

# **The shape of things to come for a church who learns: ALC's renewing purpose to serve as an enquirer-centred, transformational learning community.'**

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Opening lecture 2018

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## **Introduction**

St Paul exhorts all of us in Colossians 3:16:

*<sup>16</sup>Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. (NRSV)*

Loving heavenly Father, send us your Holy Spirit so that this exhortation will be realised in us. Amen.

As I begin, please be aware that I will use two shortened forms of terminology. When referring to Australian Lutheran College I will simply say *the College*, and, when referring to the Lutheran Church of Australia I will say, *the Church*.

For four years (and even longer for some) I, together with the College's board and staff, have been on a learning journey. It has been a journey concerned with the future of theological education in the contemporary life of the Church. This is by no means a new conversation. What we have learned from that journey is exciting. We have recalled the many conversations that have already taken place concerning this subject. We have heard those conversations through the current voices within the Church and its partners. They also want to be transformed theological learners and doers in their diverse, contemporary settings. For the College this means constantly refreshed and refreshing engagement with the whole Church who is itself always a curious and enquiring learner.

## **How this learning began**

What use is Australian Lutheran College? Why keep it?

I apologise for my abrupt, unscholarly opening to this dignified and serious event, and for the dark, even cynical nature of my question, but this is the very question that, together with our College Board and staff, has dominated the conversation for my service as College principal. Many others have tussled with this question for much, much longer than I have. I blurted this question out because, for all of that conscientious and deep wrestling, the question remains fundamentally unanswered; because, as we will finally see, another more important question precedes it.

I ask this question because, as I've listened to various groups and individual people, it represents the elephant that persistently sits in my room.

If you've ever observed an elephant trying to exist in a confined space you will notice that it rocks back and forth, fails to feed and thrive, becomes defensive, snarky and depressed, and indiscriminately flings its dung. In that little room the elephant becomes its own obsolescent, self-

fulling prophecy. Not because it is useless but because inside of that room no-one can imagine it being anything else. Hence the question is easily spawned, ‘Why keep this neurotic dung-slinger?’ Is it possible, however, that the problem is not the elephant? Might it be the room? The elephant is in that space because, for one reason or another, people have forgotten or fail to appreciate in their contemporary settings, just how useful and even vital an elephant is for them, and not just as their convenient, budget-priced heavy lifter. Far from being their redundant and even scorned ‘other’, elephants are mirrors of ourselves who also rock back and forth, fail to thrive, become defensive, titchy and melancholic, and...fling...dung, but who are also much, much more. An elephant is more than a bemusing and tragic spectacle to be sentimentally valued by the antiquarians who alone remember and celebrate its better days—days when an elephant symbolised an enthusiastic vision for the future. You see, when let out of the room to be its best, an elephant can also have strong maternal instincts, function in complex social groupings, mourn and possibly even honour its dead, display empathy, remember, play, communicate through language, and demonstrate self-awareness. Why, as emeritus lecturer Pastor Robert Kempe suggests by the title of his article, ‘Of cloistered walls and ivory towers’, (2006) would anyone lock an elephant in a room? Elephants don’t belong there. It’s a waste of a good elephant.

This morning my presentation will re-engage with an existing conversation around the identity and function of Australian Lutheran College. This is against the background of requests for structural and educational renewal, primarily stimulated by concerns for the College’s ongoing financial viability. It is a conversation which, at times, is severely conflicted by what seems to be individual, estranged and indifferent relationships between the College and various other parts of the Church. To be sure, however, while those difficult relationships impact the College and its service, they are not generally true of all of the relationships that the College shares. Many healthy, functional and deeply appreciative relationships also exist. Foremost among those are the relationships that we share with our students, our co-learners.

While a conversation concerning the College’s identity and performance has always punctuated the College’s fifty-year history, external financial realities have brought it to a point where the outcome of that conversation has become more critical. Remembering, however, that the elephant is also a mirror, the College’s own current challenges are reflective of those experienced by the whole Church. Through the College an opportunity therefore exists for the Church to appreciatively learn something of its own identity and function in its many contemporary contexts.

Life-long theological enquiry through research, and learning through the curriculum that results from that research, is core to the College’s identity. That is the way in which, by the Church’s own mandate, the College serves the Church. This is clearly stated in the College’s constitution<sup>1</sup>. The College is a learning community who leads and partners the Church in its own enquiry and learning toward a deep appreciation and expression of its own identity through its congregations, schools, aged and community care organisations, districts, departments, commissions and committees.

