

Forum Examining the Identity & Mission of Anglican Schools Within the Diocese of Canberra & Goulburn, 13 February 2020, Radford College, Canberra

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As the end of my first year as a Bishop draws closer there's a question that keeps cropping up in various forms:

“What have you learned during that time?”

“What has surprised you most during that time?”

“What have you enjoyed most during that time?”

Now there are all kinds of answers I could give to those questions.

I have learned (almost) to manage a mitre.

I have been surprised that administrative paperwork is like the seed in Jesus' parable – it grows and multiplies even when you're sleeping.

And I have enjoyed perhaps too many morning and afternoon teas for my ultimate good.

But if you were to ask me for a more reflective answer my encounter with our Diocesan schools would be at or near the top of the list.

It's not that I was unfamiliar with Anglican Schools. I attended one as a teenager, where God used the witness of Christian staff to draw me to a living faith in the Lord Jesus.

During an earlier period in this Diocese our son attended one of our schools and I served on its Board.

And yet, I have still been struck by the scope of our Schools and their capacity for influence. Over 8,000 students plus staff, parents and carers, board members and alumni. What an opportunity we have been given!

But how are we to understand that opportunity? What is the particular identity and mission of an Anglican School?

In his 2018 paper to Anglican Schools Australia our main speaker Dr Heischman identified six themes to structure a conversation about the identity of Anglican. Those themes were

- . Faith
- . Reason

- . Worship
- . Pluralism
- . Character; and
- . Service.

I have no doubt those important themes will feature prominently in our conversations today. But this morning I want to suggest a single concept which I believe is fundamental to the mission of our Schools and our Church more broadly.

As a word, hospitality is sometimes like a vintage coin that becomes indistinct and de-valued through overuse.

Reality TV encourages us to see it as a project or a performance, something done with great stress and at considerable cost in order to impress others. Even in Christian circles it can be reduced to inviting some congregation members over for lunch or lingering longer over a post-church cup of tea – essentially spending a little more time with people like us.

But the Biblical vision for hospitality is far richer. The main New Testament word for hospitality is *xenophilia* - literally love of the stranger. So the classic verse about hospitality is Hebrews 13:2 where the recipients of the letter are reminded of the ancients who in showing hospitality to angels without being aware of it.

In seeking to understand the networks of relationships that give coherence and resilience to a society commentators have distinguished two types of social capital. Bonding social capital connects people from similar social, economic and cultural backgrounds while bridging social capital connects people who are different in significant ways. Biblical hospitality builds bridging social capital.

In his book *Saved by Faith and Hospitality* New Testament Scholar Joshua uses the idea of hospitality to capture the essence of Jesus' mission as recounted in Luke's gospel.

“Luke portrays Jesus as an actual host who dispenses the Lord's welcome by sharing meals with strangers, sinners and outsiders. In fact one of the primary ways in which Jesus enacts the year of divine welcome is by sharing his presence with all kinds of people at meals. It is precisely through Jesus's eating meals with outsiders that he creates the hospitable space where outsiders

experience the saving presence of God and are thereby transformed from strangers to friends on the cross.”¹

In that sense far from being a departure from this ministry of hospitality Jesus’ death is its climax and ultimate enactment. For it is in the context of a shared meal with His disciples that He explains how His body given for them and His blood shed for them institutes a covenant that finds its fulfillment in the coming kingdom of God, a kingdom characterized by feasting and drinking².

The church in all its manifestations continues this mission of Jesus when it creates the space for connection and encounter across social and cultural difference. It does so not simply by expressing a generic preference for inclusion but by welcoming and engaging others in the name of Jesus.

In that sense hospitality would seem to embody a more robust basis for building social capital than alternative concepts such as mere tolerance.

The political theologian Luke Bretherton has argued that tolerance is a necessary but not sufficient basis for a healthy shared life. By itself it can suggest a kind of cultural *détente*, where we willingly cede the existence of individuals and groups that see the world differently to us without ever making time and space to engage. But hospitality is a particular form of neighbour love and as with all such love is active, not passive.

To those who argue that hospitality implies a one way relationship between a ‘giver’ and a ‘receiver’ Bretherton responds that genuine hospitality involves a mutual exchange of gifts.

“Hospitality can entail enormous asymmetry between the gifts received and what is offered in return. What is offered may only be a symbolic gesture such as a song or word of gratitude. Yet the exchanges are tokens of recognition or esteem that mark both guest and host as having standing in relation to each other. The gift of hospitality both signals respect and demands reciprocal recognition from the other, a demand that presumes the possibility of a common life.”³

So how do we bring this down to earth?

Before we turn to our schools let me give an example from personal life. I do so not because I presume what I’m about to describe is perfect in any or every

¹ J Jipp *Saved by Faith and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2017), pp34-35.

² Luke 22:14-23

³ L Bretherton *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), pp272-3

respect, but because it highlights some of the challenges and opportunities of seeing our mission in the world through the lens of hospitality.

