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Reconciliation: a challenge for Lutheran schools

Reconciliation is a genuine challenge for Lutheran schools. We can no longer shelve the issue as if it were just a political football. As Australians, we are involved. As a church with Aboriginal members, we are involved. Aboriginal Lutherans themselves, speaking on *Out of the shadows*, the recent video made for the LCA, highlight this point:

When people speak about reconciliation, that reconciliation has always been in the church, among black and white. Reconciliation starts with God. Pastor Keith Peters (Yalata)

Because the church is just as responsible for taking away some of these rights (of Aborigines), I think the church, in the process of reconciliation and in the process of healing for these people, has to be far more up front in supporting Aboriginal people. Frankie Deemal (Hopevale)

We talk about problems, we talk about healing, reconciliation. But it goes much deeper in our relationship with one another, Aboriginal to Aboriginal, Aboriginal to Australians, Australians to us, Aboriginal to the land. It's a deeper problem. It's a spiritual problem. David Costello (Hopevale)

I suggest there are at least four challenges that the current reconciliation issue poses for our Lutheran schools, challenges that affect the very way we function as Lutheran schools in an Australian society. For we not only exist to develop the faith of our students, but also to prepare them to function as responsible citizens with a Christian conscience.

A Challenge to our Charter

Lutheran schools have a charter to assist their students to develop faith in Christ and to relate that faith to their lives in society. We fail if we create citizens who keep their faith and their lives in separate boxes.

Reconciliation is one of those social issues where the relationship between faith and life is brought sharply into focus. The challenge before us is to understand not only how God has effected reconciliation with us through the death of Christ, but also how that reconciliation is involved in making peace by reconciling groups to each other (Eph 2:14-16). In fact God was 'pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven' (Col 1:20).

The challenge for us as Lutherans is to link the social process of reconciliation with the cross, as Paul does. For the God who effects peace in the Kingdom of the left is also the God who suffered on the cross. Reconciliation is too important to leave to the politicians.

A Challenge to our Attitudes

It is one thing to say we want to be one with our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, it is quite another to remove the baggage of racist and paternalistic attitudes many of us still carry. When I went to Concordia College, I assumed Aboriginal people were lazy, intellectually inferior and culturally deprived. I, like most people of the time, was racist. I was ignorant of the fact that most of Australia's history has been racist.

As part of the reconciliation process, we are challenged to acknowledge our false attitudes in the past and probe our present attitudes to see if racism still influences our school policies and relationships. What is the attitude of teachers or students to Aboriginal Australians in our schools? Do we still view them as a separate race?

'Race' is a construct of the past three centuries. As a concept 'race' developed primarily to justify the colonialist policies of Europe. Inferior 'races' could be dispossessed because they did not possess the intellect to develop the land. If we still accept the concept of 'race' we are racist in the precise sense of the term. Reconciliation means that we no longer treat Aboriginal Australians as an inferior 'race', or even as a separate 'race'. As the title of our recent LCA report on Aboriginal issues says, *We're all people*.

A Challenge to our Curriculum

One test of whether we are racist, or whether we relate to Aboriginal Australians in the same way as other Australians, is our curriculum. Do we include Aboriginal history as integral to Australian history, or does it remain hidden? For example, is the fate of the Aboriginal peoples of the Barossa included in history at Barossa schools? Is Aboriginal literature and story studied as closely as texts of more famous authors?

The massacre of Aboriginal people, the poisoning of their food, the removal of children from their families, their forcible removal from traditional land, and similar great wrongs of our past should not be hidden any more than the holocaust in Germany. These wrongs are part of our Australian heritage. The challenge is to face them, understand them and learn from them. Reconciliation includes making our Aboriginal heritage an integral part of our curriculum, including Christian Studies.

A Challenge to our Compassion

The challenge, however, is not confined to facing the past. The reconciliation issue is before us today. Do we, who know the compassion of Christ, have any compassion for the Aboriginal people of Australia who have lost land, lives and cultures because of the ignorance and greed of European settlers?

The Aboriginal Lutherans we interviewed for the report entitled *We're all people* did not want us to feel guilty about what our ancestors did. But they hoped we would have compassion for their hurt, their pain, their loss, and work toward overcoming the injustices of the past. They hoped we would support their struggle for justice.

We can, of course, say we are sorry for what happened and do nothing about it. In our schools, however, we are challenged to develop a program to resist injustice. We are challenged to listen to the voice of our Aboriginal people, to acknowledge the wrongs of the past and to build a curriculum that values Aboriginal people and cultures.

Christ, who is our peace with God, is now calling us to participate in bringing peace and reconciliation between black and white. And, as David Costello said above, this is not merely a political question, it is a spiritual one.

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