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<sup>1</sup> 4.2. The objects of Australian Lutheran College shall be to:

- 4.2.1. Prepare candidates to be pastors of the Church;
- 4.2.2. Prepare candidates to be teachers in the schools of the Church;
- 4.2.3. Prepare candidates for diaconal work in the Church;
- 4.2.4. Provide continuing and postgraduate studies in theology and education;
- 4.2.5. Provide theological education to all eligible persons leading to such degrees and diplomas as Australian Lutheran College may from time to time confer; and
- 4.2.6. Undertake such other activities reasonably incidental thereto which promote the mission of the Church

<http://www.alc.edu.au/assets/About/How-we-work/Constitution-Australian-Lutheran-College.pdf> (Accessed 19 February 2018)

Before continuing my presentation I need to identify its major methodological difficulty. That difficulty is a paucity of contemporary, relevant, longitudinal data as it relates to the College's identity and performance in the life of the Church. This lack of relevant data is not limited to the College alone. It is true that the Church's schools, and aged and community care facilities are current in the appreciation of their identities and performance within their sectors. This, however, is not true of the Church as a whole, nor of the College. To date the conversations about the College's identity and performance have been informed by versions of the Church and College's identity and performance. These are often anecdotally derived and based upon the opinions and hearsay which are sometimes dominated by the loudest, most plaintive voices at the doorway to the elephant's room. It is only recently that both the Church and College have sought to build a reliable body of evidence through relevant and valid research<sup>2</sup>. Together, through processes of appreciative enquiry and solid research we are beginning to form valid and reliable self-understanding. Effective formation, after all, is, in part, a product of an externally derived self-awareness (Steiner, 2014).

## The case for a renewing of the College's identity

In February of 2015 the General Church Council (GCC) of the Lutheran Church of Australia resolved that:

*Based on the financial report from ALC to GCC's FAR Committee and the continued reporting of income generation and cost pressures, GCC gives permission for the ALC Board to develop an options paper for GCC on alternate business models, that is not constrained by any of the existing structures or delivery models, and that includes professional development offerings and transition of existing programs to one or more of these options, in order to address financial and educational sustainability and enhance the development of the Church's pastors, teachers, lay workers, aged care workers in the short, medium and longer term.*

(GCC 21/2/2015)

The College's financial position was dire, with forecasts at that time indicating the College would be financially insolvent, having depleted all cash reserves, by the close of 2016. Immediate action was required to reduce costs and grow income. Costs were cut by lowering staffing levels and by reductions in resourcing and professional development. With no improvement to income, through growth in enrolments, this meant that the College's deficit was transferred from its balance sheet to its staff. The issues that precipitated the College's poor financial performance remained to be realised in impacts upon staff wellbeing, professional development and ultimately student experiences. The challenge to increase the College's income through growing enrolments remained, with growth depending upon two major factors. Firstly, upon the Church's capacity to identify, value and express itself as a constantly refreshed learner. Secondly, upon the quality of the relationships that the College shares with stakeholder groups, mainly from within the Church. These groups include but are not limited to Lutheran Education Australia, International Mission (LCA), Local Mission (LCA), along with Districts, individual schools, aged and community care facilities and individual congregations. As already identified, few if any reliable or valid means existed for identifying the quality of those relationships in respect of the College's performance, nor for even identifying specific client needs. If the College was failing in its charter it lacked a reliable methodology and metric for identifying and appreciatively knowing what its problems might be. A wry and suggestive wink was never going to be enough to drive reform. By more effectively engaging with its partners the College can understand the real factors that impact its enrolment levels.

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<sup>2</sup> An example of this is a research project commissioned by the College of Bishops in 2014 and reported upon in 2016 entitled, 'Pastoral Ministry in the Lutheran Church of Australia: A Snapshot Fifty years after Union.' It can be accessed at <http://www.lca.org.au/pastoral-ministry-research-paper-released/> (last accessed 19 February, 2018).

Notwithstanding the extensive efforts which were made to improve the College's financial performance through the implementation of the former 2009–2015 Strategic Plan (which of itself included major structural changes), the GCC identified that unconstrained changes to the College's business and educational delivery models were required. The previously cited GCC resolution was based upon two factors. First was a strong body of evidence derived from the College's repeated poor financial performance. Second was the lack of engagement or 'buy in' from obvious stakeholder groups within the Church. Apart from annual financial reports, this evidence was advanced by unpublished University of Divinity (UD) Annual Reviews and retrospectively supported by the findings of an unpublished College Business Review (2015–16). Some of the recommendations of that latter, review included:

1. That a new education delivery model be trialled
2. That the College's 'three school' structure be dismantled and that all programmes be delivered under one entity
3. That input from stakeholder groups be sought and strengthened.

