

Uniting Connections

Faith and Education Together

Forming wisdom, belonging and hope — through shared leadership

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Dinner Address **Rev Andrew Syme**

Tonight I want to simply state my reflections of school and church relationships and what I have gleaned over the last four decades or so. Its highly idiosyncratic and I hope there is enough that you disagree with and a bit you might agree with. More importantly I hope it is a bit provocative for the conversations tomorrow.



Let me begin.

There are many in our church who believe that because they went to school in some past period of their life they understand how schools work and should work.

In like ways there are many in our schools who have been or are church members and therefore think they understand how the church works.

What interested me, and continues to interest me, is what happens when church and school walk into a room for dialogue. They bring with them cultural assumptions and experiences that form their experience of the world. And like all cultural assumptions they bring those to the fore but usually in an unexpressed form.

How are we different

8 essential differences that some people bring to their cultural background

Characteristic of School	Characteristic of UCA
1. Symbolic centre	
Child learning with othersThe worshipping congregation	The worshipping congregation
Not the Principal's office; not the Assembly or Synod office; certainly not the marketing departments of either organisation. 2 fundamentally different organisations	
2. Average age	
Children – 13/14	Act 3 – 68
Could anything be more culturally different. The story of a Principal in WA walking into their first Synod (not much experience of the church for a couple of decades) being held at one of our schools. The place for Assemblies of children and adolescents – walked in – looked around at the personnel in Synod “oh my goodness – this is different”	
3. Growth trajectory	
Population increase	Population decrease
The Lakes College begin 2005 – huge increases in our independent school system over the last decades. In that time the UCA has decreased in number globally. A Major cultural difference if you're a leader. Leadership in the church is dealing with a completely different cultural phenomenon compared to school Principals.	
4. Leadership and organisational structure	
Hierarchical	Interconnected councils
The great mystery “- member driven organisation” where everyone feels they get a vote/say.	

Characteristic of School	Characteristic of UCA
5. Employment model	
Clear line manager	Ministers as sole trader/consultant
6. Financial model	
Government/client fund	Wholly self-funded
What could be more different. Churches are wholly self-funded. Schools – even the low funded schools – get money from state and federal governments. Some of our most challenging schools are almost completely government funded – those dealing with very high needs students.	
7. Governance history	
Constitutional parent	Constitutional child
8. Participation	
Government legislation	Voluntary
The most fundamental of differences. Children are required by government legislation to attend school. Churches are voluntary. Every day ministers in our churches deal with volunteer committees some highly committed. When they stand up on Sunday they look out at a sea of volunteers. In schools your volunteers are in Parents association committees and Old boy/girl committees. Imagine the life of a Principal if everywhere you went at school all you saw were parent's association committees and old boy/girl networks. Now there is a nightmare to keep you awake at night!	

How are UCA schools and the Church linked?

The life of retirement and the reading of poetry, fiction and non-fiction.

"Your Unfolding life". – A conversation with John O'Donohue (author of "Anam Cara") and Krista Tippett – just prior to his death in 2008. John O'Donohue was an Irish poet, author and priest. Trained as a Catholic Priest with a doctorate in the philosophy of Hegel. His first book "Anam Cara" is a must read and shot John O'Donohue to prominence.

Beauty isn't all about nice loveliness or fame

Beauty is about more rounded, substantial becoming

I think beauty, in that sense, is about

an emerging fullness,

A greater sense of grace and elegance

A deeper sense of depth

And also a kind of homecoming for the enriched memory of your unfolding life.

How are UCA schools and the Church linked –

how are they Church and School places of "substantial becoming".

How are they both places of "emerging fullness".

How are they places of "grace and elegance"?

Substantial becoming

I don't know a Principal or teacher who isn't interested in their students "substantial becoming". I don't know a minister or church leader who isn't interested in their members "substantial becoming". You become a teacher or minister because you want to see people grow.

And such growth is a thing of beauty. O'Donohue was right.

