



**Leadership matters: principals, pastors
and the mission of Lutheran schools**
By Tania Nelson

2016 ALC Opening lecture

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Australian Lutheran College
104 Jeffcott Street
North Adelaide SA 5006
Australia

Ph: + 61 (0)8 7120 8200
Fax: + 61 (0)8 8127 8071
Email: alc@alc.edu.au
www.alc.edu.au

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Contents

| | |
|--|----------|
| Leadership matters: principals, pastors and the mission of Lutheran schools | 4 |
| Introduction..... | 4 |
| Context | 4 |
| Research design..... | 5 |
| Findings | 5 |
| Characteristics of missional leadership | 8 |
| Recommendations..... | 10 |
| Appendix A: Self-reflection Tool..... | 14 |
| References..... | 16 |

Leadership matters: principals, pastors and the mission of Lutheran schools

Introduction

Leadership does matter. We applaud leadership skills like decisiveness in decision making and the ability to plan strategically, and we readily recognise good organisational skills in our leaders. We are also quick to note when leadership gets it wrong. We may notice a lack of consultation before a decision is made, or a short term solution with no apparent long term plan. On the whole it is fairly easy to list various managerial skills that leaders require, through recognising what we admire in our leaders and perhaps what is lacking in some others. But what about the leadership skills required when the leader has oversight of a school community and a faith community?

School and congregational leadership matters too. The skills required to lead a school community and faith community are far more than having good managerial skills, though these skills are helpful. Today's opening lecture draws upon my research into the contributions of pastors and principals to the mission of Lutheran primary schools. In sharing with you today about the research you'll hear of the perceptions of primary principals and congregational pastors in the field in regard to their community leadership actions, their spiritual leadership actions, and their views of Lutheran schools. Though the current research was limited to leadership in Lutheran primary schools, I contend that many of the findings are transferable to Lutheran secondary schools and faith-based schools who are concerned with being a Christian witness in the world. I'll conclude today's lecture by proposing eight characteristics of missional leaders and by making some recommendations that are applicable to principals, pastors, district and regional offices, Lutheran Education Australia and the College of Bishops—and even ALC is not immune to my recommendations. But before I begin I had better lay out my credentials for speaking on this topic as I am neither a principal nor a pastor and this lecture focuses on the leadership provided by the Lutheran school principal and the pastor of the supporting congregation.

Context

Firstly, my background in teaching in Lutheran schools and service in various roles on school and church councils and on the Board for Lutheran Education Australia has allowed me to have an understanding of the context of leading in Lutheran schools. Perhaps a more important credential for speaking on this topic is the research I conducted in 2013. My doctoral research (which is almost completed) is titled *Building Bridges: Exploring the contributions of principals and pastors to the mission of Lutheran primary schools*.

As a background to the research, my passion to explore, to *uncover*, how pastors and principals contribute to the mission of Lutheran schools was ignited in 2000. I was a delegate to the National Synod held in Tanunda where Synod overwhelmingly voted in favour of the *Hand in Hand – Schools and Mission Vision Statement*.

BE IT RESOLVED that the following Vision Statement be adopted.

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 (LCA, 2000).

I was one of the many delegates who proudly voted for congregations and schools to be more intentional, diligent, sensitive and flexible in responding to mission opportunities. I was also struck by the *how* of this statement. How could I, as a congregational member and a staff member in a Lutheran school, be more intentional, diligent, sensitive and flexible? So the journey began to uncover how excellent, innovative leaders respond to mission opportunities in schools. To cut a long story short, I had conversations with the District Bishops of the LCA and the Executive Officers of the Lutheran Education regions. Six schools and congregational sites were identified as being progressive and successful in fulfilling the mission of the Lutheran primary school—two sites from each of the three Lutheran Education regions. The locations fortuitously included rural and metropolitan Lutheran primary schools, small and large schools, a mixture of male and female principals and leaders with extensive experience and limited experience.

