Positive psychology—flourishing within a Lutheran school?

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'*When schools flourish, things go well...*'[1]

This was Martin Luther's view of the importance of education, when he gathered around the table with friends. In his context of the Reformation in Germany, Luther believed that when schools flourish, humanity flourishes, and in the broader quote, the church flourishes. In recent decades positive psychology has indeed flourished. It has developed as a social science with research into what makes for human flourishing and wellbeing. In educational circles, government and independent schools have taken on the positive psychology, positive school's movement. Two notable Australian private schools in Adelaide and Geelong have been leaders in the field,[2] while some Lutheran schools have embraced the learnings of positive psychology, especially after a positive presentation on it at the 2013 ACLE in Brisbane.[3] As with any educational trend, how we dialogue is critical, especially as a sector of faith-based schools informed by Lutheran theology. Questions Lutheran schools rightly ask as they venture into positive psychology are: is the school watering down its Christian focus in an effort to adopt positive psychology? Can a Lutheran school, where the gospel is to inform educational practice and relationships,[4] engage with and critically use positive psychology? In pedagogy and pastoral care, how do children and teenagers learn the reality of sin and existence of evil in the world while remaining positive and hopeful of transformation?

For a number of years, Pacific Lutheran College has been on a journey of asking these questions and wrestling with answers. The college has engaged the positive schools movement and continued a journey of learning for the whole community. This article traces our college's involvement with the movement, and how we have found connections between it and Lutheran theology. Character formation is a critical focus, and I offer tips for schools as they continue to think intentionally on how their theology informs their educational practice.

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1   Martin Luther, 'Table Talk no. 5557,' *Luther's Works* 54:452. The wider quote in context is this: 'When schools flourish, things go well...and the church is secure. Let us make more doctors and masters. The youth is the church's nursery and fountainhead. When we are dead, where are others (to take our place) if there are no schools? God has preserved the church through the schools. They are the preservers of the church.'

2   St Peter's College Adelaide was one of the founding schools of the Positive Education Schools Association (PESA) (https://www.stpeters.sa.edu.au/life-at-saints/wellbeing-pastoral-care/) and Geelong Grammar has developed its own Institute of Positive Education (https://www.ggs.vic.edu.au/Institute).

3   Stuart Traeger and Mark Worthing, 'Positive psychology in the school—What does Lutheran theology have to say?' *Australian Conference on Lutheran Education 4* (Brisbane, 2013), https://www.lutheran.edu.au/?wpdmdl=3657.

4   Commission on Theology and Inter-church Relations (CTICR), *The Lutheran Church of Australia and Its Schools*, Lutheran Church of Australia, Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions, Volume 2, Section J, Church-School Issues (2001), https://www.lca.org.au/departments/commissions/cticr/.

Pacific's background with positive psychology

For some years, Pacific has been working with the goal of enhancing student wellbeing through the integration of Lutheran theology and PERMA[5] as well as strengthening pastoral care practices that foster the academic, spiritual, and social-emotional growth of each child. Embedding restorative practices within the college was a major point which led to introducing positive psychology. Several other key markers that have shaped our journey so far include:

- Principal and Director of Students discuss how positive psychology aligns with Lutheran theology and school ethos.
- Theological audit of positive psychology by the College Pastor.
- Director of Students and Staff visit Geelong Grammar.
- Staff members form a Positive Schools Group to roll out the PERMA model across the college.
- College Pastor expands the devotional threads of the college with learnings from positive psychology, particularly stillness, meditative exercises, prayers based on the Values in Action (VIA) character strengths.
- Roll out of the character strengths amongst staff and students who undertake surveys in staff gatherings and Personal Development and Rite Journey subjects.
- Students develop and create a visual representation of how positive psychology fits into the overall culture and programs of the school (see Figure 1).
- Students encourage their peers at assemblies and other gatherings through the Pastoral Care Action Group and Teacher.
- Head of Senior College and Director of Staff undertake post graduate studies in positive psychology and lead the college's Positive Schools Group. Staff receive professional development and attend positive schools' conferences.

Figure 1: Student-created visual

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5   The acronym PERMA stands for Positivity, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment or Achievement. It is a wellbeing model development by one of positive psychology's founders Martin Seligman. Some schools also add Health to the acronym PERMAH.