For financial reasons he went to a brother school and clearly the school alone wasn't responsible for his substantial becoming but he acknowledged how significant school had been. Today – all across our nation – that story is being lived in schools and churches

I wonder what church and school meetings would be like if we shared our stories of "substantial becoming"

Emerging Fullness

Attention to the inner and outer life– both school and church are vitally interested in the relationship of the internal life to the outer life

Every schoolteacher and every minister of the faith knows that for children (or adults) their inner life – self-acceptance ; their settledness; inner peace – is remarkably influenced by their outer life – particularly the family and peers.

And of course, the reverse is also true. The outer life is substantially influenced by the inner life.

Schools and church share a great interest in how the inner life and the outer life are connected.

When the inner life and outer life are in harmony and growing that is when true attention to others is achieved. How else could we be on the path to "any sort of emerging fullness".

I wonder what church and school meetings would be like if we shared our stories of "emerging fullness" where we have seen the harmonising of the inner and outer life.

Places of grace and elegance

One of the most contentious areas for schools and church is about the fees charged by the low funded schools. These schools are so usually because they have been around for a century or more. They are accidents of history and state and federal funding policies over generations. Let me say clearly that for some in the church the fact that their schools deal almost exclusively with a very small subset of society – despite the scholarship programs - is a fair concern. There is no getting away from the Gospel's "preferential option to the poor".

However, many of our schools are accidents of history – not deliberate decisions aimed at exclusion.

I aim to highlight that there are reasonable things for some in the church to be concerned about and discuss. However, the beauty of our relationship should be marked, as John O'Donohue says "by elegance and grace". To know there are perceptions of difference but be committed to communicate and relate in a graceful and elegant way. Conscious of our difference but committed to finding the mission of God together.

I wonder what church and school meetings would be like if we conducted ourselves always with "grace and elegance" what sort of conversation might we have.

So to conclude

8 characteristics mark the Uniting Church and its schools as fundamentally different to each other. Those differences significantly affect the cultural assumptions all parties bring to a conversation.

However what both school and church are interested in is

- The “substantial becoming” of the people within our organisations and that should be a part of our conversations
- The “emerging fullness” achieved through harmonising, or at least the dialogue between, the inner and outer lives of our people. And, of course, that should also apply to the inner and outer lives of the organisations themselves where the marketing/ social media stream matches the reality of the organisations life.
- Finally, I’d suggest that our dialogue is characterised
 - o Not by silence
 - o Not by a discussion of money or control

But by “grace and elegance” that describes our work and aspirations

I’d also suggest that the life and work of the Spirit of God may best be discovered when we exhibit – as John O’Donohue says “these elements of beauty”



Key Note Address **Rev Charissa Suli**



A Thread of Possibility

Good morning everyone.

It is a joy to be here. Thank you for the invitation and for the opportunity to spend this time with you.

As we gather on the lands of the Kabi Kabi and Jinibara peoples, I pay my respects to Elders past and present and honour their deep connection to Country, culture and community.

I also acknowledge members of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and give thanks for our Covenant, which continues to shape us as a Church seeking to walk together with humility, justice and hope.

I want to begin by acknowledging Andrew Symes and his address last night.

Andrew invited us to reflect on the relationship between schools and the Church and some of the differences that shape our life together.

As I listened, I found myself returning to a much simpler question:

Who are we helping young people become?

Because that question sits at the heart of this gathering.

Faith and Education Together.

Forming wisdom, belonging and hope through shared leadership.

This morning, I want to reflect on what I have called *The Threads You're Holding*.

The threads of wisdom, belonging and hope that are woven into the lives of young people every day through the work of schools, families, churches and communities.

Because in a changing world, I believe we need one another more than ever.

The Church needs its schools.

And schools need the Church.

I left high school in Year 10.

Along the way, I returned to study, completing a Bachelor of Theology, a Graduate Diploma in Ministry, and a master's degree in theology.

Let's just say leaving school in Year 10 turned out not to be the end of my education.

I also have the privilege of being the youngest person and the first person of colour to serve as President in the history of the Uniting Church in Australia.

