for social justice. This tradition of 'Christian education' has been a rich one . . . and has never died out. Education in general might learn something from this Christian practice. (Moran, 1970, 85)

Despite misgivings about developmental theories, Moran describes three religious stages which he sees as covering the entire life of an individual. The movement is from a young child's physical relationship with its 'universe', through participation in a community's understandings of that universe to a personally held world view. Religious

education development is a journey during which the various 'forms of education' shape and reshape human beings.

In a 1997 publication, Moran picked up Ludwig Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations about the nature of language and how we learn language to describe 'how the whole environment and individuals within a human community teach the child to speak'. In a similar way, he suggested of religious education:

The community and the physical environment are always teaching in a school. No one intends this teaching, or people usually do not think much about it until someone complains. Despite the inattention - or indeed because of the inattention - the influence can be profound. (Moran, 1997a, 176)

In his continuing publications from the late 1990s to the present, Moran has been reiterating and reshaping his view of the nature and forms of religious education. The breadth of his concept is evident in such statements as these:

Religious education cannot be carried out unless there is a wider and deeper meaning for teaching than providing explanations to children . . . It includes teaching by communities in nonverbal ways and teaching by the nonhuman universe . . . Mostly what young people need is the availability of the way of life in practice and an increasing freedom to choose how they are to respond to it... What the young most need is an adult community continuing to learn, continuing to demonstrate care and compassion, continuing to celebrate a living liturgy. (Harris and Moran, 1998, 33,35,36)

The various expressions of community in our schools, so needed in our society, are a definite mark of difference, have a strong theological base, and allow for the kind of education, and religious education, which Moran describes.

The length and breadth of Moran's vision have not always been accepted by those who would want to limit religious education to the teaching which is done within the walls of the church or the church school classroom. The social and political milieu of the world today requires an approach to education which allows for connections to religion and spirituality in the ways that Moran has suggested. As McArdle comments in a recent article about the New South Wales Studies of Religion course, 'The first years of the twenty-first century have demonstrated the need for enhanced appreciation and understanding of the religious views which permeate our world' (32).

A major issue for Lutheran schools has been the place of the religious studies curriculum within the religious education offered by the school. The issue has been debated in Lutheran educational circles for a number of decades, since the nature and purpose of the schools have changed significantly: increased enrolments of non-Lutheran and 'unchurched' students, employment of non-Lutheran and even non-Christian teachers, distancing of school from church congregation, and the perceived need for competitive marketing and increasingly expensive resources.

Within the LCA there has in fact been a noticeable shift in understanding of the nature and function of its schools, evident in published documents and synodical resolutions, such as the Hand-in-hand - schools and mission vision statement, adopted by the 2000 General Synod of the LCA:

The mission of the LCA is to share the love of God in Christ with the world. Lutheran schools provide the church with many opportunities to make contact with the people of local communities and to respond to their physical and spiritual need, and so to both demonstrate and declare the gracious love of God. Congregations and schools are

encouraged to be more intentional, diligent, sensitive and flexible in responding to these mission opportunities.

The LIFE curriculum materials for the Christian Studies subject in Lutheran schools, developed in the 1990s, also reflect awareness and acceptance of the pluralist nature of the student population in Lutheran schools. The most recent curriculum development is the writing of an Outcomes Framework for Christian Studies in a format that is consistent with the latest curriculum documentation in state education departments. It now includes specific attention to philosophy of religion, world religions and ethics.

Still acknowledged as of prime importance in the Lutheran school is the practice of regular worship as a community activity. There are opportunities for committed Christians to meet in prayer groups and for all students to take part in spiritual retreats. Pastoral care and community service are recognised features of Lutheran schools. It seems that Lutheran schooling offers what Moran describes as teaching religion and teaching how to be religious, although the latter is not a formalised learning area but rather a participation in the 'religious' life of the school. There is also a strong awareness of the holistic nature of the Lutheran educational experience. Moran's concept of the teaching role of the whole community reinforces the integration of Christian Studies with the whole curriculum and ethos of the Lutheran school.

A further implication of Moran's theory for the distinctiveness of Lutheran schools lies in the concept of education being more than schooling and religious education more than the religion classroom. The justification for the existence of Lutheran schools is not that they have to provide a narrowly academic study of religion or Christianity, nor that they are nurseries of the faith, preparing for specific public ministry in the church. Such schools are, in Moran's terms, one form of education, which comes to the foreground at a particular stage of the individual's life-long religious education.

In the documentation prepared by the LCA for the High Court challenge to State Aid to Lutheran schools in 1978, it was argued that Lutheran schools are maintained for the benefit of the state in the following ways:

- By strengthening and maintaining the quality of life of the nation. As the quality of life of people is dependent not only on technological skills but also on cultural excellence and common moral values, and as cultural and ethical values have their roots in a belief system, Lutheran schools contribute towards quality of life by strengthening that religious faith which has formed and undergirds our culture and value system, namely, the Christian Faith
- By allowing for plurality in our society, and thus safeguarding the element of freedom and inhibiting the progress of a totalitarian philosophy of life and therefore also of education.

