

# THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL - A COMMUNITY OF GRACE

Don C Roy

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I'd like you to meet Maddi. Little Madeline Paterson attends an Adventist school in Adelaide - Prescott Primary Northern. One afternoon last year, when she was 5, she went out to the car to get her schoolbag. Her mother who was feeding the baby at the time became anxious when Maddy didn't return. On investigation, she was confronted by a horrifying spectacle. An aggressive Rottweiler had attacked Maddy, knocked her to the ground, and savaged her back and thighs laying bare the bone in a number of places. She was rushed to the hospital.

During the ordeal of cleaning and stitching Maddi's wounds, the doctors and nurses were amazed at her relative composure. Strangely, the expected trauma and shock appeared to be less than usual. Then, as they worked, they became aware of quiet humming, then words. As they paused and bent to listen, they could hear the small girl quietly singing,

My God is so big,  
So strong and so mighty,  
There's nothing my God cannot do!

Amazed, and deeply moved, the question was asked, "Where did you learn that song?" "We sing it at school," Maddy quietly replied. "My teacher taught it to us." Later there were other questions: "Why did the dog break off the attack?" "Why didn't the dog attack her throat? For many, the answer was simple. That event, and the little girl's testimony of faith, brought inspiration and bonding to family, medical staff, school, and community.

Colloquially speaking, Maddi "had it all together". So did her teacher and her school. That incident speaks eloquently of a school that truly exemplifies a "community of grace" and *shalom*. It is a school in which everything - the vision, mission and goals of the school corporately, are lived out in classrooms, the playground, and in the individual lives of the teachers. The intellectual, emotional, spiritual and social come together spontaneously. It is a school that helps its members to "make connections", and "get everything together", particularly when it counts.

"Community of Grace" - it sounds right and proper for a Christian school. But it is more than that. Both words - "community" and "grace" are significant and relevant. There is no denying that we live in a disconnected world where individuals suffer interpersonal famine and emotional dislocation. The fact that community is spoken about so often is symptomatic of its absence and of our deep longing and primal craving for it.

But what *is* community, what are its implications for schools generally, and what can educators do to facilitate its development? Community may simply describe a group of people united for shared purpose and goals - a community. But over time, a community develops a distinct culture comprising beliefs, values and *mores* that are lived out in customs, practices, social arrangements and relationships. The outcome of life and interaction within such a group may produce a *state of community* that provides a sense of identity, solidarity and well-being. The latter term has more dynamic, holistic, organic connotations, and is what we are really interested in here, and how it can be viewed in relations to schools. Notably, Parker Palmer observes, "at the frontiers of intellectual life, scholars now regard the concept of

community as indispensable in describing the terrain that educators inhabit”, and therefore, the restoration of connectedness and community should be our goal.<sup>1</sup>

But informed Christian educators do not seek community lightly. Community has *particular* and *distinctive* connotations for them. It is a divinely endorsed quest because it harmonises with the way God designed and created us in His image - relational, intelligent, communicative, cultural, moral, expressive, meaning-makers and decision-makers. In essence, we are *made to be in relationship, - to be in community* - and we do not function authentically unless we *are*. *To deny anyone relationship, by any means, is to dehumanise them.*

There is a tendency to think of community as something that simply gives benefit to individuals within a group - a one-way process. But reflect for a moment on John Donne’s insight:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a part of a continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were . *John Donne - Meditation XVII*

When one suffers, all suffer. The community suffers. The sad reality is that through the Fall, we *all* experience fragmentation and alienation. Community has been forfeited, and we are all in desperate need of reconciliation and restoration. This is the work of Grace, and such is the ultimate goal of the Christian school.

### **Grace, and the Ultimate Goal of Christian Education**

For *Christian* educators, regardless of the subjects in which they specialise, the work of Grace is the primary responsibility and ministry shared with that of the church and the family. Consider Ephesians 4:11 ff.

It was [Christ] who gave some to be ...pastors,.. teachers, to *prepare* God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ...From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.<sup>2</sup>

The sentiments of such Scripture imply a prior need, a human predicament, and a fundamental need for restoration to wholeness and meaning . The word translated ‘prepare’ has significant connotations.<sup>3</sup> The word is *katartismos* from the verb *katartizein*. It implies *healing*, for example in the setting of a broken limb, or restoring a dislocated joint. It also has significance in the political sense of bringing together alienated parties to enable government to continue.<sup>1</sup> In essence, this process represents a *reversal* of the alienation resulting from the sin of our first parents. Christian schools adopting such a vision and mission truly emulate the redemptive, restorative ministry of Jesus Himself.