Research design

The research methods included unstructured interviews of the principal and pastor together at their site. The interviews were unstructured so that the leaders could direct the conversation to what was important to them. The only guidance regarding the direction of the interview was in the form of the research questions:

How do principals contribute to the mission of Lutheran primary schools?

How do pastors contribute to the mission of Lutheran primary schools?

Naturally the conversations uncovered what the interviewees perceived as the mission of their school, and Lutheran schools in general, and their actions that contribute to the mission, and covered topics such as *preparation for leadership* and *what is spiritual leadership*? Using grounded theory methodology, with line by line coding of the interview transcripts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), themes began to emerge. These emerging themes were further verified by surveying (via SurveyMonkey) the cohort of primary principals (there were 46 primary principals in 2013) and the supporting pastor identified by the principal. In the case of a school with more than one supporting congregation or multiple pastors involved in the school the principal was asked to select the pastor who was most involved in the school at that point in time to participate in the electronic survey.

Findings

How did the principals and pastors perceive the mission of the Lutheran primary school? Before I answer that question, please note that I did not provide a definition for *mission* in the interviews and survey. Rather the perceptions of mission arose from the data, that is, from the ground up, hence the research methodology is termed *grounded theory* (Charmaz, 2000). The principals and pastors perceived the mission of the school as intrinsically connected to the school's culture. They were deeply aware of the culture and needs of the school community and their role in meeting the needs. In one location both pastor and principal commented on the extent of positive male role models within the school community which had developed over time and was largely due, they believed, to the strength of the shed-men group and its influence over both church and school.

The principals and pastors perceived the mission of the school as strengthened through staff and parent partnerships. They valued and invested in those relationships—in money, time and resources. They saw the mission as multi-faceted—including the education of the whole child for life; nurturing staff, students and parents in the faith; reaching out to all with the faith; and serving the community and beyond. The persistent use of the metaphors of nurture, outreach (or mission), service and vocation confirms and builds upon former ALC lecturer Meryl Jennings' doctoral research (2009) on

dominant metaphoric constructs of Lutheran education. They viewed the mission of their school as primarily witnessing the faith. And they viewed their role in regard to the mission of the school as a 'calling' or having a deep moral purpose. They were committed to their school and to Lutheran schooling.

When separating the data into principal and pastor cohorts some differences in perceptions were evident. The principals perceived the mission as part of the broader reason for the existence of Lutheran schools, believing that Lutheran schools exist firstly to prepare students for their vocation and for life and secondly to reach out to those who don't know Jesus as their Saviour. The pastor cohort also perceived the mission of the school as one part or aspect of the broader reason for the existence of Lutheran schools. They believed that Lutheran schools exist primarily to prepare students for their vocation and for life, however the pastors rated nurturing students and their families as the secondary reason for the existence or purpose of Lutheran schools. This is a subtle though interesting difference between the pastor and principal cohorts, and may be explained by the inherently nurturing role or nature of the pastor, or the servant role that they play within the school.

The principals and pastors were asked to comment on each other's contributions to the mission of the school. Generally the principals and pastors perceived each other's contributions as evidence of commitment to a shared ministry and they valued the importance of their unity and shared vision. A small number of surveyed principals and pastors hinted at local difficulties between the pastor and principal.

Pastor attitudes are cited as detrimental to school growth by past parents. (principal: SurveyMonkey)

...it is difficult...when one party does not immerse themselves into the congregation so the congregation can better connect to the school. (pastor: SurveyMonkey)

Our relationship is good, trusting and significant but is not all that it could be. (pastor: SurveyMonkey)

These comments are hardly surprising when we are dealing with people and relationships and, in the case of the pastor and principal, what should be a significant professional relationship. It was pleasing to note however the overall high level of cooperation and collaboration between principals and pastors which appears to represent a shift in practice from that reported in Bartel's doctoral research (2004).

When separating the data on perceptions of each other's contributions, the principals perceived the pastor's contribution as enhancing a united and caring community. In answering the survey question regarding the pastor's actions, the principals reported that the pastors firstly promote student participation in Sunday worship and, equal second, promote child/youth programs and the offering of counselling and support. The pastors perceived that the principals' actions impact the mission of the congregation and the pastors reported that the principals promote parental involvement and joint school/church activities.

