



Enhancing our Anglican Identity

A Paper by The Reverend Dr Daniel Heischman

Introduction

In May of 2018, fifty-five school principals, chaplains, bishops, and other representatives of the 160 Anglican schools came to Melbourne for a two-day forum on the identity and mission of Australian Anglican schools. Amidst the diversity of theology and practice within the Anglican Church of Australia, as well as the growing secularisation and religious diversity of the country, delegates came to the forum charged with the task of helping to clarify and more fully articulate what it means to be an Anglican school in Australia today. Mindful of the clear variety of perspectives to be encountered at the forum, delegates nonetheless came seeking common ground in how we describe, experience, and ultimately understand the distinctive culture and ethos of Anglican schools.

There was a palpable sense of urgency to the gathering, in that a great need was felt by delegates to capture a sense of Anglican identity in our schools in fresh and vivid language and imagery, a language and imagery that reflects our deepest aspirations as school communities while also touching upon the most practical, everyday elements of school life. While there were many points on which various segments of the Anglican Church and school world in Australia were likely to differ, delegates to the

forum came with a deep yearning to find common ground, as well as to probe more deeply into the nature of the differences we may possess.

They came, as well, with a clear confidence that there were things we could identify and proudly proclaim that held our parishes and schools together. That sense of urgency was also reflected in a sense of eager anticipation, a shared feeling that now is the time to be capturing this language and imagery, given the unique opportunity that Anglican schools face in carrying out their ministries in a world both confused by and unfamiliar with varying religious claims, yet deeply eager for guidance on how to live today with spiritual and moral integrity. Delegates were mindful of the inherent tension that Anglican schools face: to be both places of welcome and inclusivity, but also communities with a clear affinity to the beliefs and practices of Anglicanism. Here, too, many came with a sense that there is opportunity within that tension, an opportunity that Anglicanism is uniquely able to address.

The tone and format of the forum reflected one of the pillars of Anglican education – its openness to dialogue and learning through hearing and understanding the experiences of those gathered around the table. The structure of the agenda allowed delegates to learn about and discuss

how Anglican schools throughout the world have sought to express their identity, then to apply, within the context of discussion groups, those topics and contributions to the Anglican school world in Australia.

Six themes were chosen by the facilitator – The Reverend Dr Daniel Heischman, Executive Director of the National Association of Episcopal Schools in the USA – around which conversations took place: faith, reason, worship, pluralism, character and service. While hardly encapsulating all of the constituent parts of Anglican identity, the themes were designed to give structure and comprehensiveness to the discussions, as well as help to set the stage for what it is about Anglican schools that make them unique.

This paper is an outgrowth of this forum. While any such written piece cannot fully capture the depth and richness of the conversations which took place, nonetheless it reflects the common threads identified by this diverse group of delegates. It represents, as well, a distinct opportunity, within worldwide Anglicanism, to say, in proud and confident tones, ‘this is who we are as Anglican schools, this is what we have to offer to our students, their families, our country, our world’.

Faith

For Anglican schools, faith is incarnational, invitational, and interactive.

It is grounded in our belief in Jesus Christ, God incarnate. Anglican schools are not ashamed to affirm and follow Christ, as the foundation for all that we are as a school community. Within the context of a school, the truth of the incarnation is not only a doctrine to be affirmed, but an expectation of daily encounter with the living God. Indeed, because of our commitment to living life in relationship to Jesus Christ, we have a rare opportunity, each day, to put faith into action. What other faith community has such an immediate and intense context for encountering and experiencing the reality of Christ in our work, our routine, and our communal life?

Because of our belief in the incarnation, we do not evade the larger context in which school life finds itself. The surrounding culture is taken seriously and embraced for what it can offer our students. That is not an easy thing to accept, at times, given some of the values that permeate the culture and the secular mindset which can seem, at least on the surface, to be at odds with faith. Incarnational Christianity, however, expects to encounter the living God in daily life and in the interaction of faith with culture.

Faith is invitational in Anglican schools. It is something offered to our school community – to students, families, staff – as something worthy of personal exploration, study and conversation. Our students are invited to consider the role that faith can play in human lives and events, and they are challenged – within contexts such as worship, the classroom, and pastoral conversations – to reflect on the meaning of faith for their own lives, whether that hold immediate or (as we are in the business of sowing seeds!) long-term meaning.