That ministry of restoration also has salvific significance. ‘Salvation’ is reconciliation in the most comprehensive sense. As Westly explains:

Salvation in the biblical sense cannot be understood in one-dimensionally, narrow, reductionist, parochial ways. The salvation the Scriptures speak of offers a

comprehensive wholeness in this fragmented and alienated life. Salvation in the biblical sense is a newness of life, the unfolding of true humanity in the fullness of God (Colossians 2:9), it is salvation of the soul and the body, of the individual and society, of humankind and the whole of creation (Romans 8:19).<sup>4</sup>

It is for such reasons that George Knight also argues that Christian education is true ministry and each teacher, an ‘agent of salvation’.<sup>5</sup> It is also ‘religion’ in essence (Latin *religere* = ‘to bind together again’). But, returning to Paul and the word *katartismos*, it is important to note that the purpose of restoration is to facilitate ‘works of service’. In other words, *koinonia* (fellowship, community) is an **outcome** of unselfish activity, not as an end to be sought simply for its own sake. Nevertheless, it is an indicator that something significant, dynamic and fundamental is happening.

In recognition of this, some Christian schools adopt as their ultimate goal, “The restoration of the image of God in man through the harmonious development of the mental, social, physical and spiritual faculties.” Not only are community overtones clearly reflected here, but so too, the necessity for a pedagogy and environment that is sensitive to, and supportive of *all* these faculties. What we are speaking of here is “whole-person” education that nurtures all facets of humanness. This gives new meaning and significance to the word “integrity”.

### **The Challenge to Christian Educators**

There’s no doubting the sincerity of teachers who have committed their lives to Christian education. However, sometimes, despite our best intentions, we are “squeezed into the world’s mould”, and contradictions and practices conducive to individualism creep into the way we conduct our schools. It is important that we remain constantly alert and critically reflective, because ultimately, what we do speaks more eloquently than what we say. Our typically bold declarations of distinctiveness demand a constant vigilance to be authentic, not only to be seen to be right, but to be effective in God’s calling.

Some teachers have difficulty in seeing how this fits with the academic character and emphasis in contemporary schools particular at the senior high school level. Part of the reason could also be the difficulty we create for ourselves through setting up a false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. The disturbing thing about this is that we all appear to have been socialised thoroughly in a culture that is fundamentally antagonistic to biblical Christianity, and this has translated into much of our educational practice. Despite our attempts to cultivate a positive school ethos, many current practices promote individuality and fragmentation.

It is ironic that even critical theorists have responded from a humanistic perspective to deplore the dehumanising, anti-communitarian effects of much educational practice. Their call for *praxis*, that is, the bringing together of theory and practice with a view to change, is a sobering challenge that cannot be ignored. We must be prepared to engage in open, honest critique to ensure that we are fulfilling our God-given responsibility authentically and effectively.

Many of our efforts to integrate faith and learning have been superficial and dualistic. Regrettably, many so-called Christian schools, particularly at secondary level, have adopted practices conducive to individualism and fragmentation. For example, many are preoccupied with ‘this world’ interests, and function primarily as information brokers particularly for career and employment and, consequently, the enhancement of personal life chances and

material gain. Its association with a public examination system belittles much of such knowledge to a mere device to sort individuals. The relative worth and status of the different subject fields has become socially determined in terms of their 'buying power'. The integrity of knowledge and its intrinsic worth as 'wisdom' appears to be minimised and violated. An unselfish service ethic is often minimal, if present at all. The term 'integration of faith, learning and practice' has only superficial understanding and has become a cliché to the point that it is sometimes viewed with cynicism.

The emphasis on 'academic excellence' in many Christian schools has unfortunate connotations of elitism and thus, exclusiveness. To whom are the rewards given at the annual speech night? What is the hidden 'message' that such practice carries? If *academic* excellence, then what about moral, social, creative or spiritual excellence? And if such categories are being acknowledged and rewarded, what is their relative status in the eyes of teachers, parents and students?