Moran's theory of life-long religious education similarly recognises the integral place for such schools in our society: The aims and means of education ought to be worked out in the context of scientific, artistic, philosophic, and religious life' (Moran, 1983, 164). Brian Hill was just as forthright:

In a community that is becoming more and more divided, Christians are called to play a significant role as savouring salt, particularly in the field of education; a role which is not negated, but made all the more necessary, by the increasing pluralisation of values and world-views. (34)

It is important for schools as closely connected to the parent church as Lutheran schools are, to maintain an approach to Christian education which openly proclaims the

educational validity of studies in the Lutheran tradition and opportunities for expressions of faith. Moran states,

Religious education . . . has two distinct but related elements: the first is immersion into the particular practices of one's people and one's tradition. The more particular the practices the better. The second is a study of one's tradition in relation to other particular traditions. (Moran, 1997b, 162)

Russell Moulds, in an article entitled What's Lutheran about Lutheran teaching? concludes that

a Lutheran education that deliberately communicates the Biblical, Lutheran tradition and ethos will do students a world of good, both for this world and the world to come. Non-Lutherans, believers and unbelievers alike, will receive a distinct, historically extended, community-embodied worldview located in sources they can access and evaluate as grounds for standards, judgments, authority, the good, and meaning and purpose ... Meanwhile, Lutherans will receive an account and induction into their own community that does not isolate and inoculate them from the world, but prepares them to understand the world and bring to it that Word of life for today and eternity... (192)

We need to take seriously perceptions of elitism

Given the valuable contribution our schools can and do make to the life of the church and society through the holistic education of their students, issues of elitism need to be addressed. Last November's Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) conference had a strong emphasis on public education. It was inevitable that sessions threw up comments about the private school situation in Australia. A notable and typical expression that was heard concerned the concept of 'buying advantage for my children'. We have to acknowledge that view and respond to it. There ought to be no place for our schools among elitist, choice-denying private schools.

We also should have a role in the public debate about education. It is certainly consistent with our theology to be concerned about public education. Values education is also a concern of state school systems. Our schools can join the educational conversation in terms of social justice and respect for the individual. We have an ethic to offer in the public arena. We also need to reiterate and reinforce the LCA's stance on support for government schooling, as found in the policy document of November 2001.

The LCA promises to support government schools. We offer and encourage cooperation, with government authorities and Lutheran authorities working together to share experiences and to express common concern for the wellbeing and nurture of children in government schools. We further encourage the common use of resources wherever applicable . . . Above all, we urge all to work for the promotion of the ethical and spiritual dimensions of government schools, recognising their vital significance and the important part that parents, guardians, church and state play in this regard.

Our schools can cooperate with state schools in local communities and our teachers can contribute on committees, task forces and subject associations along with colleagues from the public and private sectors. Christian teachers can continue to have an influence as they teach in state schools.

Elitist Lutheran schools? Well, maybe, by virtue of their development within a market-driven society, as non-government schools which charge fees, require costly uniforms and may give the impression of being overly conscious of their image. So we come to ask, 'So what?' That expression is not meant in the colloquial sense of an offhand rejection of any responsibility. Rather, it asks, 'So, what are we to do about all this?'

One of the ACSA conference speakers remarked, 'Marketisation means we're all involved in spin'. As a member of the marketing committee for my congregation's school, I am well aware of the need to promote the school in order to keep it running so that it can offer our 'brand' of education to those who want it. However, research indicates that expensive marketing may not be the best form of promotion. Word of mouth, by parents and others, seems to come out as the most effective form, for state schools as well. It is important that schools give parents information about the school's distinctiveness so that they can talk to others when the opportunity arises. Marketing of this kind is not costly.

One indicator of elitism, picked up by undergraduate Lutheran Strand students doing an assignment on school websites, is the 'expensive look' of Lutheran schools. The challenge for our schools is to think creatively about ways they can become more accessible to more people. Schools are good at prioritising spending; this talent needs to be put to use on social justice issues. If we want to argue choice, we should lobby government along lines already suggested: funding to less well-resourced private schools to take in a more diverse range of students and to enable more to do so; or the more recent proposal for equalised state and federal funding for all students.

We might also think more readily about opening up our schools even more to the community. Some schools do that, but more need to explore the possibilities. There are opportunities for voluntary work within our schools. Have we sufficiently challenged our people, not just school parents, in this regard? How can the relationship of teaching staff at Australian Lutheran College with the schools be rethought in ways which might promote a different image of Lutheran schools from that of other private providers? What we at ALC can do is continue to be clear about the differences and teach where they lie.

I continue to be encouraged by the positive, informed teacher voices I hear in graduate students' assignments, which demonstrate an articulate grasp of the nature and purposes of our schools and an eagerness for what they can offer to the community in general:

As a teacher I need to help and guide students to recognise and develop sensitivity to the hardships and sufferings of others - both close to us and further away. In this way students can explore ways of helping and serving others.

By encouraging the development of students' talents and abilities as a means by which they can help others ... I can help students see their gifts as a God-given opportunity for service and not as a sign of individual success for a self-glorification motive.

With our increasing non-Christian clientele in our Lutheran schools it is important that all sense the love, support, care, forgiveness and concern of Christian believers.

This article has raised the issue of the perception of our Lutheran schools as part of the seemingly affluent independent school sector. It has revisited the factors which have led to the current positioning of the schools and touched on some of the concepts of distinctiveness. It has then suggested some areas of challenge to counter the image or the impression of elitism. While many answers are still to be found, it is important that creative conversations continue around this issue.

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