The Lutheran school: communicating hope, vision and leadership in challenging contexts—historical and global perspectives

Andrew Jaensch

Andrew is Australian Lutheran College’s Queensland faculty member, based in the School of Education at the Australian Catholic University in Brisbane.

The Trinity and the global context of Lutheran schools

Over the centuries in a variety of both visual images and words Christians have attempted to communicate the mystery of the Trinity. One classic image features a triangular model with lines crossing between the points inside the triangle and phrases relating to the identity of the three persons. In his Catechisms Luther captures something of this diverse yet unified nature and activity of the Triune God in his explanation of the three parts of the Apostles’ Creed. ‘I believe that God has created me and everything that exists.’ ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is my Lord … he has rescued me when I was lost.’ ‘I believe that the Holy Spirit has called me to Jesus’. God consists of three distinct persons. The Father is not the Son and so on, but they are united in their creating, rescuing and calling activity.

This is at the heart of the historical context of Lutheran schooling. The commitment of Lutheran schools to their role within the global community flows naturally out of Trinitarian theology. God doesn’t just sit. God is active within the Godhead and in history. It has been said that the doctrine of the Trinity ‘safeguards a dynamic as opposed to a static understanding of God’ (McGrath: 338). Jesuit scholar Richard Rohr underlines this connection poetically. Rohr speaks of the Trinity as ‘unhindered dialogue, love, flow’ (2004). Living in this ‘flow’ is, among other things, a call and inspiration to connect with others both locally and globally.

Models of airline flight paths and aerial photographs of roads offer hints of this Trinitarian imagery. Within these can be recognised reminders of connections between places and people across the globe. The nature and activity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit are lived out in God’s people as they connect with each other. The circle image speaks of relationships characterised by loving service which is willing to suffer for the other.

1 This article is an edited version of a presentation to the Lutheran Educators’ Conference, Bethlehem, 25 September–4 October 2010.
The lines connecting the persons of the Trinity in Trinitarian symbols reflect the love radiated within the Trinity and out to humankind. These connections are lived out by God’s people through the global roads, flight paths or communication superhighway links between them and God’s other people wherever they are.

In the Trinity there is perfect harmony both between the identity of the persons and the identity of the group of persons which is the Trinity. It is ironic, then, that in so much of western society the cult of the individual has led to a diminishing of personal identity and self-love. The more that this Trinity life is lived out, the more a complete and satisfying identity is experienced.

Living out ‘Trinity life’ occurs in an encounter with God’s free grace in Christ, as appreciated so well by Martin Luther. This encounter shifts our attention from good lives to secure God’s approval to service of our neighbour. ‘Luther argued that God does not need our good works, but our neighbour does’ (Jericho). Jesus leaves us in no doubt that the neighbour is anyone whose needs we know about, and, ‘with knowledge comes responsibility, with familiarity comes community’. This is true for all citizens of the globe; but for children of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a prior and even more fundamental call to reach out to the neighbour can be heard.

‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit’ is the proper name for God whom Christians know in and through Jesus (McGrath: 337). The community created by Father, Son and Holy Spirit has been made possible through the reconciliation that Christ has won. Richard Rohr refers to the incarnation as God ‘pushing out and drawing in’ through the one whose arms were outstretched on the cross for the world (2004).

When we begin worship we are reminded of God’s presence not only then and there but also ‘historically’ in our baptism. And that in turn is a reminder that we were then incorporated and now remain in the people of God of all time, and across the globe. The sign of the cross which accompanied baptism and announces God’s presence in worship also points out to Christians the four points of the compass where their brothers and sisters in Christ are living and struggling, and also where all of their fellow citizens of this globe are to be found.

The leadership of schools in communicating a vision of hope in the global context

Central to this living out of Trinitarian community is the call to schools to exercise leadership by communicating hope to the neighbour in challenging contexts near and far. Fostering hope is a leader’s first and last task. It is not only the first and last task of all leaders; it is the first and last task of all educational leaders because fostering hope is of the very essence of the educational process. Education is a hopeful vocation. Fostering hope is even more the first and last task of Christian and Lutheran educational leaders who live out in their daily and professional lives the hope they have through Christ. These leaders are not just those who have titles of leadership, but all who are involved in the vocation of education in communities, churches, schools and homes.
Across the globe hope is fettered in many ways. Each society is fettered in one way or another and needs hope, whether it recognises that need or not. Relatively comfortable western mainstream societies too are fettered in ways that their members rarely even recognise as fetters and which constrain their hopes all the more because of this ignorance.