Integration with Lutheran theology

When Pacific Lutheran College first considered positive psychology, the then college pastor, Paul Smith undertook a theological audit with the college's pastoral care team. He mapped the congruence and divergence of five core Lutheran theological principles against seven key components of positive psychology.

The Lutheran theological principles used were:

1. We sin against God and against each other.
2. God is always gracious and merciful.
3. We are uniquely created.
4. We are created for relationships.
5. God's purpose is for peace and justice.

The seven components of positive psychology used were:

1. Relationships (we cooperate in activities, share personal feelings and the quality of relationship matters, not quantity)
2. Caring/giving (people who volunteer or simply care for others on a consistent basis seem to be happier)
3. Spiritual engagement (faith, prayer, social support, community service, cultural tradition, friendship and commitment)
4. Flow (activities that help us to work towards meaningful goals)
5. Health and wellness (regular exercise = improved mental wellbeing)
6. Optimism (reacting to a problem with confidence and high personal ability)
7. Being thankful for what we have.

In the mapping of these theological principles against components of positive psychology much congruence was found. Like any modern psychological theory, sin and original sin is not a part of its philosophical framework. Indeed, positive psychology stems from the concept that,

> psychology has placed major attention on human pathology and what can go wrong with human nature…this has meant that our understanding of human nature, from a psychological perspective, is a model that sees the human being as fundamentally lacking in positive qualities. As such, the emphasis in psychology has been to fix the deep pathology that sits within each individual and to repair 'damaged habits, damaged drives, damaged childhood, and damaged brains.' Positive Psychology places the emphasis on the positive aspects of human nature such as our strengths, virtues, capacity for altruism and our search for meaning.[6]

Where does this leave a Christian worldview where fallen human nature needs redemption? Where does this leave the Lutheran school where our theology of sin informs our educational practice?

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6   Theo McCall, Lea Waters and Matthew White, 'Finding similarities and points of connection between Positive Psychology and Christianity,' *Dialogue Australasia* 27 (May 2012): 18.

We need to be clear and transparent that in the positive psychology approach the concept of sin does not play an active role.[7] For Christians sin is an accurate and necessary picture of the human condition. Sin is more than a psychological flaw that needs to be fixed. Sin is an unavoidable part of our human nature. Original sin is our condition before God. It is a state of un-flourishing, shriveling, wasting away and rotting like a healthy plant that has been cut off from its roots and source of wellbeing; the triune God. Malcolm Bartsch writes 'each person from conception and birth is in a state of sin…the sinful nature we inherit from our parents is not just neutral towards God; it is actively opposed to God.'[8] In the Augsburg Confession, a Latin term is used to describe the sinful human nature; 'concupiscence'. Concupiscence is defined as a constant inclination toward evil that is within every person from birth as a result of original sin. The *Augsburg Confession* states:

> our churches teach that since the fall of Adam all who are naturally born are born with sin, that is, without fear of God, without trust in God, and with the inclination to sin, called concupiscence. Concupiscence is a disease and original vice that is truly sin. It damns and brings eternal death on those who are not born anew through baptism and the Holy Spirit.[9]

For some, reading this confession might make one think that Lutheran theology is very pessimistic about human beings. However, Mark Worthing who researched positive psychology for Lutheran Education Australia, argues that Christian theology has a fundamentally optimistic as well as a realistic view of human nature.[10] As Tom Christenson puts it, a Lutheran epistemology operates from 'a hopeful realism'.[11]

Without an acknowledgement of the depth of our human condition and how that affects every relationship we have, there's no need for God's grace and the person and work of Christ. Acknowledging this in schools, in life, and in faith is essential. It is important because it sets the scene for the paradox of existence, of being sinful and inclined to selfishness, but also capable of great good and service to others. We are simultaneously saint and sinner. Worthing writes,

> On the one hand we know we have been redeemed, made holy and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be Christ-like, but on the other hand, we forever have a sinful nature that wants to curve in on itself. Paul's struggle in Romans 7:14–25, where he wants to do good, but the sinful nature leads him to do evil. Whilst this may appear to be the very opposite of wellbeing, it is because of this ongoing struggle that we are drawn back to God, his word, the sacraments, prayer, worship and strengthened to become

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7 Mark Worthing, 'Positive psychology and the Christian doctrine of sin; Are they compatible?' Paper as Senior Researcher, Australian Lutheran Institute for Theology and Ethics, Australian Lutheran College, Adelaide, 1–2.

