

Hope-makers in an un-peaceful world

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Withdrawing from the world can be so easy, and the pandemic has taught us to isolate, barricade and distrust others. This has particularly impacted on our young adults, who are typically still in process of making their way in the world. Society has changed, and with that, our church needs to reflect and adapt—how will we use this opportunity to better share God’s saving grace and make a difference in the world? I share my experience and personal insights with you, in the expectation that we can engage in open and honest dialogue towards change.

My personal daily ministry is with young adults. As the pandemic struck, I found myself unexpectedly changing to working online and responsible for supporting forty-one local and international young adults training to be health workers, using email, text and online platforms. These young adults were in despair as their income was suddenly lost (self and partners) and many were home-schooling children. In an effort to address their needs, I introduced what eventually became known as the ‘Resilience Corner’—a few deep questions and discussions each week, to help build strengths and find balance within a strangely out-of-balance world. Whilst the students knew of my own spiritual commitment, I had to step carefully within an international and multi-faith critically-oriented skills class which had nothing to do with formal theology. Therefore, I worked to create a suitable blend which tapped spiritual values but carried a subtle theological message. Examples of topics included: What gives you joy? What gives you meaning? What types of things are gifts for you? What gift do you turn into a burden? What makes you feel fully alive? How do your personal experiences affect helping others? Each topic included some thoughts put forward and then time for discussion and reflection. Simultaneously, I spent unlimited time by phone/online encouraging students in despair and reminding them of their personal value and ongoing achievements.

In working with my students, it struck me that my biggest role was to bring hope—hope of change, hope of the future, hope that they could grow to meet the challenges, and hope of personally being able to keep a roof over their head and food on the table. Eventually government and other strategies supported some of the students, but maintaining hope has still been an ongoing rocky road. In expressing and embodying my support to these young adults, with both time and attention, these students have had an opportunity to experience unconditional love and be reminded of finding peace in a distinctly un-peaceful world.

My view is that as God’s people, we stand as embodied messages of hope and peace amidst a fractured world of stress, anxiety, depression and fear. Young adults have been particularly hard-hit, where the usual reference-points of family interaction, social engagement and work identity have seen the rug pulled out from under their feet. And this in a world where many young people are essentially without a compass of spiritual values and where many exist far from an experience of unconditional love or a sense of a greater force of love beyond themselves.

I am one of the lucky ones. I was blessed to be born into a generations-rich Lutheran family steeped in church service, and I remember an early childhood marked by the amalgamation service in Tanunda, frequent trips to Murray Bridge and Adelaide, attending seemingly interminable church synods with my delegate parents and as a teenager singing in combined Lutheran choirs at Tabor and Geelong. At University, the Lutheran Student Fellowship was available to me and supported me through some difficult times, and when I moved overseas I drove past one 1,000-member Lutheran church close to my home to attend another 1,000-member Lutheran church in the next suburb. Wherever I have travelled, I am curious to attend the local Lutheran church, which has included delightful experiences of outdoor church beside the Neckar river in Heidelberg, an ecumenical reformed Protestant church at a hospital in Salzburg, and an unexpected lunch time service in the Berlin Lutheran Cathedral. For me, church has always been an everyday, if at times somewhat frustrating, experience of joining with others in exploring the message and the presence of God in our world.

But what of other people in our world? The disenfranchised, marginalised, disillusioned and frankly hurting people we meet every day. What is the church to them? I've been blessed with rich church connections, and yet many times I have felt discomfort in the way that we worship and the messages that are coming through to me as I sit in the pews. My problem is not with God, but with the way we are 'doing church' as the people of God. How can we better reach our neighbours, in this world God has given us to inhabit?

And when we think of our neighbours—who is our neighbour? In my understanding, it is the people who have fallen by the wayside, who are injured and bleeding by the side of the road, who have needs that they cannot fulfil themselves and are in need of care and healing. We can no longer simply cross to the other side of the road and wish people well from a distance. It is time to closely investigate our neighbour's needs from their point of view and see how we can bring help and comfort to address their needs for healing and growth.

As people of God, we understand and embrace suffering and we know that Christ brings us new life under the theology of the cross. However, we have also worn our privilege as called Lutherans ministering in Australia as a cloak of glory, with our established and at times seemingly intractable traditions leading to more law and rigid expectations rather than Luther's prioritising of the gospel. It seems to me that we have often asked people to come to us, rather than going to them. I see the current pandemic as God's way of turning society on its head and figuring out what is really important—and no less so that this should be happening in this Lutheran church that I know and love. Such a change is not just for a few weeks or a couple months—it is time to make fundamental changes in the way we see ourselves and our ministry in the world around us.

In 'doing church' today, we need to use all means possible to reach and comfort young adults since they are the future of our society. It is not enough to simply create our messages into electronic form. We need to truly understand differences in connection, understandings and motivations of younger generations, as opposed to our traditional, generational and rural Lutheran approach. It's time to reinvoké the theology of the cross and do it as Jesus did. He was jostled and touched in crowds, spent time in disreputable homes, shared every crumb of his food with massive crowds, and yet still had time for that

one person up a tree looking for help. His love reached people in a world which was dirty, messy and complicated. Likewise, we need to be present with how young adults think and live, so that we can more fully understand how they are hurting and where their needs lie, and then shed our religious hegemony to meet them where they are with our genuine and authentic presence. There is no formula to this beyond taking up our cross and moving beyond our seemingly ingrained sense of Christian glory. We must remember that we are all part of the world God gives us as called ministers, both ordained and lay, and we need to use all possible means to reach our young adults including language relevant to their culture and society. There is a dire and pervasive need for our young generation to be listened to in their times of despair, to help them find new solutions, and to remind them that 'one foot in front of another' is still progress. At times simply getting out of bed to face another day has been an achievement for a lot of young adults, and indeed for all of us.

If we can change to see their real needs, we will be finding ways to express the 'cup of water' (Mt 10:42) to these young adults, who are rightly leery of formal church and church practices, but at the same time they are searching for spiritual values and strength, as we see from online and other behaviours. What will it take for us to see them, and to initiate person-to-person understanding and caring, as members of body of Christ? Maybe this is it: a worldwide and life-threatening pandemic.

I see a future Lutheran church in Australia as an authentic ministering community of God's love, reaching out to every person in our everyday world, which includes genuinely seeing our suffering young adults, and being aware of and attending to their 'cup of water' needs. In doing so we will embody God's grace, spreading hope and peace beyond the mental health stresses of current life, creating resilience and building faith in the future, hope of change and above all spreading God's love to all people. We talk of 'doing church', but let's move forward under the grace of our baptism and simply 'be church' in our everyday ministry to our community.

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