We invite our students to deepen their own Christian convictions or plumb the depths of whatever faith tradition they come from and/or currently profess. In such an invitational context and, stemming from our belief that each person is a child of God, we not only acknowledge that our schools are rich with a diversity of understandings of God, but see that breadth of viewpoints as a real source of strength.

Lastly, faith in Anglican schools is interactive. One's individual faith is in constant conversation with those of other

faiths, or no faith at all. Its interactive character is seen in the interplay between sacraments and personal belief, between symbols and the scriptures, between the daily weaving together of our schools' ideals and the realities of human community. Faith is about what we do on a daily basis in Anglican schools, it is identity lived out in our relationships with others. Again, few other faith environments are so blessed with such an abundance of opportunities for faith to be shaped through daily interactions as are schools.

The incarnational, invitational, and interactive nature of faith in our schools allows us to engage faith in multiple dimensions, and not only doctrinally. There is an openness to the sacred in Anglican schools that is found in few other educational venues. As schools proud of both our Christian foundation and pastoral concern for young people, we provide an open place for our students, where belief is encouraged but not coerced, modelled in the lives of many adults in the school, and viewed as something worthy of long-term commitment for well-educated, well-rounded human beings.

Reason

All good schools value reason and see the development of the intellect as one of their prime goals for students. While some religious schools may see reason as subservient to faith, regardless of the academic discipline, Anglican schools are known for cultivating reason, through critical thinking and respectful discourse in daily interaction with faith. Just as faith is not compartmentalised in Anglican schools, neither is reason.

Anglican schools have long maintained that the intellect is a gift from God, one of the primary ways we discover what God has created us to be, hence our hallowed and sustained reputation worldwide for being among the best of academic institutions. A thinking mind, in our view, is a way to deepen faith; we are about 'open engagement with faith using academic rigour'.

We encourage students to be informed, to challenge worldviews, to develop a mature voice of reason. Jesus, as a teacher, leads us in that pursuit of reason, helping us seek clarity in our convictions, challenge prevailing norms of the world, and engage in respectful dialogue with those who differ from us. All of this involves reason. At the same time, we believe that reason alone will not do justice to the fullness of humanity and meeting the demands of living in community. Reason has limits, and ultimately gives way to mystery. Inevitably we encounter that 'space of unknowing in our search for truth'. When schools as rational communities fall short, we have, by way of faith, a supportive context and worldview which upholds the complex, multi-dimensional nature of being human, including our dependency on and need of God.

Anglican communities – be they churches or schools – thrive when people are learning, where people can bring questions, challenge assumptions, and sharpen their understanding of our tradition. Anglican schools have a rare opportunity, through substantive academic engagement with the tradition, to offer a particular lens through which many students can discover the fuller dimensions of faith. Bringing academic questions about God to the classroom context can help students to grow closer to God. Through other academic disciplines – be it through the human complexities revealed in literature or history, or the sense of wonder cultivated through science – we encourage our students to become deep, expansive thinkers, fostering in them the gifts they possess to contribute to the common good and to glorify God.

Just as a thinking mind does not operate in a vacuum, so we seek to place reason within the larger context of what makes us both human and children of God. While we do not tell students what to think, we expect them to do the hard work of thinking. That task does not work against their current or potential faith but serves to enrich it. It stands as one of the primary portals in life through which we go deeper.



Worship

Perhaps the most defining mark of being Anglican is our worship: how we worship, that we worship, and that our beliefs are supremely expressed through worship. That is certainly the case with schools, as worship is a primary, defining mark of what it means to be an Anglican school, where we demonstrate who we are and why we are such a school.

Worship is educative in Anglican schools. There students learn about the Christian faith, and in some cases have opportunities to learn about other faiths. Through worship students learn to appreciate something larger and older than themselves, opening them to the possibility of engaging with God on God's terms, while having the chance to learn of the value of stillness, silence, and reverence in a well-balanced life. They also learn through practice, through repeated ritual, where students take their place alongside teachers and staff, 'practicing how to gather', how to grow as a result of the predictability and regularity of a common experience.