8 Malcolm Bartsch, *A God Who Speaks and Acts: Theology for Teachers in Lutheran Schools* (Adelaide: Lutheran Education Australia, 2013), 77.

9 *AC* 2 (*Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions—A Reader's Edition to the Book of Concord,* ed. Paul T. McCain [Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2005], 57–58).

10 Worthing, 'Positive psychology and the Christian doctrine of sin,' 11.

11 Tom Christenson, *The Gift and Task of Lutheran Higher Education* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 130.

more Christ-like in our daily life.[12]

This Lutheran theological distinction is foundational for our appreciation of positive psychology in the school setting, and in particular our use of the movement's character strengths as we also focus on the spiritual development of young people.

While noting the positives of positive psychology's take on sin, Worthing also suggests,

> the Christian, embracing the many good elements within positive psychology, must be careful that the focus on self (which is not entirely wrong) does not supplant the focus on others and their wellbeing, and on God as the ultimate source of our wellbeing, the ultimate source of which each individual 'self' is able to achieve.[13]

Wellbeing programs which focus only on caring for and improving the individual self are detrimental and only highlight the self-centered world-view.[14] Younger generations are born into a 24/7, digitally connected world. Luther expounding on Augustine writes,

> Our nature, by the corruption of the first sin, (being) so deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself and enjoys them (as is plain in the works-righteous and hypocrites), or rather even uses God himself in order to attain these gifts, but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly, curvedly and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake.[15]

A realistic view of our sinful human nature and awareness of the curved-in nature of the self, is a critical point of dialogue with positive psychology's focus on mindfulness and individual wellbeing. Together with LEA's strong focus on community and service learning, the focus beyond the sinful self is present and practiced in a Lutheran school. A final word of caution from Worthing:

> there is much to affirm in the focus on what we can and must do to achieve wellbeing…A baptized version of PERMA will regularly point us to the importance of the wellbeing of others and will not forget that God is the ultimate source of our wellbeing and achievements. It will remind us that when we begin to believe that our human programmes or our own individual, unaided self can achieve these things, then we have abandoned the theology of the cross and taken up a theology of glory.[16]

Authentic alignment

There is a clear divergence between our Lutheran theology of sin and positive psychology. How do we work with the positive school's movement so that it authentically aligns with

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12 Worthing, 'Positive psychology and the Christian doctrine of sin,' 16.

13 Ibid., 13.

14 Meaning turned or curved inward on oneself.

15 From his lectures on Romans 5:4. For a slightly different translation see *Luther's Works* 25:291.

16 Worthing, 'Positive psychology and the Christian doctrine of sin,' 14. Suffering is a core reality in Lutheran schools so the theology of the cross is another critical point of tension between positive psychology and Lutheran theology that needs further exploring. See: Stephen Pietsch, *Of Good Comfort: Martin Luther's Letters to the Depressed and their Significance for Pastoral Care Today* (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2016), 189.

who we are as a Lutheran school where our theology informs our practice? The staff goal at Pacific is to enhance student wellbeing through the integration of Lutheran theology and the PERMA model of wellbeing, through pastoral care. A first step for working towards this goal has been to develop the devotional threads of the worship life of the college,[17] a common language and framework used in chapels, daily prayers and devotional activities. We supplement this with written communications by the principal and college pastor to parents and families in the weekly school newsletter. In our context, much convergence has been found between the character strengths of positive psychology, the values of Lutheran Education and the biblical themes found in Lutheran theology. An example of this is in term two of each year of our three-year cycle of threads, where our college focuses on our Lutheran values as a school. These ten values include humility, compassion, service, hope and forgiveness amongst ot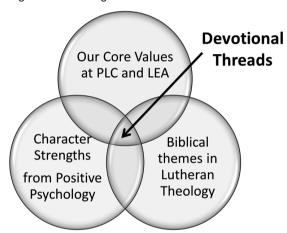hers. Most of these Lutheran Education values correspond directly with the VIA Character Strengths. And of course, each of these values/character strengths are concepts taught in the bible specifically from Jesus' ministry and life as described in the gospels and explained further in the epistles of the New Testament. The sweet spot in the middle of these three areas as highlighted in Figure 2 is where this convergence is articulated in our college's devotional threads.

