



Values in SSA Schools – Spirituality leading to praxis

The Rev'd Gillian Moses, August 2016

Revised March 2022

In 2014, Rev'd Tim Booth produced a thoughtful paper that attempted to articulate the spirituality of the Society of the Sacred Advent (SSA). This paper was well-received by the SSA, and the two SSA Schools as a useful and timely reflection on the values and ethos of the Sisters. The Ethos Committee of the two schools has since sought to make full use of the insights from Tim's paper. In particular we have been much occupied with the question of how we live out the values and spirituality of the Sisters, and how we hand on this tradition to our students, staff and school community. This paper is an attempt to begin to answer that question.

Tim Booth's paper identified six characteristics or elements of SSA spirituality:

1. Incarnational faith
2. Holistic education
3. Compassion
4. Courageous hard work
5. Adaptation to new challenges
6. Humility

These characteristics sit comfortably, although not necessarily identically, with the vision for Anglican Schools identified by the Anglican Schools Commission, which may be summarised as:

1. Promoting faith in Jesus Christ and the experience of Christian community
2. The provision of a religious education program which effectively hands on the Christian faith and teachings
3. The provision of school staff who understand and model the Christian life and ethos and who are provided with spiritual formation to assist them to do this
4. Governance that bases its decision-making processes on Christian beliefs, attitudes and values.
5. The provision of outreach opportunities and learning activities that reflect the values of the kingdom of God.
6. The building of a school culture where gospel values of love, forgiveness, tolerance, honesty, safety and generosity are encouraged.

In addition, our patron saints offer their own spiritual wisdom. St Aidan in particular might be said to embody courage, patience, work ethic, the importance of education, generosity and care for creation. St Margaret's story is more apocryphal but certainly encapsulates the values of resilience and faithfulness.

While it is important to know what our values are, it is also essential that we put them into practice. As St James wrote, faith without works is dead (*James 2.17*). In trying to articulate how we do or might put our spiritual values into practice, I suggest we name those values as follows:

1. Humility
2. Compassion
3. Courage
4. Resilience
5. Faithfulness
6. Whole-heartedness

Humility

“Christ was truly God. But he did not try to remain equal with God. Instead he gave up everything and became a slave, when he became like one of us.” Philippians 2:6-7

“If you are to meet people you need to have your feet on the ground.” St Aidan.

The quality of humility is not readily celebrated in the wider culture. Dictionary definitions suggest humility is related to submissiveness or lowliness of rank. In such a context it can be hard to promote humility as value worth aspiring to. Yet Paul reminds us that “Christ humbled himself” in order to be able to connect with and serve humanity.

The SSA schools endeavour to promote the quality of humility among students and staff by understanding humility as strength or power under control. We model that it is good to ask for help when we need it. We appreciate diversity of views, including religious views. We recognise the limits of our knowledge, and the impact of rapidly changing sources of authority and wisdom that hold sway over popular opinion.

We endeavour to teach our students and staff about the work of the Sisters and emphasise their position as models of service and humility. Through interactions with the Sisters, student and staff quiet days and staff induction the example of the Sisters’ humility and service are handed on. We are concerned to offer students a variety of opportunities for service and service learning which model mutuality and reciprocal learning. We recognise the danger of service that emphasises our resources and the needs of others and fails to name our own needs and the ways in which those we serve meet those needs.

In our worship, in Religious Education and in daily life we take opportunities to critique and deconstruct popular role models and ideas of success. We encourage our students to succeed according to their own capacity and interests. We practice gratitude, giving thanks to God for all the blessings we enjoy. We understand that all we have is a form of grace, and very little of what we achieve is the result solely of our own efforts. We also strive to show appreciation to staff who serve the school in ways that go well beyond their contractual obligations. We seek to encourage a sense of interdependence within the school community, understanding that we rely on the participation and contribution of all to achieve our goals.