The trajectory of this growing body of evidence was further enhanced in 2017 when the College conducted initial market research through an external provider. Included in that research was a Net Promoter Score or NPS. An NPS is a standard by which the customer experience (which includes internal and external stakeholders as customers) is measured as a predictor of business growth. This is benchmarked at a value of 40 and above. After receiving data from a total of 175 respondents comprised of current College staff, current students and former students the College's NPS was calculated at -20. While this result did not provide qualitative data as to why the College's NPS was skewed towards detractors rather than promoters, the score does help identify the magnitude of the problem and how future growth strategies will focus upon improving the College brand through targeted communication approaches.

The challenge presented by the GCC resolution, which is now being enacted through the College's current Strategic Direction 2017–2022, was to identify the complex and critical interactions between the College and the Church as they impact the College's enrolment numbers. This required processes of discovery and research. While the data from most of that research remains 'in house' and is unpublished, a consistent theme emerged. An estranged relationship exists between the College and some, but not all, parts or agencies of the Church. Often those parts represent the greatest possibilities for a growth in enrolments for the College. The bases for that estrangement are diverse, represented by the generalised statements:

*'We didn't know that we could ask the College for help and, even now we're not quite sure what to ask for.'*

through to

*'The College has failed to deliver in the past.'*

While short term cost-cutting strategies together with outstanding support for the College's annual appeal in both 2016 and 2017 reduced risk to the College's immediate financial viability, long term strategies were required which specifically focus on growing income through enrolments. This focus formed the basis of the College's current 2017–2022 Strategic Direction<sup>3</sup>, which identifies six

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<sup>3</sup> Australian Lutheran College Strategic Direction 2017–2022. 2017. Adopted by the ALC Board of Directors (April). (Accessed 19 February 2018). <http://www.alc.edu.au/assets/About/How-we-work/ALC-Strategic-Direction-2017-2022.pdf>

priorities for the College's growth in education and research through an effective engagement with all stakeholders. They are:

- Equipping people for service in the church and the world;
- Exploring, understanding and discussing contemporary church life questions and issues;
- Listening and responding in partnership to the LCA and its needs and aspirations;
- Using evidence as the basis for decision making;
- Communicating well with all stakeholders about where ALC is going and why;
- Implementing good governance that can manage change well.

Through these priorities the College seeks to revitalise its relationships with its partners in our learning Church. It's time to imagine all that the elephant truly is outside the constraints of the room. After all, we all seek to faithfully fulfil the Church's mission.

To be sure, however, one does not put new wine into old wine skins. Our College cannot live by reimagining alone. It also needs to deliver. The GCC identified this when it stipulated an:

*[Alternate business model] that is not constrained by any of the existing structures or delivery models*

It is time for the College to also reimagine itself outside of the room, and to function and thrive in the Church's diverse contemporary settings. The College is asked to engage with the Church as the Church both is and as the Church is becoming where, for example, more people encounter the Church through its schools in any given week than people who collectively attend weekly worship. This should inform how our College's resources are applied.

It was clear that the College had reached a critical point. How would it sustainably continue to serve the Church according to both the Church's theologically expressed confessional identity and its varied local, contextual manifestations where its theology is diversely enacted in mission? For Thomas Groome, the noted Catholic theologian and educator, the answer was a revisionist pedagogy which abandoned a 'theory-to-practice' mindset, in lieu of a contemporary reengagement by the learner with the historical enactment of theology itself (1987, 55–56). Our learning begins from where God 'lives' and acts, most notably in Word and Sacrament. As God acts anew each day we are also constantly renewed as learners. In such a pedagogical paradigm our only possible disposition can be that of a learner. All of us. In our reimagined life beyond the elephant's room we are transformed from transactional supplier and consumers into learners with learners. The origin of that transformed anthropology is surely God's Holy Spirit who, obedient to God's mission: Calls us, Gathers us, Enlightens us and makes us Holy. Just as God wants.

I am sensing that the elephant has begun to settle and the crowd who was perversely tantalised by the spectacle of its distress is moving on. The room, now occupied only by learners, is becoming a much safer place for all. They are ready to learn. Now we are ready to learn.