The spirit of aggressive competition pervades society. The argument that we need to provide competitive activity in the school to teach students how to survive in such a world has dubious justification and support. There is no denying it is a difficult issue that calls for careful study. What needs to be considered are such questions as, To what extent do these activities highlight the difference between winners and losers; success and failure; selfishness and self sacrifice? What is the 'hidden curriculum' underpinning all that is occurring? Is there a disparity between what we articulate as our aims and objectives and what we are likely to achieve — between theory and practice, if you like? How conducive are such activities to harmony and *community*? Again, Palmer's words are thought provoking:

[T]he rules and relationships of a school comprise a 'hidden curriculum' which can exert greater formative power over the lives of learners than the curriculum advertised in the catalogue. A business school may offer courses in team management and collective work styles, but if the culture of that school requires students to survive those courses through competition, then competition and not cooperation is the real lesson taught and learned. In a thousand ways, the relationships of the academic community form the hearts and minds of students, shaping their sense of self and their relation to the world.<sup>6</sup>

This raises a number of questions. First, it raises the issue of authenticity of such schools and whether they are truly Christian. Second, it raises questions about the kind of life preparation we are providing when so many of our present generation face the distinct possibility of permanent unemployment. There is no denying that one of the functions of the school is, indeed, to provide knowledge, understanding and skills in order for individuals to find their way into useful work. However, this paper insists that this is not the primary function of the Christian school. It only speaks to 'this-world' needs. Third, it raises the question of how likely is the achievement of genuine *community* going to be in such a self-centred, competitive and materialistic environment.

While many Christian schools appear to have had a positive impact on the lives of children and young people, evidence also indicates that we expose our students to detrimental effects by virtue of questionable philosophies that we adopt without adequate scrutiny, or we stumble ignorantly into practices that are 'out of harmony with biblical Christianity'. As Knight argues, the resulting smorgasbord is likely to constitute a disjointed eclecticism that produces destructive inconsistencies.<sup>7</sup> In terms of the theme of this paper, such practice is

*antagonistic to the restoration of connectedness* and thus a denial of Christian education's mandate.

### **The Faith-Oriented Learning Community**

In today's information-hungry, consumer world, we tend to regard learners as mere receptors in a uni-directional process. However, *true* learning, the realization of truth, and the nature of faith occurs in community. Learning represents a *dialectic* relationship between individuals and their community. And there are obligations and responsibilities on individual members. The contribution of each affects the ethos, culture, and integrity of the learning community. Thus, true learning involves all parties, and the unique contributions each makes to the whole. Dwayne Huebner<sup>8</sup> expresses this dynamic graphically. He adopts the metaphor of "weaving" to describe how individuals create a "fabric of life" comprising an interweaving of ideas, concepts, memories, biblical metaphors, and cultural mores that they gain from the faith community, and what they contribute to it. It is dynamic, nourishing, and renewing. Such ideas are consistent with the kind of intelligent and active personalities God created in His image.

### **The Place of the Teacher**

In their core role in the learning community, teachers shoulder enormous responsibility. Their personal identity and integrity have a direct impact on the community. It is a dynamic relationship where teachers...

are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves... The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts ...the place where *intellect, emotion* and *spirit* will converge in the human self.<sup>9</sup> (Italics mine)

The quality of those connections will be evident in the life, ethos, and relationships of the community. Herein lies a challenge to the teacher. Palmer argues that:

Community is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace, the flowing of personal identity and integrity into the world of relationships. Only as we are in community with ourselves can we find community with others.<sup>10</sup>

Teaching and learning, therefore, must not be reduced merely to a set of techniques. While instructional models and strategies are important, authentic teaching and learning takes place in the context of community.

Some teachers, particularly in the more technical subjects, find it difficult to appreciate the significance of the emotions and spirit. While contrived, artificial connections should be avoided, the technical fields are still part of God's order. But of equal importance is the fact that knowledge is meaningless out of human context. Pure objectivity is a myth. Each subject-community constructs its own paradigm based on assumptions and interpretations peculiar to the subject and its form.

Much of what we have been discussing about community and learning harmonizes with Peter Senge's notion of *the learning organization*. It is important to note that *this* organization does not see organization as a structure into which individuals fit. *This* organization represents people interacting in community. It recognizes people as active, creative agents who build mental models of reality and vision that shift from seeing parts to seeing wholes and relationships. This vision represents the personal and shared faith of its

members, and thus might be truly described as a faith-oriented learning community. Such learning communities are purposeful..

.. organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspirations are set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. <sup>11</sup>

### **Developing a Model**

The further we go, the more complex it seems to become. Where does one start? Recent years have seen a good deal of interest in the development of “big pictures” or schemas to account for and a map the relative parts of the whole. Stephen Covey,<sup>12</sup> for example, speaks of these big pictures as “paradigms” and their power to inform and support the achievement of worthwhile goals. At risk of reductionism and oversimplification, it is possible to create a model to represent the interrelationship between the concepts discussed and the development of an authentic community of faith and grace. In this model, a number of significant aspects need to feature prominently:

- the cultural context in which that learning takes place;
- the learning environment, the conditions that support that learning, and the potential of such learning.