We celebrate achievement in many forms, in academic life, the sporting fields, in cultural pursuits and in the way our community responds to the challenges of daily

life. In doing so we recognise that it is good and healthy to celebrate success, and that our own success does not need to come at the expense of others.

Compassion

*“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”
Matthew 25:35-36.*

*"Also those that have this day of my death in memory,
Or with good devotion doth me worship or pray,
Jesus Christ my Lord, the maiden Mary's Son
Have mercy on those souls, where ever the body lies." St Margaret.*

Much of the work of the SSA was prompted by their compassion for God's people, especially for the most vulnerable. The first Sisters recognised that women and children were often most at risk from poverty, illness and other social concerns. Out of this recognition emerged some remarkable achievements including the establishment of nine schools across Queensland, Tufnell Orphanage, St Mary's Home for unmarried mothers and St Martin's War Memorial Hospital. This heritage underpins the SSA Schools in a number of ways.

We endeavour to offer practical and pastoral support to members of our community who are experiencing difficulties. Our Pastoral Care structures ensure that each student is known and her circumstances monitored so that appropriate assistance is offered quickly and sensitively. Counselling and spiritual support are available alongside academic assistance and even the provision of meals and other practical assistance to families in need.

We work to create school cultures where acts of kindness are encouraged and celebrated. It is also important to teach the community that compassionate practice is a form of prayerfulness and that praying for others leads to action. Jesus' compassionate action is a model for the community.

We try to encourage students to listen with empathy to the stories of others. This includes creating opportunities for students and the wider school community to meet with others, to welcome visitors and to hear their stories. These opportunities typically include assemblies, chapel services, service and service learning experiences, and international school tours. As Aidan said, "In the strangeness of the stranger God comes and asks for wonder...No one is common, for everyone is a mystery, and if we give them proper attention that mystery will unfold before us."

We understand the importance of compassionate leadership and the reality of making tough decisions which may impact negatively on some members of the school community. We look for opportunities to constructively critique other models of leadership which devalue the role of compassion in decision-making.

We encourage students through the curriculum to recognise the impact of our decisions on others? We explore models of ethical decision-making and behaviour to equip students better to make ethical choices in their own lives.

Compassion for others is central to proper relationships. It is important to teach students and staff the value of healthy relationships and to model these in our communities. We understand the importance of conflict and seek to model healthy conflict styles through SEL programs and in daily interactions.

Courage

“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” John 16.33

The value of courage encapsulates a number of qualities including hopefulness and a sense of justice. Courage may be defined as the ability to face difficulties and dangers without shying away. It does not preclude fear, which may need to be overcome. Courage comes from hopefulness, and a world view that understands the future as one of possibility. Aidan and Margaret both exhibited courage in facing their own difficulties and trusting that those obstacles could be overcome.

One can also imagine the courage required of the Sisters in coming to Australia and in challenging social and even church norms in order to care for working-class women and children. Today they still show courage through their untiring commitment to their work in spite of a lack of new vocations to the order and in the midst of a world that sees religious life and something quaint and largely irrelevant.

We value courage as a quality that enables us to overcome personal, academic, social and sporting challenges. We look for hope and aim to be people of optimism. We encourage recommitment and starting again when things don't go according to plan. We aim to be places of second (and even third) chances, looking for signs that students and staff are willing to persevere. We recognise that courage is closely related to resilience.

We encourage our students to dream dreams for the future, personally and more globally. We aim to form students who ask themselves how they can help to make the world a better place. We offer opportunities for them to express their hopes and dreams through the creative arts, and to apply the academic learnings in pursuit of their visions.

We understand that the role of leadership in a Christian school is to cast a vision for the future framed by gospel values. We honour leadership that is prepared to take risks in service of God's mission as expressed through school. We pursue social justice and broader justice and we seek to be a just and fair community. We endeavour to ask how our decisions and policies contribute to the full flourishing of the members of our communities.

We engage appropriately in issues of social justice in our local and wider communities including human rights, domestic and family violence, refugees and asylum seekers, homelessness, and the care of at risk children. We celebrate our

alumni who are actively engaged in social justice and we actively strive to equip current students with the passion, wisdom and skills to follow their example.