Worship in Anglican schools is an essential part of the rhythm of community life. Gathering, as we do, routinely, a sense of belonging to the school community is fostered and enhanced, underscoring the core values of the school and its commitment to the development of a community as well as the individual. Such gathering plays a critical role at key moments in the life of a school, be those moments about celebration, loss, or in response to events that have taken place throughout the world or nearby in the local community. Because it often stands in contrast to the hectic pace of school life, the very distinctiveness of worship may seem odd or out of place. However, through worship a school community takes time to experience something different, an occasion where 'God can break in', where 'the old lives into the new'. Here is where the busy nature of school life is put into a larger context and given deeper meaning, where members of the school community can feel connected to God and to each other, thereby enhancing so many of the other dimensions of daily life in school.

As with churches, worship in Anglican schools varies greatly, dependent as it is on the distinctive culture, ethos, and theology of each school. In each context, student involvement, the value of students being able to see adults in worship, and the support of the school principal are always crucial.

It may seem odd that, within a school community, a group of largely unchurched people are doing church. This, however,

points to a fundamental reality of all Anglican worship – participation often precedes understanding; experiencing worship paves the way to deeper meaning. It also provides for many of those unchurched people an entryway into an appreciation for and possible affinity with religious life. What other type of Anglican institution provides such an ample opportunity for those outside of the tradition?

Pluralism

Pluralism is both a reality and a goal of Anglican schools.

By their nature, Anglican schools are diverse places, and for many years there have been far more non-Anglicans than Anglicans in these schools. However, this is not simply 'pluralism by accident': we believe that Anglican schools are welcoming places, enriched by the presence of those who practice other faiths as well as no faith at all. As Anglican schools exist for the good of all segments of society, it is natural and desirable that we see this pluralism as positive and enriching, contributing to the greater good of the school community and bolstering the learning environment of the school.

Pluralism, to Anglican schools, is not the same as relativism. While relativism claims that all viewpoints are equally valuable and equally true, pluralism acknowledges the reality of a variety of viewpoints which may be engaged in respectful discourse. Unlike relativism, pluralism does not give up on the value of truth. In recognising other views, pluralism does not require forsaking one's own commitment to truth. In fact, it is because Anglican schools confidently embody clarity of purpose and a particular form of truth that others are encouraged, within that context, to pursue the truth. Anglican schools tell a particular story but ensure that the stories of others will also be heard and explored.

Thus, we encourage a genuine interest in the viewpoints of others, while coming from and modelling our own point of view. We believe that what we learn from others who differ from us in belief and practice, enriches and graces our teaching and learning, and we are committed to living with differences on a respectful basis. We seek to help students to articulate what they believe, learn from differences and be able to disagree respectfully and compassionately.

This does not mean that shaping a pluralistic community, within the context of an Anglican school, is an easy process. Difficult decisions must be made about such things as how chapel accommodates

pluralism and how we are able, on a daily basis, to live with a wide spectrum of difference while being proud of our Anglican and Christian tradition. Different viewpoints and traditions are represented in the community, but the community continues to stand for something – meaningful pluralism does not operate in a vacuum.

We live with this tension, and all of its challenges, by growing into our own tradition, and being confident of our place and ministry as Anglicans. We are confident to both offer hospitality to others and to be ambassadors for Christ. In the process, we honour the very real differences that may exist. By virtue of saying who we are, we allow others to do the same.

Character and Service

The roles of service and character are inevitably linked in Anglican schools: serving others builds character, while strong moral character issues in service. Both are about relationships, in that our character is bound up with how we treat others and service is about people working with others. Both are about learning, as well. The formation of character in young people comes from learning about the teachings of Jesus Christ, as well as from the values transmitted through other religious traditions and ethical theory. We also learn as a result of our experiences with others, which invites us to grow in our respectful treatment of others. In turn, we learn from our fellow human beings, be it about their situations in life, the needs of the world, or how we react to the experiences that service opportunities bring to us. By their nature, both are aimed to be lifelong endeavours, showing us in the process how we should live.

Anglican schools ground their character formation in the teachings of Jesus. In the many ways we teach and deal with character we are seeking to be more Christ-like in our everyday behaviour. This deep connection to Christ differentiates Anglican schools from other schools that seek to teach and build character; our efforts to build character have a transcendent dimension and foundation, with profound roots in repentance, forgiveness, and redemption. Both call us to go beyond ourselves and be more than simply people existing for ourselves alone.