The principals and pastors were asked to comment on the extent that they promoted the mission of the primary school community. This is an area that is difficult to quantify. It would have been counterproductive to ask the interview or survey participants to calculate the amount of time spent in leadership actions that contribute to the mission of the school as they clearly viewed their role towards in mission as part and parcel of their calling and of all their actions. One principal said:

Everything that we do is about promoting the mission of the school, otherwise what's the point? It comes down to the people you employ, the programs that you run and the things that you say, that's the main thing. It's got to be at the forefront of every decision that you

make. It's whether or not it's really going to serve the school and its purpose (principal: interview E).

The principals and pastors perceived that they promoted the mission by valuing students and families as co-contributors to, and beneficiaries of, the mission. They placed worship as central to the life of the school (and this prioritising of worship has implications on timetabling as well as promotion and resourcing). They valued and worked to enhance the culture of care and community. They recognised the importance of staff recruitment and development, valuing staff as front-line promoters of the mission. In all the interviews the importance of employing Christian staff was highlighted. Investment in the staff, not only in terms of recruiting staff, but also in terms of the spiritual development of staff was considered an essential aspect of furthering the mission of the school. One principal commented:

So that gets back to the importance to employ people who are passionate about their work, committed to their faith, their beliefs, and being able to bring those two together to give that quality in education (principal: interview A).

The data from the principal cohort shows that the principals perceived that they promoted the mission in all their actions, and devoted significant time to encouraging parental involvement and ensuring the centrality of worship within the school. The pastors reported that they devoted their time in the school to involvement in, and promotion of, child and youth programs and joint school/church activities.

So how did the principals and pastors perceive that they contributed to the mission of Lutheran primary schools? They contributed to the mission in their role as school missional leaders; alongside staff as valued partners, that is, they viewed their leadership as a partnership with the staff or, to use an educational leadership term, they were practising distributed leadership (Harris, 2008); by uniting the community for mission; and by prioritising the spiritual dimension of the school.

Again, if we separate the data, the principals perceived that they contributed to the mission of their school by involving themselves across the breadth of the school community, and by their spiritual oversight of the school, whereas the pastors perceived that they contributed to the mission by involving themselves across the school and church community, and by serving the school.

So far I've presented various aspects of my research from the principals and pastors as a group and then from the principal cohort only and the pastor cohort only. It was also interesting to separate the interview data, and the survey data. Here we note again that the interviewees were purposefully sampled. That means that the interviewees were intentionally selected in conjunction with the District Bishops and regional executive officers because they were recognised as leaders who were progressive and successful in furthering the mission of the school. The survey, in contrast, went to all primary principals and local supporting pastors, so this group was more likely to respond with a greater range of views.

When comparing the interview and survey responses, of particular note was the discussion on the spiritual headship of the principal. The interviewed principals and pastors all agreed that the principal was the spiritual head of the school. One pastor said:

It is so important for the pastor and principal to have a relationship and a good understanding. And my understanding always is, we both understand that, Christ is the head of the school but under Him [the principal] is the spiritual head of the school. We support that and we are ministers of the gospel but the head of the school, I've always contended... some chaplains have argued we can't talk about the [principal's name] as the spiritual head. Of course they are! (pastor: interview D)

One principal, in acknowledging his spiritual headship role, was keen to point out that his relationship with his pastor was deferential and respectful:

The only bit that worries me about that [being the spiritual head of the school], I still would dip my hat and defer to the pastor, being respectful to the pastor in that one. He's our trained theologian. I also feel that I need to be [the spiritual head], being the CEO of the school, and my role is to link the school into the church. And obviously there's a lot of worship that happens in the school without Pastor being involved. But I would still defer to the pastor (principal: interview B).