Figure 2: The convergence between values, character strengths and biblical/theological themes

Pastoral care groups and class devotions make connections between biblical texts as the threads are unpacked with students through quotes, activities, discussion points, media, and meditative and stillness practices. In daily prayers, we give thanks to God for the strengths he has given to us as we ask the Holy Spirit to grow in us his gifts to us. In chapel, we look at the biblical stories of our thread cycle through the lens of the character strengths of the characters in the text. Another major avenue for alignment between our theology and elements of positive psychology has been through weekly whole staff devotions by the college pastor. These devotions which mainly focus on the devotional thread are another opportunity for staff to unpack biblical virtues, the character strengths

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17 The devotional threads at Pacific are a deliberate framework originally created by Paul Smith that guides the worship life of the college. It is a three-year cycle of readings and themes for a school context. The threads largely come from the Developmental Assets of the Search Institute in the United States. The individual threads are repeated fortnightly and accompanied by bible readings, explanations, quotes, prayers, reflective activities, YouTube and internet links, children's story books and other devotional material.

of positive psychology, and our gospel theology that God comes to us from outside of ourselves. This material also includes content for students to experience times of Christian meditation and stillness in the busyness of school life. The work of the founding college pastor Rick Zweck has also been instrumental in setting an openness to the contemplative side of Christian spirituality, including Christian meditation and using the labyrinth in our and other Lutheran schools.

Character formation

The character strengths research from positive psychology has much to offer Lutheran schools, whilst providing a Christ-centered education which helps form character in students. Forming a Christ-like character is what a Christian school and learning organisation is all about. For Christians, Christ-like character is formed when the fruit of the Spirit is grown and developed in people. Paul also writes in Romans 5:1–5 that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character and that results in hope. For Lutherans, Christ-like character happens when the gospel, as distinguished from the law, informs all learning, relationships, and practices. From the time of the reformation, Martin Luther and his co-reformer Philip Melanchthon devoted themselves to reforming schools as well as local congregations. Their emphasis was always on the pastoral and educational needs of the common people, so that they were not robbed of Christ and the power and grace to change people's lives and transform their character.

Fast forward to our current context; the positive psychology movement has birthed the VIA Institute, a non-profit organisation which is dedicated to bringing the science of character strengths to the world through supporting research, creating surveys of character and developing practical tools for individuals and practitioners.[18] Character strengths are viewed as our positive personality in that they are our core capacities for thinking, feeling, and behaving in ways that can bring benefit to us and others. Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson worked with many scholars and practitioners to devise a classification of twenty-four character strengths and six categories of virtues and ways of measuring them. Their eight hundred and fifteen-page volume, *Character Strengths and Virtues; A Handbook and Classification* is the result of this work. Seligman and Peterson's handbook is focused on psychological health, i.e. the character strengths that make the good life possible. They believe it is a necessary correlative to the diagnosis of psychological illness as articulated in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.[19] The VIA Character Strengths survey measures an individual's character strengths and was initially developed as a study for positive individual traits of teenagers. It soon emerged as having a much wider brief for adults as well as having the potential of identifying institutions that enable good character.[20] Over six million people have completed the VIA Character Strengths survey. Many schools like Pacific use this strengths-based inventory with students, staff, and leadership.

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18 From the VIA Character Strengths Mission as found on their website as accessed 21 June 2018; http://www.viacharacter.org/www/Character.

19 Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3–4.

20 Ibid., 5.

Character strengths in the life of a Lutheran school

Character strengths and virtues have had a long history through Christian tradition. Lutheran theology has sometimes been critiqued for not having a substantive articulation of Christian virtues. In this area, American Lutheran theologian Joel Biermann outlines a Lutheran framework for character formation while maintaining a faithful expression of justification by grace alone in his work *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics*. Biermann presents writings of the Lutheran Confessions which highlight the importance of character development in the justified Christian. He argues Luther originally wrote the catechisms in order to help shape and form people. Through exhortations, examples, scriptural threats and promises, repetition and memorisation, the catechisms were intended to grow Christian character in Christians.[21] Luther had high regard for the spiritual habits that contribute to the formation of Christian character especially as directed to the neighbour rather than the self. In his *Small Catechism*, he explains each of the Ten Commandments in a positive way, that details succinctly how to live out the prohibition. In his *Large Catechism* commenting on the second commandment, Luther encourages the repetition of practices which form habits that in turn shape character.[22] He writes,