Having recently moved into our new house my wife Monica and I decided to connect with our neighbours by inviting them around for a Friday night dinner. We know from our initial contact that they came from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds so we worked with them to ensure the food we served would be acceptable to all. But because genuine hospitality involves self-disclosure we also wished to be authentic about our own faith commitment. So we began the meal, as we always do, by offering a short prayer of thanks for the food and the occasion, noting that our guests were free to engage with that prayer however they wished.

Everyone who came to our house brought something to the meal – a dish or a drink and of course their presence and their conversation. In that sense although Monica and I may have initiated and hosted the event we all created it. By the end of the night we had learned a lot more about each other and identified some ways in which we might work together to further the well-being of our neighbourhood.

Of course the life of a school is a lot more complex than a single meal. But let me briefly tease out some principles that may help us do hospitable mission there.

We do hospitable mission well when we ground that hospitality explicitly in the teaching and example of Jesus. That's because far from being narrow or exclusive this teaching and example offers us the basis for a gracious welcome to people from all backgrounds. It is my belief that if we try and ground our hospitality elsewhere – in a particular educational philosophy, or a particular social vision – we will inevitably find that welcome narrowed to implicitly exclude people who do not share that philosophy or that vision. So let me ask us – do we name Jesus explicitly as the heart of our mission? Where is Jesus in our mission and vision documents, our publicity materials and our Annual Reports? I'm not asking us to do a simple word count – although if the words Jesus and/or Christ was entirely absent that would be concerning. I want us to ask where is the person of Jesus Christ – at the centre or beyond the margins?

We do hospitable mission well when we acknowledge, accommodate and embrace difference. Our Anglican schools will never be monochrome. They will always embody the social, religious and cultural diversity of our pluralistic society. Recognising and responding to that diversity is not contrary to the Christian faith but an expression of it. It means that our schools can be a safe

space for all in the best sense of the world – not safe because we’ve eliminated all challenge but safe because we’ve done all that we can to ensure everyone is able to engage with those challenges.

We do hospitable mission well when we are open, honest and authentic about our own faith commitments. This means not hiding or apologizing for practices and policies that reflect a particular Christ-centred world view. Nor does it mean assuming that a Christian worldview or an Anglican ethos is nothing more than common sense shared by everyone. Because both reflect a particular vision of God’s way in the worlds. Now I recognize that amongst our school communities, including on our boards and committees, there will be people on a variety of places in our own spiritual journey. In this Diocese we have shied away from requiring detailed statements of faith from all staff and Board members and that is a tradition I am more than happy to continue. But, if the hospitable mission of Jesus is to be at the heart of our schools and their mission it is good for us all to be able to articulate where we are in relation to that person and His mission. So if a student at one our schools were to ask you “Who is Jesus Christ for you?” how would you answer?

We do hospitable mission well when we provide opportunities for common service. The way of Jesus is the way of service but sometimes this is caught as much as it is taught. A Christ-centred worldview recognizes that all people have been made in the image of God and have been given gifts to enrich our mission people. As in our dinner example hospitality is as much about doing good with people as it is doing good for people. In this context I’m delighted to affirm all that our school communities are doing to support our South Coast Schools who have been most impacted by the recent bushfires. It was an absolute delight to receive a phone call recently from Ms Godfrey to report that although the school term had barely begun Radford students had already raised over \$7,000 – and I am aware of similar initiatives at other schools as well.

In my Synod charge last year I advocated for a vision of our Diocese based on engaging a world of difference with the love and truth of Jesus. Central to that vision was an image of engagement with the world which combines fresh waterholes at the centre with low or no fences at the edges. The image comes from a preacher’s illustration, which like all such stories may well be apocryphal. An Australian grazier is hosting a farming friend from overseas and takes them up in a helicopter so they can see the full extent of their holdings. As they gaze towards the horizon the guest says “How do you keep the stock from wandering off – you must have to build a lot of fences.” The

host smiles and replies “Fences? We don’t worry about that! We just make sure we keep the waterholes fresh.”

In Chapter Four of John’s Gospel we have the noonday encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman as a woman. Ethnically and religiously they are different in so many ways. Yet they are to make a common space for genuine encounter, where each reveals something about themselves to the other.

This is how the encounter ends:

²⁷ Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”

²⁸ Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ²⁹ “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?”

The fences were low or non-existent, the well or waterhole was deep and she goes away not necessarily with a settled conviction, but with a profound and potentially life-changing question.

In an increasingly pluralistic and sometimes polarised society I want our Diocesan Schools to be places with low or no fences, where people of all faith backgrounds and none experience gracious hospitality. But for that hospitality to be authentic and Christian we need to keep the waterholes fresh. In word and worship, through service and community we offer all an opportunity to encounter the Lord Jesus, who is the giver of living water even to eternal life.

May our time together refresh us for the journey and equip us for the task that lies ahead. AMEN