## We were always learners

From its inception in 1967 the College held deep symbolic and pragmatic value in the life of the emergent Lutheran Church of Australia. Not only, in its many different iterations, did it vocationally prepare people to serve in and through the Church, but it was also a dynamic, living symbol of the Church's dogmatic or teaching unity. Two former faculties merged to form one united faculty to be aligned with the Church's equally united teaching. Today that clearly stated, dogmatic identity remains, and so the College also remains as a learning community in and for the life of a learning Church. From their common inceptions the Church and the College were established as co-learners

to be expressed not just in the classroom but also through the Lutheran Theological Journal and by the College's presence on many of the Church's commissions and committees. The College, at its best, always companions the Church as learner.

I hope by now that I have established to your satisfaction that the reform process instigated by the General Church Council and which is now articulated in the College's current Strategic Direction identifies the College as a learning community in and for the life of a learning Church. Through such a clear expression of our dynamically shared identity as Church and College the elephant and room metaphor can, at last, be put to rest because it simply doesn't describe God's enacted and enacting reality in us. There is no elephant to be accused and derided because, as we realise, the only one whom we actually accuse is ourselves. To be sure, we are no more and no less than a room of learners. What will our learning look like?

## Reimagining the College

Last year I was blessed to study Martin Luther's contribution as an educator. It is well documented and attested that while he may not have been an outstanding educational theorist he was an effective educator and a dogged advocate for educational advancement and reform. In my own learning one particular quotation caught my attention that provided me insight into Luther's educational values. He wrote:

*Now since the young must always be hopping and skipping, or at least doing something that they enjoy, and since one cannot very well forbid this—nor would it be wise to forbid them everything—why then should we not set up such schools for them and introduce them to such studies? By the grace of God it is now possible for children to study with pleasure and in play languages, or other arts, or history. Today, schools are not what they once were, a hell and purgatory in which we were tormented with casualibus and temporalibus, and yet learned less than nothing despite all the flogging, trembling, anguish, and misery. (LW 45:369)*

For Luther the learner was central to the learning experience. Luther did not make this remark as a substitute for a focus on the content of learning. Instead, he was concerned for the learner's effective, personal and transformational engagement with that content. Luther was not just a faithful student of God, he was always an equally faithful student of his neighbour. That was how he fulfilled his own vocation as learner and teacher. Such concern for the College's own learners remains the same today.

Transformational learning theory, as advanced by Jack Mezirow in the mid-twentieth century, focusses on the adult person as learner. It acknowledges that the adult learner arrives at a new learning experience not only with **diverse** prior knowledge but also with equally **diverse** prior ways of knowing (epistemologies) used to make or construct meaning. Mezirow states that:

*Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action. (1996, 162)*

According to this theoretical framework the learner is neither an empty vessel to be filled, nor an aberration to be broken down and reconstructed according to a prescribed epistemology thus becoming the object of the learning experience. Instead, the learner is the subject, the primary enactor, decision maker and beneficiary of the learning experience.

In 2012 Les Ball published the findings of a shared project entitled, *Transforming theology: student experience and transformative learning in undergraduate theological education*. Through that project Ball and his learning partners described a constructivist approach to theological education which places the learner and not the content of the learning at the centre of the learning experience. He wrote:

*The mission of theological providers is largely to safeguard and to perpetuate the sacred knowledge and wisdom of the Christian tradition and so curricular have traditionally organised around the systematic content bases of that tradition. However, in the interest of more transformative learning, curriculum needs to be developed in way that will be more effectively engaged by the learners. (2012, 2)*

Four questions defined the scope of Ball's project, with a recognised diversity in clientele being the key driver for the appropriation of this particular educational theory:

- How can the diverse background and experiences of theological students be effectively recognised and engaged in theological education?
- How can transformative learning be appropriately defined within the Australian theological context?
- How can transformative learning as so defined be integrated into curriculum design?
- How can transformative learning be incorporated into and improve the teaching and learning dimensions of theological education? (2012, 6)

This vision for a transformational, theological learning experience is not a new one.

Thirteen years ago Pastor Robert Kempe delivered our College's opening lecture. It was entitled 'Lutheran Theological Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – an Agenda for Discussion' (2005). This lecture was subsequently summarised in the Lutheran Theological Journal under the title 'Of cloistered walls and ivory towers'.