And I do not say this because this story is about me.

I say this because somewhere in our schools today, there are young people who cannot yet imagine what their future might hold.

My story is a reminder that God often sees possibilities long before we do.

How does someone move from the first sentence to the second?

I had left school to raise a young family.

At the time, that was the whole of my horizon.

If you had told that young woman – a young mum from a Tongan-Māori family, carrying more responsibilities than opportunities and well outside every conventional pathway people expected

success to follow – that she would one day stand before principals, teachers and school leaders as President of the Uniting Church in Australia, she would not have believed you.

It was not imaginable.

It was not on any map I owned.

I got here because God was not finished with me when I was sure I was finished.

A vocation kept knocking that I could not ignore.

And the people God used were educators.

Teachers and leaders who looked at my circumstances and refused to write me off.

They did not just teach me what to think; they helped me imagine what might still be possible.

They saw possibility where others saw limitation.

They believed in me before I could believe in myself.

They saw a thread that still belonged in the weave.

Education did not save me.

But it became one of the threads God used to weave me into the person standing before you today.

And every one of you is holding threads like that. Every day.

You may never know which thread you are holding.

It may be a conversation. A word of encouragement. A second chance. A moment when a student is seen rather than overlooked.

And years later, long after they have left your classroom, that thread may still be holding their life together.

So never underestimate the power of what God has placed in your hands.

Learning from the Land

As someone whose own identity has been shaped by culture, story and ancestral memory, I have come to understand that education is never simply about information.

It is about belonging.

It is about knowing who we are, where we come from, and how we are called to live together.

In the Uniting Church we do not acknowledge Country as a courtesy.

We do so because our covenant relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress reminds us that God was already at work in this land before colonisation and that we are called to walk together in truth, justice and hope.

Long before modern classrooms existed, knowledge, wisdom, identity and responsibility were passed down from generation to generation on this land. There is much we can continue to learn from First Peoples about belonging, story, community and what it means to form people for life.

And the work you do has never mattered more.

Because those traditions remind us that education has never been simply about the transfer of information.

It has always been about forming people.

And that insight may be more important today than ever before.



The Question of the Machine

We are living through a moment of profound technological change.

For the first time in human history, the machine can do many of the things we once believed education was primarily about.

It can write the essay.

Solve the equation.

Summarise the book.

Produce information instantly and endlessly.

For generations, we have measured students by what they could remember and reproduce.

Now every student carries a device that can remember and reproduce more than any human being ever could.

At the same time, this is one of the most connected generations in human history, yet many young people are reporting unprecedented levels of loneliness, anxiety and uncertainty.

So, the question facing education today is not simply what students need to know.

The question is: ***Who are they becoming?***

In an age when a machine can manufacture information, the things only a human community can offer become even more precious.

Wisdom.

Character.

Belonging.

Purpose.

Hope.

The machine can give a child answers.

It cannot give them meaning.

It cannot teach them how to love.

It cannot help them discover who they are, whose they are, and what their life is for.

That is why your work matters more than ever.

Not less.

You are not obsolete.

You just became essential.

And I know many of you are carrying responsibilities that feel heavier than ever.

Rising complexity, growing expectations, concerns for wellbeing, and the daily work of caring for young people can be demanding and exhausting.

Yet in the midst of all of that, you continue to show up.

You continue to teach, mentor, encourage and believe in young people.

For that, I want to say thank you.

And perhaps that brings us to the deeper question beneath all education: not simply what young people know, but who they are becoming.

Formation: The Way of Jesus

The gospel was never mainly about information.

Christian education has always understood that knowledge matters, but formation matters even more.

At its heart, formation is about becoming more fully the people God created us to be.

Jesus did not hand the disciples a textbook.

He walked with them.

Ate with them.

Served them.

Loved them.

He formed them.

The Apostle Paul writes that our hearts are to be “knit together in love.”

Knit together in love.

That is not simply a school motto.

That is a job description.

It is also the image I carry as your President.