We encourage conversation about rights and responsibilities and teach our students that their rights and ours are interdependent on our responsibilities and the rights and responsibilities of others. We promote respect for human rights, an understanding of how these rights have been secured, and awareness of the risks to human rights in our world.

Resilience

*“Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.”
Ephesians 6.13*

“Unless in childhood we can refer to God the pleasures and interests, activities and aspirations, strivings and conquests of the mind, we are not likely to discover how to do that at a later time.” – Bishop John Oliver Feetham OGS, writing on the importance of Christian Education.

Resilience may be defined as the ability to overcome adversity, to ‘bounce back’. Educators have come to understand the importance of resilience in building young people to develop healthy self-esteem and to cope with change and disappointment. Resilience, like courage, requires a belief that a different outcome is possible.

The Sisters of the SSA have always shown great resilience in their ability to adapt to changing times and demands. As social welfare organisations and the church itself have taken on many of the Sisters’ traditional areas of concern, the Sisters have looked for new ways to serve. Even in recent times, in the face of dwindling numbers and resources, they have stepped out in faith to purchase and develop the property at Crow’s Nest and have involved themselves in the local faith community there. They also remain eager to engage with the surviving SSA schools in innovative ways that allow their influence to be shared even as they become less able to be present among us.

The Sisters’ example is a powerful model for our students and staff. It teaches us there are some things worth working for, even when the future seems dim, or results far off. It encourages us to take a long view and to exercise patience. Their story also illustrates the reality of change in life, as schools were founded, flourished, and were handed on to others.

To see change as an integral part of life, and to find those aspects which do not change but remain as our foundations, is critical to developing resilience. As Christian schools we endeavour to communicate to our students and families the enduring and eternal presence of God as the foundation that offers continuity in a rapidly changing world. While customs, mores and standards can come and go, the Christian story present us with values that are constant, even if their expressions vary.

Stories of faithful people who have persevered in difficult circumstances teach us the value of ‘taking up one’s cross’ and committing to something. Across the curriculums we look for opportunities to explore the challenges and difficulties that others face in achieving their hopes and ambitions. We celebrate perseverance as well as achievement, recognising that perseverance is its own kind of success. As school leaders we share our own stories of perseverance with humility and gratitude, encouraging others to take heart.

Faithfulness

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Lamentations 3.22-23

“The strength of the Sisters has always been God’s strength. Prayer, at the centre of each of their days, is the channel for that strength. The most important legacy, which the Sisters have left and continue to leave to all who spend times in their wonderful schools, is the legacy of the Christian faith: the belief in Jesus as God’s son, the belief in eternal salvation through Him and the belief that all of us are created to do God’s work on earth, through the privilege of relationship with Him in prayer and worship.” Karen Henry, Old Girl of St Margaret’s, p 304.

Many words have been written about the ongoing influence of the Sisters on all who attended their schools. One of the great recurring themes of these words is the impact of the Sisters’ faith and its place at the heart of all they do. In order to continue their legacy of faithfulness we celebrate the qualities of peace, trust and wisdom within the Christian tradition.

We encourage our community to pursue peace and to take up the vocation of peacemakers. We recognise the importance of healthy conflict in the securing of true peace and endeavour to model appropriate conflict and resolution. We understand the Peace of God to include the active pursuit of peace between people as well as between ourselves and God. This highlights the roles of forgiveness and reconciliation in relationships.

We celebrate collaboration and team work in the classroom and sporting fields, and in our other endeavours. We value the diversity that community brings and recognise its challenges.

We value wisdom as found in our tradition and recognise its presence in other faith traditions. We recognise the wisdom of our elders and seek to hand it on to future generations. We also recognise the wisdom in our young people and seek to nurture and encourage this.