***The Cultural Context:*** It is this domain that reflects the *raison d’être* of the learning community, its vision, and its sense of mission. This reality is understood, and explained by its growing tradition based on its “Grand Story”. In this case, it is the cosmic drama played out through the “Creation-Fall-Redemption-Restoration” motif of Scripture. The meanings, values, ideas, mores and customs that make up Christian culture will be lived out and expressed between the teachers and other members of the school community. Sometimes these cultural expressions will be “visible” in the regular patterns of behaviour initiated and promoted by the teacher as part of the life and interaction in the class, for example, in times of formal prayer and devotional sharing or daily socialising and interaction. On other occasions, they will be reflected in subtle nuances that are nonetheless significant.

***The Learning Environment:*** In this domain, learning is much more than a cognitive exercise that focuses on information transfer and reproduction. It also occurs in the context discussed above. It must also be sensitive and responsive to the characteristics of human nature as discussed earlier.

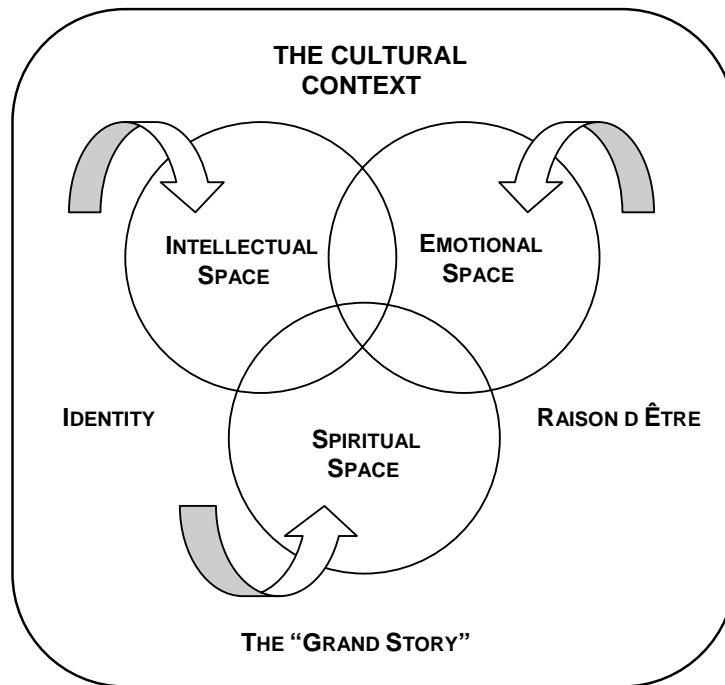
In Parker Palmer’s view <sup>13</sup> there are three “spaces” that are indispensable to effective learning, and the model endeavours to incorporate these appropriately. These are:

***Intellectual Space:*** This refers to the way we tend to think about teaching and learning in a pedagogical sense – content, concepts, students, teaching and learning strategies.

***Emotional Space:*** This refers to the feelings that enable or constrain the interpersonal relationships – teacher, students and peers.

***Spiritual Space:*** This acknowledges a Transcendent connection in response to personal restlessness, and a craving for meaning, fulfilment, and *shalom*. (I have modified Palmer’s third space to more strongly emphasize essential relationship with God through the ministry of Holy Spirit.)

The proposed model (following) endeavours to incorporate these spaces, to show their interrelatedness, and to represent them in the cultural context in which they are embedded.



**Aspects of a Faith-Oriented Learning Community**

### **Developing the Faith-Oriented Learning Community**

Schools are about learning. So, understandably, the intellectual space - the content, concepts, skills and understandings to be addressed and developed - is of major importance. It is also significant point of engagement between teacher and student. Traditionally, students expect teachers to teach. However revitalized teaching and learning that is consistent with community building calls for a reorientation to provide a rich, learner-centered pedagogy where the emphasis is on collaborative, interactive, active-learning techniques, and students are encouraged to be agents of their own learning. It is also open to multiple means of learning and responding, thus honoring the diversity of humanity. Student reflection, creativity, collaboration and decision-making will be encouraged and affirmed.

The importance of the **emotional climate** cannot be overemphasized, for it is that climate that supports or inhibits learning. In essence, a safe, caring, supportive environment inspires assurance and confidence. Students will be more likely to be creative and take calculated risks if their responses are viewed with sensitivity and are affirmed by their teachers and fellow-students alike. A teacher's ability to recognize signs of personal difficulty, confusion, frustration or interpersonal tensions, and the ability to deal with them constructively, is of paramount importance and embodies grace. Subject information, guidelines, expectations and procedural items should be clearly organized and communicated to minimize confusion and anxiety.