Threads of Love: Weaving Christ’s Love Across Cultures and Boundaries.

I come from weaving people.

Tongan.

Māori.

In our cultures, individual strands become something stronger together.

A place of belonging.

Your schools are looms.

And in an age that can manufacture answers but never love, you are weaving the one thing the machine will never make.

No one weaves alone.

Teacher beside parent.

Chaplain beside caregiver.

Principal beside mentor.

Student beside community.

Across your schools and communities, you are weaving one cloth.

And like every strong piece of weaving, it is held together by a few essential threads.

Pull one away and the whole thing weakens.

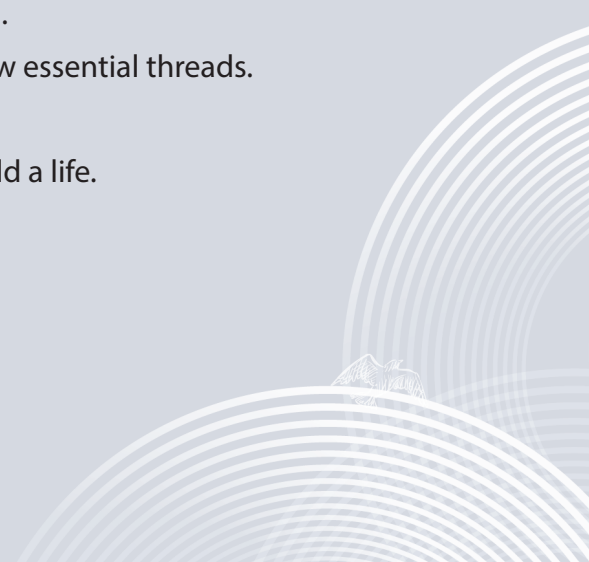
But woven together, they create something strong enough to hold a life.

For me, there are three threads that matter most.

Wisdom.

Belonging.

Hope.



The First Thread: Wisdom

Knowledge tells us what is possible.

Wisdom helps us discern what is good.

The machine can answer: "What can I do?"

Wisdom asks: "What should I do?" "Who will this help?" And: "What kind of person am I becoming?"

The world is about to be flooded with information and cleverness.

What it needs is wisdom.

Form the rarer thing.

Form the wise.

The Second Thread: Belonging

You are forming one of the loneliest generations on record. Belonging is not a slogan.

It is a necessity.

Every child matters.

The high-achiever.

The struggling learner.

The First Nations child.

The refugee child.

The child carrying grief.

The child who feels unseen.

The Year 10 dropout who has no idea what they might yet become.

Every child matters.

Because the Spirit of God is already at work in every life long before we recognise it.

Our task is often not to create possibilities, but to notice them, nurture them, and help them flourish.

A school cannot weave belonging if one child is unsafe.

Protecting the dignity and sacred worth of every young person is not simply compliance.

It is gospel work.

The Third Thread: Hope

The machine cannot hope.

It has no future to believe in.

Our young people need hope.

Not cheap optimism.

Not denial.

But Easter hope.

The hope that says suffering does not get the final word.

The hope that says love is stronger than fear.

The hope that forms resilient, courageous young people.

Forming Disciples for the World

So here is the question I leave on the table:

Are we forming achievers, or are we forming disciples?

The gospel never asks us to choose between excellence and character.

It calls us to form people whose gifts, talents and achievements are placed in service of others.

Young people who can flourish in the world as it is, while helping to shape the world as God intends it to be.

The best schools are doing both.

A Uniting Church school is unafraid of questions.

We hold faith and inquiry together.

We encourage curiosity, critical thinking, compassion and courage.

We trust that faith and learning belong together, and that truth need not fear investigation because all truth ultimately belongs to God.

We are a Church born from reconciliation.

A Church committed to covenant and that believes every person bears the image of God.

The Basis of Union describes us as a fellowship of reconciliation and a pilgrim people.

Our schools can embody that vision.

Places where young people learn how to live across difference.

How to seek justice.

How to serve.

How to belong.