Character and service are 'mutual blessings', in that we both bless others

through our service and outreach to the community, while being ourselves blessed by those experiences. Students in Anglican schools, for example, continually speak of the great benefit they have received from their experiences with their service partners. This benefit they deem greater than the good they have done, in their estimation, for others. In that way they discover service to be not about 'to', or 'for', but 'with'. It turns out that, for some students, service is a vehicle through which they discover or deepen their faith. We also come to know some of the deep blessing that comes through care for others, and how a school community where good will and equitable treatment abound turn out to be better learning communities. Reciprocity, it turns out, lies at the heart of our understandings of both character and service.

Likewise, character and service are both local, in that they begin in the school itself or in the surrounding community. Anglicanism has always had a deep attachment to the local communities where churches find themselves, and Anglican schools have an opportunity to build their relationships with the local community through their commitment to serving it. Similarly, the daily give and take of school life provides an optimum laboratory to discover dimensions of character and to grow in grace, compassion, and self-understanding.

By virtue of the inherent collaborative nature of character and service, we begin to see natural links with institutions beyond our own school. There is great opportunity, in service to the community, to forge important connections with other Anglican agencies. Our efforts, through service, to recalibrate the social order are strongly shared by our brother and sister Roman Catholic schools as well as other Christian schools.

Together, service and character are a response to Christ's call to honour the dignity of every human being and to share more fully in our common humanity. Anglican schools have a unique opportunity through these avenues to encourage a sense of vocation in our students, a vocation based on the everyday tasks of working together that

schools so optimally provide. Our purpose is aimed toward the cultivation of a lifelong love of God through love of others.

Conclusion

This document is meant to be the foundation for further conversation, the beginning of ongoing and frequent dialogue about what it means to be an Anglican school in Australia today. Having experienced the intensity and fullness of the discussions in Melbourne, delegates viewed the process and its aftermath as a vehicle through which the various dimensions of Anglican identity can in turn be explored among Anglican schools in Australia. All of those gathered in Melbourne in May 2018 hoped that similar discussions could take place at local levels as well as national gatherings. They were eager to keep the dialogue going, capitalising upon the momentum and satisfaction so many experienced 'gathering around the table', as they did in Melbourne.

While this paper may be decidedly of the 'big picture' variety, it is hoped it can serve a variety of more practical purposes – as a means of orienting new principals, school board and council members, staff, students and families to the mission and purpose of Anglican education. It may serve as a means of helping assess the depth and common understanding of Anglican identity at individual schools, while also serving as a valuable resource on school or diocesan websites. Many delegates also expressed the hope that this important first set of steps will help to enrich the dialogue and partnerships between the church and school worlds.

This document is also meant to be an invitation for dioceses, schools, parishes,

and related gatherings to undertake a more thorough and intentional exploration of Anglican identity. Accordingly, here are but a few of the important questions that can arise from reading and discussing this:

1. How does this paper reflect/not reflect what it means to be Anglican in your particular school/diocese/parish?
2. What elements of Anglican identity expressed in this document do you find your community doing well, what elements suggest where more work and reflection need to be done?
3. What words and images mean the most to your community in its understanding of Anglican identity, be they contained or not contained in this paper?
4. What are most hopeful things that Anglican schools can offer to Australia today?
5. What are the first steps your community needs to take in being more conversant with and confident of its Anglican identity?

At the beginning of the forum, when groups reported on their discussions about the expectations for this particular gathering, one group reported that its primary hope for the forum would be that 'it would matter'. Busy people came with the hope that this would be time well spent. Not only did delegates come to a consensus that their time spent in such conversation did indeed matter, but that what we discussed touched deeply upon what most matters to our schools as they struggle to be true to their Anglican identity and faithful followers in the path of Jesus Christ.

Note: Those places, in the paper, where there are quotation marks are direct quotes from delegates as they reported back to the larger group on their respective discussions.

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Anglican Schools Australia provides a forum at a national level for Anglican schools to facilitate discussion on spiritual, moral and values related issues as they relate to education. Established in 1999, ASA aims to develop and foster a strong unity of purpose among Australia's 155 Anglican schools.