In many challenging contexts around the globe people have the experience of being in fetters—military, cultural, technological, economic or psychological fetters, or fetters of some other kind. These fetters produce dissatisfaction, anxiety and fear, which in turn threaten to destroy hope. Justin Cronin’s novel, *The passage*, reflects this contemporary fragility of hope. *The passage* was born out of a challenge from Cronin’s nine-year-old daughter Iris who wanted her dad to write a story in which a young girl saves the world. Its post-apocalyptic theme comes from a writer who was born just before the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and grew up under the threat of a Soviet missile attack. The author has recalled that everyone around him thought the world was going to end as he grew up under the shadow of the period. So *The passage*’s six year old heroine Amy fights vampires and biological viruses in her battle to restore people’s hope. The novel was prompted also by Cronin’s own concern about the world his children would inherit, a concern reflected in the dedication of the novel, ‘For my children—no bad dreams’.

But damaged hopes are not just the stuff of fiction. In a 2008 Australian anthology ‘Catholic schools: hope in uncertain times’, Hedley Beare urges upon educators the need to nurture students ‘with constructive approaches while they are still at school as they are instructed in just how dire the situation is with regard to climate change, population explosion and limited resources’ (162). Similarly, Marva Dawn offers examples of ‘aspects of the technological, consumerist world that fetter us, to deepen our awareness of how tightly we are chained and how desperately we need a Rescuer from outside ourselves’ (xiii). Unremitting in her description of the fetters placed on society’s hopes, Dawn claims that ‘only when we know the grip of our bondage in our present milieu can we know the sweeping fullness of our deliverance and thereby be empowered to respond by setting others free to hope’ (xiii).

It is in Dawn’s offer of a clear message of hope founded on God that we find fertile ground for our consideration here of the role of Lutheran schools in communicating a strong vision of hope. In *Unfettered hope* she outlines her concern for three ‘overwhelmings’ that are oppressing humanity.

The first is the ‘overwhelming’ of despair. There is the despair of the three quarters of the world’s people who live in inhumane conditions. In affluent societies there are two kinds of despair: that of those whose hopeless situations see them resorting to crime, violence, substance abuse or suicide, and that of the well-off who repress their poverty of hope, but just below the surface see life much as Ecclesiastes saw it millennia ago. ‘Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun’ (Eccles 2:11, NRSV).
Marva Dawn’s second ‘overwhelming’ is the technological milieu and its paradigm. She makes much use of Jacques Ellul’s seminal 1964 book, *The technological society*, in which, with a kind of Orwellian 1984 prescience, he saw that ‘human beings would become immersed in, and completely subjected to, an omnipotence made possible by the intertwining of technology, money, politics, and other forces’ (2). It is not technology itself which Marva Dawn critiques, but its associated paradigm which promises liberation while actually bringing with it a form of enslavement. Technology is one of the modern-day ‘principalities and powers’ that St Paul refers to (Col 1:16) which, while created for good, have moved beyond their proper vocations and now have potential to fetter our hopes. Dawn says that technology ‘has moved beyond its proper vocation to create an orientation that has shifted away from engagement in practices that relate to what is most important to us’ (57). Technology and the associated love of the god Mammon prompt us to want what will only leave us less contented and with hope even further from our grasp.

Marva Dawn’s third ‘overwhelming’ is the god Mammon. Money is another of the ‘principalities and powers’ that have been created for good but have moved beyond their proper vocation. Within affluent societies too much money leads less to generosity than to an idolatry which raises false hopes. It promises much but actually enslaves, because it always leaves what is hoped for beyond grasp. The hope of a fair standard of living is left deceptively out of reach for vast numbers of poor across the globe.

Wei Minzhi is the central character in the Chinese film *Not one less*, set in a poor rural village in the People’s Republic of China during the 1990s. Wei is a very unlikely educational leader, a thirteen year-old substitute teacher called in for one month to take the place of a village teacher who has gone to the city to care for his ageing mother. The village mayor has agreed to pay Wei a modest amount for her services, and as the teacher leaves for his time away the mayor promises her a fifty yuan bonus if she ensures that there is ‘not one less’ student at the school when the teacher returns.