A Shared Mission

There is another reason this gathering matters.

It has been many years since leaders from Uniting Church schools gathered nationally in this way.

That matters.

Because no school stands alone.

We belong to something larger than ourselves.

A shared story.

A shared faith.

A shared mission.

Your schools are not on the edge of the Church's life.

You are part of the Church's mission.

Yesterday, Andrew reflected on the relationship between schools and the Church.

As I listened, I found myself returning to a simple conviction.

We are different institutions, but we share a common vocation.

We share the sacred work of formation.

We care about who young people are becoming.

And that is why we need one another.

The Church needs its schools.

And schools need the Church.

Not simply as a historical connection or founding body, but as a community that carries a story larger than ourselves — a story of meaning, reconciliation, justice, belonging and hope.

The future of our relationship cannot be built on nostalgia for the past. It must be built on a shared commitment to the young people entrusted to us today.

In an age of increasing complexity, neither of us can do this work alone.

We are stronger when we walk together.

One of the gifts of being part of the Uniting Church is that our story is both deeply local and profoundly global.

Through our congregations, agencies and partnerships, young people can discover pathways into service, justice, intercultural leadership, environmental stewardship, ministry and discipleship.

That is a remarkable gift.

Nurturing the Next Generation

One of the great opportunities before us is not simply educating young people for successful careers.

It is helping them discover how God might use their gifts for the sake of the world.

That is why partnership between schools, congregations, agencies and the wider Church matter so much.

When we work together, something remarkable happens.

Schools become places where young people encounter faith in action.

Congregations become places where they discover vocation and belonging.

Agencies become living examples of justice and service.

Together we offer a more complete witness to Christ than any one part could offer alone.

One of the greatest opportunities before us is how we nurture the next generation of leaders.

Young people are not simply the leaders of tomorrow.

They are already leading today.

Our task is not simply to prepare them for the future. It is to recognise, encourage and create space for the gifts God has already placed within them.

The question is whether we are creating pathways for them to flourish.

If we do that well, we will not simply preserve the Church for the future.

We will help shape a Church that is more faithful, more courageous and more reflective of the kingdom of God.

I will not give myself the last word this morning.

In a few days, on the 22nd of June, our Church will mark forty-nine years since the inauguration of the Uniting Church in Australia — a Church born from the conviction that unity, reconciliation, and hope are worth building together.

As part of that anniversary, I have invited the whole Church into a season of prayer.

But I made a deliberate decision about whose prayers we would pray.

I did not only want presidents, moderators, professors or church leaders writing them.

Because I believe something with my whole heart.
Our children are not the Church of tomorrow.
They are the Church of today.
They have something to offer now.
And they have something to say.
So I asked a young girl named Phoebe if she would write one of the prayers.
In her prayer she wrote:

"Grant our leaders the wisdom to see through the eyes of those they serve."

And later:

"May they know that they are seen, heard and loved."

Phoebe wrote that.

When I hear those words, I do not just hear the voice of one young person.

I see the fruit of what happens when faith and education work in concert.

I see a young person learning wisdom.

Learning compassion.

Learning that leadership is service.

Learning to recognise the dignity of others.

Those words remind me why formation matters.

Why the work of parents, teachers, chaplains, congregations and communities matters.

Because one day the values we nurture, the faith we encourage, and the love we share take root and bear fruit in the lives of young people.

And every child in your care carries that same possibility.

Every one.

Especially the ones who do not yet see it in themselves.

I was one of them.

The Charge

So here is my charge.

Go back to your schools.

Find the child who does not fit.

The brilliant one.

The broken one.

The one eating lunch alone.

The one everyone has quietly given up on.

Weave them in.

Form their wisdom.

Build their belonging.

Hand them hope.

And listen to them.

Because they already have something to say.
These are the threads in your hands.
Hold them as though a whole life depends on it.
One of them might.
The machine will make the answers.
You form the human beings.
May God bless your hands, steady your hearts and hold every child you carry.
Now go and weave something the world can never make.
Thank you.

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