The majority of the survey respondents also viewed the principal as the spiritual head of the school. One survey question asked the respondents to indicate how comfortable they are with considering the principal as the spiritual head of the school. Seventy-five percent of all respondents replied that they were comfortable with the notion of the principal as the spiritual head of the school. There was however quite a spread in responses on the five point scale, with twenty-five percent either neutral, somewhat uncomfortable or not comfortable. The discrepancy between the interview and survey results in this area indicates that there is more to do in understanding the spiritual leadership role of the principal.

The topic of preparation for leadership arose in the interviews and was further explored in the survey. A number of the interviewed pastors acknowledged that a paradigm shift was required to minister in a school, though they approached this required shift by accepting that they were not the experts and had much to learn from the principal. The survey respondents were asked to comment on whether the training and preparation they received for their role in the school reflected the demands placed on them. There was a broad mix of responses to this open-ended question. Of the 30 substantive responses, nine were positive, six were neutral, and fifteen were negative. With regard to the positive responses, one pastor was thankful for the time spent in Lutheran primary and secondary schools as part of the seminary field education program, as well as his vicarage placement in a congregation attached to a school. A principal commented:

I was blessed with completing over two years at Luther Seminary and have also completed a Master of Education with ALC. Over the years I have taken advantage of many excellent in-service opportunities i.e. Grief Counselling, Conflict Management, etc. (principal: SurveyMonkey)

Among the negative comments, mention was made of a general inadequacy of training, and comments were included such as: "What training?"; "I was trained as a pastor with no preparation being given for school pastor"; "Little preparation and training for the role of principal"; and "Very little on leadership through initial training..." The six neutral responses had a qualifying or justifying comment. These neutral responses emphasised the following—training and preparation was gained over time and with on the job experiences; training and preparation was intentionally sought by the principal or pastor; training and preparation occurred through being part of a team and/or a District. The high level of negative comments in regard to leadership preparation, particularly from the pastor cohort, shows that there is more to do in this area.

Characteristics of missional leadership

In exploring the contributions of principals and pastors to the mission of Lutheran primary schools, a set of characteristics of missional leaders emerged. The following statements form a proposed theory, which has emerged from analysis of the findings, on what constitutes principals' and pastors' contributions to the mission of the school.

Table 1. Characteristics of missional principals and pastors

| Table 1 |
|---|
| <i>Towards a theory: characteristics of missional principals and pastors in Lutheran primary schools</i> |
| Lutheran primary principals and pastors: |
| ○ read the culture of the school community, enhance its positive elements and meet needs within the community. |
| ○ understand and articulate the mission of their school and Lutheran education. They view the mission as witnessing the faith. |
| ○ understand the distinction between the reason for the existence of Lutheran schools and the mission. They view the purpose of Lutheran education is to prepare students for life in vocation. |
| ○ perceive the mission, and their role in the mission, as a calling and are committed to their school and to Lutheran education. |
| ○ work together collaboratively to promote and enhance the mission. |
| ○ unify the community in and for mission. |
| ○ are active in both congregation and school, and value each other's distinctive contributions to the mission. |
| ○ develop, value and invest in relationships to benefit the mission. |
| ○ value students and their families as mission contributors and beneficiaries. |
| ○ focus on promoting and resourcing a caring community. |
| ○ focus on developing, nurturing and valuing staff for the benefit of the mission. |
| ○ serve the school as missional leaders. |
| ○ place Christ at the centre of the life of the school community. |
| ○ are spiritual leaders of the school community. |

The contributions of principals and pastors to the mission of their schools has been conceptualised in the current research into eight categories. The categories—witness, vocation, calling, unity, relationships, care, service and Christ-centredness—are the elements of the theory as illustrated in this visual representation (see Figure 1). The image of the *Luther Rose* has been used to convey the essential elements that principals and pastors bring to the mission of the school. Missional principals and pastors ensure the school is Christ-centred, as depicted by the cross of Christ, and that Christ is at the heart of the school community. This Christ-centredness impacts and radiates from the school's core to all elements of the school community. Principals and pastors enhance, promote and strive to build a unified community as shown through the gold ring that envelops the rose. Gold, a precious metal, represents the preciousness of a united community under Christ. Principals and pastors build and enhance a culture of care, and bring an attitude of service to their leadership. They perceive

their leadership role as a calling and having a deep moral purpose. They value relationships—with staff, students and families—for the benefit of the mission of the school. Their actions and activities aim to ensure that the school is a witness for Christ to the community. Caring, serving, viewing their role as calling, valuing relationships, and witnessing are the petals of the rose and imbue their leadership role with perfume. These elements sit under the principals’ and pastors’ view of Lutheran education as vocation, that is principals and pastors view their actions and the actions of others around them as participating in God’s continuous creative work in the world.