In a sense this thirteen-year-old’s own hopes were fettered by the economic realities of her poverty, and in turn by her own limited vision of her students as a means to an economic end. Her story, though, includes these fetters being unexpectedly broken by circumstances, through which Wei gained a new vision of hope along with her students.

What precisely is ‘hope’? And what is Christian hope? As those who suffer ongoing injustice know, Christian hope is not optimism. One can lose all optimism—in political processes, for example—yet hold on tenaciously to hope. In tune with this understanding, hope has been called ‘Christian realism’ (Dawn: 110).

On 20 November 1989 at a key point in the non-violent Velvet Revolution against the authoritarian regime in Czechoslovakia, half a million people gathered in the centre of Prague to make a statement and take a stand. Many in the crowd were young people who had been hoping against hope for freedom and were prepared to risk all for it. During the rally that day these young people and others were led by a priest in praying...
the Lord's Prayer. ‘Your kingdom come’, they prayed. Then, a mere eight days later, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia announced that it would relinquish power and dismantle the single-party state.

A key figure in the Velvet Revolution was former Czech President Vaclav Havel who later wrote about hope that it ‘is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and continually try new things, even in conditions that seem hopeless’ (Walker: 16). Havel's description of hope sound very much like Marva Dawn's Christian realism.

This brings us closer to the hope that Lutheran schools are called to communicate both locally and globally. It is a hope that is so close to us yet so easily taken-for-granted. Keith Walker observes, ‘Our severest challenges make us candidates for the grace of hope. The school's culture including its taken-for-granted assumptions, its stories, its values, its memory of change and critical events are all important in the hope quotient of the learning community’ (17). Sadly, Lutheran educators are sometimes so close to their tradition that they don’t see what others see in it and yearn for from them.

At the heart of the Lutheran tradition is the 'Trinitarian hope' confessed by St Paul: ‘Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Rom 5:1–5). Father, Son and Holy Spirit are acting for us to provide us with an ultimate hope. We wait in hope for what God has already begun for us in Christ, and we offer ourselves as agents of that hope in our world. This is the hope which the world dearly needs and which Christian educators have the challenge to communicate by word and action.

There are three basic questions that students in Lutheran schools, their family members, their staff and all in their communities instinctively seek to answer. Answers to these questions are pivotal for finding hope (Smith: 2001).

1. How are we to win food and shelter from our natural environment? Modernity has helped here considerably, but ‘over-promised progress and offered precious little to the longings of humankind’ (Walker: 7).

2. How are we to get along with each other? Postmodernity has helped here through its ‘accommodation of diversity and deconstruction of longstanding tyrannies’ (Walker: 8).

3. How are we to relate to the total scheme of things? Neither modernity nor postmodernity offers anything here.
Speaking into this void the Christian tradition offers a meta-narrative, a great overarching story that encompasses all the bits of a fragmented world and presents an answer to the perplexing questions which threaten its hope. This is the meta-narrative which answers the meta-physical question to which modernity and postmodernity offer nothing in response. How are we to relate to the total scheme of things? It is the narrative that Christians have in Scripture, the story of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, acting through history to bring all creation together under Christ as head. This is what can break the fetters on the hopes of a despairing world, producing a hope that does not disappoint us; those in Lutheran schools have the privilege of communicating that vision of hope.

But the unholy trinity of ‘overwhelmings’ fetter hopes by focusing people’s concern on what can never fulfil their hopes nor the hopes of those who share the globe with them. Hopes are overwhelmed because focal concerns are things which leave people dissatisfied and alienated. Marva Dawn comments:

Christianity provides focal concerns worthy of our lives, suitable for integrating them, and strong enough to counteract what overwhelms us and hope itself. (xiv)

Much of that fettering is due to the paradigm that controls our society: that the development of the technological milieu has moved us away from engaging in practices that are related to our focal concerns, the centre of our lives, and instead toward a way of life cluttered with commodities (objects, data, achievements, even persons) produced by devices (physical machinery, networked communications machinery or more hidden machineries such as that of advertising or the pressures at our jobs to accomplish certain levels of performance. (63)

Ecclesiastes tells us that God ‘has put eternity in our hearts’ (Eccles 3:11, RSV). Into the vacuum created by the fettering of hope, Scripture speaks of focal concerns which arise from the Triune God, the God of relationships: the focal concerns of love of God and love of the neighbour (Dawn: 76). These change the way we spend our money, time, energy and love. They also enable us to resist the technological paradigm and make use of only those commodities that genuinely contribute to our commitments. These concerns equip us to clear more space for the ways in which we love God and our neighbours’ (Dawn: 77).