In his lecture Kempe challenged the College and the Church as he entered into the complex and exciting conversation regarding the transformative nature of a person's theological formation for service in the life of the Church. Far from becoming a careless elephant-taunter himself (I'm sorry, but the metaphor stuck back in) Kempe identified that much was already taking place at the College to align its learning and teaching values and practices with modern approaches to theological education as well as education in general. Yet Kempe remained disturbed. To what extent were both the Church and the College prepared to identify, value and express themselves as learners? Thirteen years later his closing challenges to us remain somewhat unanswered:

1. Those responsible for the leadership and well-being of ALC must take initiative to commit us at ALC and the wider church to ongoing participation in the discussion from which this paper has drawn its material. We have spent incredible time, energy and resources on ecclesiastical reviews of the economic rationalist variety, and on the issue of women's ordination. The theological education debate deserves—possibly even demands—our spending at least the equivalent time, energy and resources on it as on these other foci.
2. We at ALC need to accept that we can and do become isolated in our little world here, and that we are nowhere as near in touch with the rest of the church and the world as we need to be if we are going to be effective as an authentic Lutheran theological school in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We therefore need to come out from any hiding we may be tempted to do, and engage far more than we do with the LCA and other churches and theological institutions in this incredible discussion.

3. The LCA needs to be more serious than it is in supporting ALC as the tertiary institution of the LCA. Evidence abounds that many in the LCA strongly support non-Lutheran institutions of theological education in preference to ALC, and promote sometimes dubious alternates to the kind of theological education and pastoral formation that are offered at ALC. Such attitudes and action serve only to detract from the great discussion that is occurring and are destructive to both ALC and to genuine Lutheran ministry within Australia. I personally am saddened by these kinds of things, as I hope we all are, and would much prefer that we work together as closely as we can to develop ALC as the kind of community that naturally grows from committed partnership in the dialog on theological education.

To be sure, many of the College's past and current staff are engaged in rigorous and informed conversations around the nature of transformational theological education. My own review of the faculty minutes from the College's inception from 1967 on, reinforces this. The learner has always been a focus. There a range of educational and theological writers constructed a shared vision for continuing theological education in the Church. Those conversations will and must continue. But, as Kempe identifies, the Church must also be involved in those conversations to ultimately form a shared and locally relevant vision for theological education across all vocational expressions and organisational sectors. Imagine, just for a moment, quality conversations around theological formation that we, who are from diverse parts of the Church, could participate in. Just imagine how we could service and learn from each other in those conversations.

To advance this conversation the College is restructuring. Its new structure promotes the values of transformational theological education, for the whole of life, by deeply engaging with the learner and the church at two critical points:

- Firstly, through high quality learning programs, and
- Secondly, through close attention to the formation needs of the Church as they inform the learner's whole experience.

The College is already engaging deeply with all stakeholder groups to support educational experiences so that our learners are shaped and transformed in ways that align with the Church's needs. To this end, crucial conversations to align the Church's contemporary needs with graduate attributes are already initiated with:

- The College of Bishops
- Leaders in Lutheran Education
- Local and International Mission.

Those conversations will lead to a 'whole of life' approach, through various, dispersed (or locally accessible) pathways for learning and formation. The College will engage with learners sooner, deeply and for much longer with a key indicator being transformation growth and not graduation. As one example of this, the College now administers the Continuing Education of Pastors.

## Conclusion

At the opening of this presentation I asked:

What use is Australian Lutheran College? Why keep it?

I sense that this question is rarely about the College. If we accept that in the neurotic, taunted elephant we actually see ourselves, I suspect that the underlying question, the one that really bothers people, is:

What use is the Lutheran Church of Australia? Why keep it?

This latter question is one that I have not specifically addressed at all this morning. Nor will I, apart from stating this:

*The Lutheran Church of Australia is where I learn and am transformed by what cannot be taught—faith in the God who always acts for me, for you and for creation.*

At its very core the Church is and has always been a learning community. It is what we are called into, and it is what, as mission, we are called for. We also realise, however, when we stop being that community. It's when we lock elephants, whoever they are, in rooms and taunt and accuse the hapless creatures with our disappointment in them, that our learning ceases and our disposition degrades.

What use is Australian Lutheran College? The College remains a deep, deep symbol for the Church because through it we recall and learn anew who we are as Church. We are the community who, fifty years ago, was formed by divine teaching for the sake of learning.

If you have the opportunity, please go to the College website and read our Strategic Direction. You might be surprised by it. The document isn't only about our vision for the College. It's actually about our vision for the Church. We want you, the Church, to:

- Identify yourselves as curious enquirers and as ravenous learners
- Value and give thanks for yourselves as those enquirers and learners
- Express, be transformed and serve each other as enquirers and learners.

But first, let the word of Christ dwell in your richly. He is God's wisdom, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. In him all learning begins.

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