We look for ways to encourage students and staff to be thoughtful and reflective in developing and shaping their own world views, understanding how our world view influences our ethics, our decision-making and our life choices. To this end we also encourage critical thinking and engagement with all wisdom traditions including our

own. We name the sources of wisdom in our community including the Gospel, the Sisters, our own forbears and the wisdom of the culture.

We recognise the importance of trust in building healthy relationships and we encourage trust in our school communities. We understand the importance of naming instances when trust is broken and we look for ways to rebuild trust authentically and with humility. We value all that has been entrusted to us and work towards being good stewards of these legacies.

We recognise that much of modern life has been stripped of reverence and wonder and we look for opportunities to reintroduce these experiences. We draw attention to the wonders of the natural world through science, the arts and spirituality, through the academic program, camps and other recreational activities and through worship, quiet days and opportunities for stillness and reflection. We communicate the value and integrity of creation and other people through worship, teaching and in personal interactions and decisions. We encourage increasing awareness of interconnectedness and the responsibilities and joys this offers.

Whole-heartedness

‘When Jesus had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.” John 13.22-24

“If you give of things you give little, but if you give of yourself you give all that you have. Give yourself wholly to what you do. Give your undivided attention to every act, for this is the way to wholeness. Whatever asks you for your action or attention, let it be whole-hearted ... no matter how menial the task, let it be done to the glory of God, and it will be transformed.” St Aidan.

Service to God and others has always stood at the heart of the SSA and its schools. The history of the Society is shaped uniquely by the Sisters’ willingness to serve others and their joy in doing so. Much has been written about their history of enthusiastic response to perceived social needs, regardless of financial, social and geographic challenges. We understand the power of this history and we are keen to ensure that this legacy is maintained.

Service Learning is a central pillar in the ethos of both schools and this is supported by other opportunities to offer service to others in the school and wider community. Intrinsic to the idea of service is the acknowledgement that we are called to offer our giftedness to the world, serving where we are most able to flourish personally and to allow others also to grow and be nurtured. This shapes our understanding of vocation or calling and sees service as dedication of life rather than one-off acts of helping and kindness.

We also understand service as reciprocal and value the opportunities to be served when we are in need, responding in gratitude. We see strength in asking for help when it is needed. We offer respect and dignity to those among whom we serve.

In leadership we take seriously the model of servant leadership given by Christ, seeking to encourage and involve others, and to nurture the leadership of others.

In all our activities we recognise the importance of giving of the whole self: of engagement, attentiveness, generosity of mind and spirit as well as resources. We value those whom we serve enough to listen to them and spend time with them. We emphasise Aidan's quality of whole-heartedness which stressed the importance of true generosity of self in all things, even those that seem trivial or menial. We value all work done in and by the school community and we recognise our place in the wider community. As we have received from God, without stint, so we hope to give.

Conclusions

While education is at the front and centre of our schools, we are more than places where academic qualifications may be earned. The heart of each school, gifted by the mission and spirituality of the SSA, is community. The values of SSA schools, derived from the Spirituality of the Sisters, form and strengthen our communities, so that both schools may be places where God is present, in the hearts, minds and lives of all who share our common life.

References

- Booth, Tim. "Towards an Articulation of the Spirituality of the Sisters of the Society of the Sacred Advent." A paper for the St Margaret's and St Aidan's Joint Ethos Committee. 24 July 2014.
- Anglican Schools Office. "A Vision Statement for Anglican Schools." <http://ascqld.org.au/wp-content/public/ASC2813-Vision-Statement-Anglican-Schools-2014.pdf> . Accessed 26 August 2015.
- Reames, Sherry L. (ed). "Stanzaic life of Margaret". From *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*. 2003. <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/reames-middle-english-legends-of-women-saints-stanzaic-life-of-margaret> . Accessed 14 October 2015.
- Adam, David. *Flame in my heart: St Aidan for Today*. London: SPCL, 1997.
- Geise, Raymond. *The Sisters of the Society of the Sacred Advent and their Contribution to Educating Girls since 1895*. Bribie Island: Victory Press, 2012.