The story of Wei, the teenage substitute teacher from the film Not one less, beautifully illustrates this call to love God and our neighbours. Like the shepherd in Jesus’ parable, Wei’s focal concern of ‘not one less’ leads her to put aside her single focus concern for the promised bonus and go in search of the other, ‘the lost one’. In her case this was a student who had headed to the city to try to earn money for his widowed and ill mother. The extent to which Wei’s search for the lost student is driven by genuine concern for him rather than for the sake of her promised bonus is unclear, but there is no doubt that in taking that step she discovered a whole new way of seeing the world, a new focal concern worthy of her life.

Thirteen-year-old Wei was leader for her class in living according to the focal concern for others that she discovered almost by accident. Those in Lutheran schools must ask
themselves if they really lead by living according to their focal concerns and thereby communicate a vision of hope to those near and those across the globe. In a world—including a world of schooling—in which it is so easy to surrender to the technological, economic and other forces that surround them, educators are at serious risk of hypocrisy. Faced with apparently overwhelming problems, it is tempting to throw up our hands and lament, ‘It’s all too hard!’ Mary Jo Leddy, director of Romero House Community for Refugees in Toronto, has observed this about the efforts of Václav Havel and others like him to resist seemingly overwhelming forces. She observes: ‘You cannot live outside a culture, but you can create within it zones and spaces where you can become who you really are. It is in such places that you can speak the truth, where one can gather with others who share that truth’ (Dawn: 95). Zones and spaces can be created in schools where people can maintain focal concerns of love of God and the love of the neighbour, in spite of economic and other pressures that threaten those concerns.

Christian hope, Trinitarian hope, is communal in nature. ‘Hope is always associated with a communion’ (Walker: 17). It was not surprising then that substitute teacher Wei enlisted the support of her students to find the lost one, and to raise the money to do it. Not one less tells the story of her going to the city alone to seek out the lost one, but only with the support of her students. Together they made it possible. Hope is communal.

Christian educators everywhere face the challenge and opportunity to hope vicariously, to hope for others when their own hope is at an end. ‘Substitute hopers can keep hope alive until our own hopes have a revival. Everybody needs somebody who can be a vicarious hoper’ (Walker: 17).

In the Aboriginal community of Hope Vale in Far North Queensland, vicarious hope has been lived out movingly. Living in their home country for thousands of years, the Guugu Yimithirr people first encountered Europeans in 1770. In 1886 a Lutheran mission was established. Over time there were many threats to the hopes of these people, perhaps most painfully with their forced removal in 1942 to the community of Woorabinda, far to the south, where many of them died, but where the hope of a return to their home remained strong. This hope was fulfilled in 1949 when they returned to their country, and the Hope Vale Mission was established. Beset by the kinds of problems experienced in Indigenous communities across the globe, this former mission is now a self-governed Aboriginal community with the church still central. Elders at Hope Vale speak of how their (imperfect) Lutheran Church helped keep alive and bring to reality their hopes of a return home from exile in Woorabinda to their traditional home at Hope Vale.

This is vicarious hope, others hoping for us when our own hopes are threatened. This continues today through the provision of special educational support for Indigenous youth in Lutheran schools in Cairns, Brisbane and Toowoomba. And in a beautiful mutuality, this writer’s own hope and the hope of many others is revived as they sit with these hopeful people and listen to their stories. In the same way Lutheran educators need to give thanks for hope-givers in their schools and communities, and to encourage them in return.
In the final scene of *Not one less*, Teacher Wei returns to the village with ‘the lost one’ with the help of the producers of a city TV news program who stumbled across her story and helped her to find the missing student. She brings with her resources previously unheard of in the poor village school, including abundant boxes of coloured chalk. When Wei had begun her month of duties the departing teacher instructed her strictly to use each day no more than one stick of their precious white-only chalk supplies. Now, these boxes of coloured chalk act as symbols of renewed hope for a struggling community, much as a new computer laboratory might do in a school in more affluent societies.

Behind and beneath the stories of hopeful people like Substitute Teacher Wei, and the Guugu Yimithirr people of Hope Vale is the God of hope, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whose grand story creates and renews that hope. Lutheran schools have a special call to communicate that hope, both locally and globally.

**References:**