Figure 1. Visual representation of the characteristics of missional principals and pastors

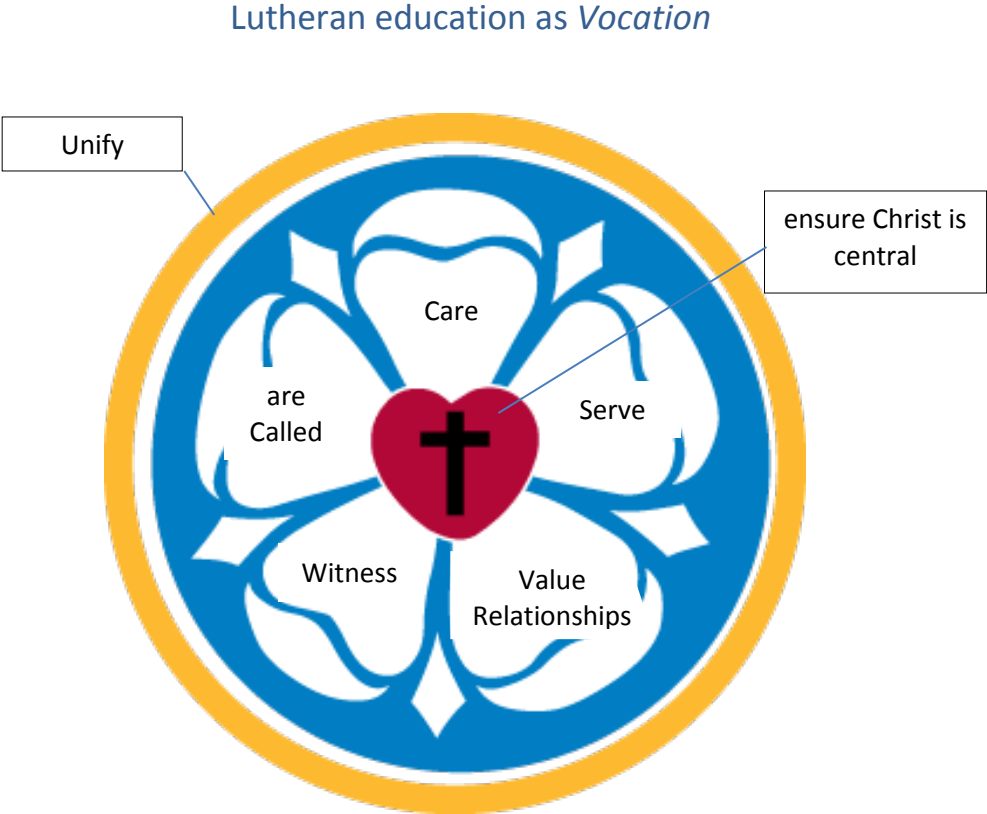


Figure 1. Elements that principals and pastors bring to the mission of the Lutheran primary school.

Recommendations

In light of the findings and the emerging characteristics of missional leaders in Lutheran schools, the following recommendations are offered.

Recommendations 1 and 2—Contributing to the mission of the school

A self-reflection tool was developed based on the emergent characteristics of missional leaders (see Appendix A: *Self-reflection Tool*) which may assist leaders to reflect on their individual characteristics and local circumstances. Leaders of faith-based schools, who perceive the mission of their school as a witness to the grace of God, are encouraged to reflect deeply on their leadership and explore the dimensions of missional leadership.