For Christian teachers, the **spiritual dimension** is always a reality and opportunity to practise the presence of God, even in the apparently secular subjects. It need not necessarily be overt or directly connected to the content of the subject. Recognition of our students as fellow creatures in the image of God, and relating to them accordingly, is truly sacramental. (Matt. 25:40) For example, the Carmelite monk, Brother Lawrence, practised the presence of God through the washing of pots and hands and serving his brothers.<sup>14</sup> It is true, too, in

teaching from a Christian perspective. *Whatever is done to foster deep connection, meaning, and purpose in the lives of students is truly spiritual.*

There will often be what I like to describe as “serendipitous moments” when inspired, unplanned insights do emerge from something being studied. Or it may have nothing directly to do with the subject matter, but nevertheless, enriches the moment being shared. Such moments are rich, memorable, and bonding. Sometimes they will be the product of a Christian teacher's systematic practice, but on other occasions, such instances will be a spontaneous manifestation of the faith, grace, and integrity of the teacher flowing into and enriching the learning community, to the glory of God.

Some teachers have challenged me recently as to how realistic some of this visioning might be, particularly in the secondary school setting. I began with a story: I would like to finish with another in response.

One afternoon, Murray, who had transferred from the ministry to teach Religious Studies at my school, came to my office seeking reassurance. “I hope I’ve done the right thing!” he volunteered, somewhat nervously. He explained how he had just given his year 9 class a written assignment reflecting on Jonah’s experience in running away from God’s commission. One student, Stephen, had asked if he could draw a cartoon rather than writing the essay. Now Murray had seen enough of Stephen and his doodling to note that he had an exceptional gift in sketching. He also knew that Stephen was rather self-conscious of his literary skills. So a deal was struck, and Steve would produce a cartoon, while his friends would write an essay.

A few days later, Murray proudly shared Stephen’s magnificent creation with the other teachers at staff worship, and throughout the day, Stephen’s self-esteem hit an all-time high as teachers in the corridors and in the quadrangle slipped alongside him, expressing their appreciation. It had worked beyond Murray’s wildest dreams. The God of Grace was truly present. But, in the words of the advertisement, “There’s more.” Last year, some 15 years after that event, I happened to be walking down the street in nearby town. As I walked past a tattoo studio, I scarcely believed my eyes as I glanced through the window and saw the same Steve. He also saw me, and came bounding out onto the footpath, greeting me, and shaking my hand warmly. After the usual pleasantries and “what have you been up to’s”, I asked him if he remembered the cartoons he had drawn for Pastor Murray. His quick glance and the warm, reverent smile and slow nod spoke volumes beyond words. And in that moment again, the God of Grace was truly present with us in the street. A few weeks later I saw Steve’s parents across the congregation in my church. They were visiting for the day. After the service I made my way across to them to tell them of my meeting with Stephen after all the years and recounting the story of the cartoons. “Yes,” they replied warmly, “Steve called and told us.” It was special to his parents also, and made possible, because for a time, his school had been a community of grace, and a teacher and obtain an active agent of Grace.

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## References

- <sup>1</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: a Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), p. xiii
- <sup>2</sup> Ephesians 4:11-13, 15, 16
- <sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible: Letters to the Galatians & Ephesians (2<sup>nd</sup> Edn)*, Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1958, pp. 176, 177.

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- <sup>4</sup> Dick Westly, *A Theology of Presence: The Search for Meaning in the American Catholic Experience*, Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1988, p.69, 70.
- <sup>5</sup> George Knight, *Philosophy and Education: An Introduction in Christian Perspective*, Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1980 pp. 186, 187
- <sup>6</sup> Parker Palmer, *op. cit.*, pp.19, 20
- <sup>7</sup> George Knight, *op. cit.* pp.142, 143.
- <sup>8</sup> Dwayne Huebner, "Practicing the Presence of God", *Religious Education*, (vol. 82, no 4, Fall, 1987).
- <sup>9</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1998) p. 11.
- <sup>10</sup> Parker Palmer, in Rachel C. Livsey, *The Courage to Teach: A Guide for Reflection and Renewal*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.
- <sup>11</sup> Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*, (London: Random House, (1990) p. 3, cited in M.K.Smith, "Peter Senge and the learning organization", *The encyclopedia of informal education*, [www.infed.org/thinkers/senge.htm](http://www.infed.org/thinkers/senge.htm) (2001).
- <sup>12</sup> Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habit of Highly Effective People*, 1st edition, Simon & Schuster; 1990.
- <sup>13</sup> Parker J. Palmer, (1998) *op.cit.*
- <sup>14</sup> Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, (Springdale, PA: Whitaker House, 1982).