> Children should be constantly urged and moved to honour God's name and to have it always upon their lips...This is also a blessed and useful habit and very effective against the devil...It is also useful that we form the habit of daily commending ourselves to God...Look we should train our youth this way in a childlike way and playfully in the fear and honour of God.[23]

In the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, regarding the invocation of the saints, Melanchthon acknowledges the need for ongoing training, formation and exercising of the faith. He writes, 'our Confession approves honouring the saints in three ways [including]... the strengthening of our faith…[and] the imitation, first of faith, then of the other virtues. Everyone should imitate the saints according to their calling.'[24] This is what Aristotle and current virtue ethicists would call 'habituation'. Biermann describes habituation as the practice of virtuous acts and the cultivation of pious habits.[25] For the Lutheran this is always directed in service of the neighbour. Also, in the *Apology* regarding the monastic life and Luther's idea of vocation, Melanchthon writes,

> if we follow this logic, monasticism will be no more a state of perfection than the life of a farmer or mechanic. For these are also states in which one acquires perfection. All people, in every vocation, should seek perfection, that is, growth in the fear of God, in faith, in love toward one's neighbour, and similar spiritual virtues.[26]

In the *Formula of Concord*, the first generation of Lutherans writing on God's eternal

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21 Joel D. Biermann, *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 95.

22 Biermann, *A Case for Character*, 97.

23 *LC* 21,70–76 (*Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, ed. Paul T. Mc Cain, 366–367).

24 *Ap* 21,4–7 (*Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, ed. Paul T. Mc Cain, 228).

25 Biermann, *A Case for Character*, 93.

26 *Ap* 27,37 (*Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, ed. Paul T. Mc Cain, 269).

foreknowledge and the elect 'therefore, believers, too, should not be idle, much less resist the work of God's Spirit. They should practice all Christian virtues, in all godliness, modesty, temperance, patience and love for one another.'[27]

The *Lutheran Confessions* don't shy away from how virtue and character are developed by the Holy Spirit in the life of a person. Our Lutheran theological tradition does give permission for Lutheran schools to pursue character formation, including tapping into the research, wisdom and advice on developing character strengths from the positive education movement. If God is part of and central to positive psychology practices within Lutheran schools, the work of the Holy Spirit will be highlighted in terms of the development of character traits and strengths within students.

Conclusion and tips

This article describes some of the journey Pacific Lutheran College has had with elements of positive psychology. Our school acknowledges that there is scope for positive wellbeing models with a Lutheran educational worldview that is acutely aware of original sin. There is opportunity for dialogue with positive psychology's character development within Lutheran schools. With this in mind, here are some tips and questions for fellow Lutheran schools who are interacting and conversing with positive psychology.

- Complete a theological audit with your pastor, principal, deputy and unpack it with your pastoral care/wellbeing staff/leaders, then revisit this again and again.
- How do staff, students and the wider school community learn of the reality of sin and evil in the world? And how do school leaders and staff provide opportunities for students to use their God given strengths and abilities for acts of service to others?
- How does your school's wellbeing programs and interventions acknowledge God as the source of all wellness and wholeness?
- Tap into mindfulness practices through the lens of scripture and Christian meditation.
- What language and systems do you provide for a coherent framework for the worship life of your community that integrates Lutheran theology and character formation?
- Spend time with the passionate drivers of positive psychology in your school and beyond to encourage critical theological thinking, especially around an appreciation of original sin, the tension between saint and sinner and the theology of the cross.

While this paper focuses largely on the theological tensions within a Lutheran understanding of sin and positive psychology, other fruitful avenues for exploration would be the role of suffering and pain in a Lutheran school.[28]

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27 *FC*,*SD* 11,73 (*Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions,* ed. Paul T. Mc Cain, 642).

28 For a critique of positive psychology and a Lutheran approach to suffering see Stephen Pietsch, 'Luther's theology of suffering and pastoral care,' a paper given to the NSW Pastor's Conference of the LCA, May 2017. Also, for a wider Christian view of positive psychology. See: Peggy L. Kern and Susan D. Benecchi, 'Intersections of positive psychology and Christianity' [white paper], (2019). Available from http://www.peggykern.org/publications.html.