It is recommended that principals, pastors and leaders of faith-based schools regularly reflect on the mission of their school, and their contributions to the mission. In considering how

they promote and enhance the mission of their school, it is further suggested that they reflect on their contributions by considering dimensions of missional leadership as articulated in the Self-reflection Tool (see Appendix A).

The principals and pastors who participated in the interviews articulated some common actions in regard to the mission of their school. The survey data revealed that the relationship between church and school leadership was not positive in some instances. The following recommendation suggests that leaders of faith-based schools adopt missional actions for the benefit of the mission of their schools.

It is recommended that principals, pastors and leaders of faith-based schools ensure that the witness of the school to the saving grace of God remains at the forefront of their consciousness. In considering their actions to promote and enhance the Christian witness of the school, it is further suggested that leaders:

- meet regularly to discuss the mission of the school;
- collaborate with staff and parents in furthering the mission;
- develop and promote a common vision for the mission;
- prioritise spiritual leadership of the community; and
- involve themselves across the school and local faith community.

Recommendation 3—In-service training of principals and pastors

The need for in-service training for principals and for pastors who minister in a school was evidenced in the current research. While the principals and pastors agreed that the leadership of both pastor and principal is extremely important in furthering the mission of the school, a majority of principals and pastors perceived that they had received little or no preparation for school leadership.

It is recommended that the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) district offices and Lutheran Education Australia (LEA) regional offices prioritise facilitating regular principal/pastor seminars where reflection and dialogue can occur on issues such as mission of the school, ministry roles, school/church community leadership, and leadership of the pastor within the school. The aim of such seminars would be to build bridges, and remove barriers, between the school community and community of the local congregation or faith community.

Recommendations 4 and 5—Pre-service preparation and in-service training of pastors

Lutheran Education Australia (LEA) recognises the importance of principal preparation as demonstrated by the development and offering of the *Leadership Development Program* (the sixth iteration of the Leadership Development Program begins in 2016). The majority of surveyed pastors, however, viewed that insufficient preparation for school ministry was received from the pre-service pastoral theology program offered at Australian Lutheran College and no coordinated training or formation was available for pastors upon entering ministry that included a school.

It is recommended that the LCA—through the College of Bishops and Australian Lutheran College—explore the suitability of pastoral candidates for school ministry roles and provide intentional pre-service training for school ministry with input from serving principals and school pastors.

It is also recommended that the College of Bishops, together with LEA and Australian Lutheran College, develop a program of school pastor preparation and support. The pre-service component of the program could aim to provide graduate pastors with knowledge and skills to minister within the school setting. The in-service training component could aim to support pastors transitioning from congregational ministry to school, or school and congregational, ministry. Additionally it could aim to provide pastors with leadership training to equip them to serve in the school under the oversight of the principal. The in-service

component may benefit from the learnings gained through the development of Lutheran Education Australia's *Leadership Development Program* for aspiring principals and leaders.

Recommendation 6—In-service training for leadership

The current research supports a rigorous training pathway to assist Lutheran education in its provision of leaders. The following recommendation urges in-service training for staff in faith-based schools that develops understandings of the values and beliefs that underpin leadership actions and engages in the dialogue between education and theology.

It is recommended that Lutheran Education Australia set a high and aspirational standard for the training of Christian Studies teachers and for leaders which ensures that participants explore motivations/personal values and the dialogue between education and theology. The training would assist participants to embed reflective practice and ongoing dialogue between theology and education into their leadership action.

Recommendation 7—Dialogue on spiritual headship and spiritual leadership

The spiritual headship of the principal and the spiritual leadership of the pastor and principal are areas that require further exploration for both pastors and principals in Lutheran schools.

It is recommended that LEA, in conjunction with the LCA, provide opportunities for dialogue on the spiritual headship of the principal and the spiritual leadership role of the pastor. It is further recommended that the dialogues lead to a discussion paper to assist future pastors and principals to define and enact their spiritual leadership roles within the school. The dialogues and discussion paper would assist in defining ministry and spiritual leadership roles and in the provision of innovative missional leadership.

Recommendations 8 and 9—Provision of spiritual formation opportunities for leaders

In the current research the need for ongoing spiritual formation of principals and pastors for their mission roles in the school was highlighted.

It is recommended that the LCA district offices and LEA regional offices provide opportunities for spiritual formation of principals, school pastors and other key missional leaders in order to connect the leaders, offer them opportunities for spiritual renewal, and prepare them to serve their communities. The provision of spiritual formation opportunities for all in leadership prioritises personal spiritual renewal, creates connections and develops missional leaders who are prepared for service.

It is also recommended that the district and regional offices collaborate to establish a program of intentional mentoring for new school pastors, principals and other key leaders to assist them to define and promote a common vision for the mission of their school, and a shared understanding of their roles in contributing to the mission.

Recommendation 10—Exploring missional leadership in faith-based schools

The current research identified a lacuna between the interviewed pastors and principals—who readily expressed a common vision for the mission of their school—and the surveyed pastors and principals. This gap highlights the need for dialogue. The current research also revealed that local difficulties between pastor and principal meant that the partnership between the congregation and the school was impacted.

It is recommended that regular opportunities for local dialogues be facilitated by regional and district offices to encourage pastors, principals and key stakeholders to explore the characteristics of missional leadership. These dialogues would aim to assist schools and congregations to walk hand in hand in mission and ministry. They would provide leaders with understanding and skills to enact their missional leadership role.

To conclude today's lecture, I ask you to consider your missional leadership role. We are all called to be missionaries, to further God's mission. I pray that you take time to reflect on your missional actions and contributions and be a light in your community.

Preach the gospel at all times and, when necessary, use words.

Francis of Assisi

Appendix A: Self-reflection Tool

| Promoting and enhancing the mission of the school: a self-reflection tool for leaders in Lutheran primary schools | |
|--|-----------------------|
| <i>Characteristics of missional leaders</i> | <i>Comment</i> |
| I am able to articulate the culture of the school. | |
| I recognise the positive and negative elements of the school's culture. | |
| I enhance the positive elements of the school's culture by... | |
| I minimise the negative elements of the school's culture by... | |
| I recognise the needs within the school community. | |
| I meet the needs within the school community by... | |
| I develop and value relationships with teaching staff by... | |
| I develop and value relationships with non-teaching staff by... | |
| I develop and value relationships with students by... | |
| I develop and value relationships with families by... | |
| I prioritise the development of relationships by... | |
| I am able to articulate the mission of the school. | |
| I am able to articulate the mission of Lutheran education. | |
| The school is a Christian witness to the community through... | |
| I am able to articulate my role in regard to the mission of the school. | |
| I participate in God's continuing creative work in preparing students for life in vocation by... | |
| I participate in God's continuing creative work within school families by... | |
| I participate in God's continuing creative work within school staff by... | |
| I am able to articulate the relationship between the Lutheran church and the school. | |
| I am able to articulate the reason for the existence of the school. | |
| I collaborate with fellow school leaders in promoting and enhancing the mission of the school by... | |
| I model collaboration in the school and church community by... | |
| I value the leadership of others in the school and church community by... | |
| I am active in the church community through... | |
| I value the contributions of students to the school community by... | |

| | |
|--|--|
| I value the contributions of families to the school community by... | |
| I value worship in the school by... | |
| I place worship at the centre of the life of the school community by... | |
| I promote the faith community within the school by... | |
| I enhance the caring nature of the school community by... | |
| I resource the school for its ministry of care by... | |
| I nurture school staff by... | |
| I encourage school staff in their mission role by... | |
| I view myself as a missional leader. This is demonstrated through... | |
| I provide a 'bridge' from the school community to a worshipping community by... | |
| I promote joint programs and activities of the school and local church/faith community. | |
| I prioritise joint programs and activities of the school and local church/faith community through... | |
| I am developing a mission focused school community by... | |
| I view myself as a servant leader of the school community. This is demonstrated through... | |
| I view myself as a spiritual leader of the school community. This is demonstrated through... | |

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