



Report from Nairobi: Reflections on Jesuit Identity from the 70th Congregation of Procurators

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A few years ago, I had the privilege of meeting some secret Jesuits in an Asian country, which, due to the politically sensitive situation there, shall remain unnamed. It was an amazing experience. These Jesuits were all relatively young, in their '40's. They were known to be diocesan priests, and all held key leadership positions in their diocese. No one in the diocese knew they were Jesuits except their bishop. We had to meet in a nondescript restaurant some distance away from the city where they worked, for their security—and mine, too, I suppose.

Several things struck me about this handful of truly admirable men. First was the fact that, although they could not publicly identify themselves as Jesuits, there was clearly something deeply Jesuit about them, and Jesuit at its best. They were among the most respected priests in their diocese, known for their dedication and excellence in ministry and preaching. They were known to be spiritual men who lived simple lives and could be trusted with both the formation of priests and diocesan finances. During a time of crisis, it was one of these hidden Jesuits who helped the bishop arrive at a principled stance vis-à-vis the authorities, and rallied the Catholic community to remain strong in the face of threats.

Secondly, I found myself wondering why these men chose to remain Jesuits where there were no evident advantages to being members of the Society. On the contrary, they had put themselves at risk in choosing to identify themselves, however secretly, as Jesuits. When, during the course of our dinner, I inquired about their reasons, they offered no complex calculation of benefits versus costs. To a man, it all came down to simply feeling called by God.

Third, when I asked them what the Society of Jesus could do to help them, their answer was very simple. They wanted two things: more formation and more opportunities to experience community life.

I wanted to begin these reflections with the memory of these men, these brothers of ours, who, at this very moment, without drama or fanfare, unknown to the world, are, in fact, living heroic Jesuit lives. I think they remind us that Jesuit identity is not primarily about public labels, but about a spirit, a way of living and serving in commitment, freedom and courage. It is not an external “brand,” but a depth of response to an interior call from God. They challenge me to assess how deeply I value my Jesuit identity, whether I regard it as something worth guarding even without prestige or honor, or, worse, in the face of danger. These men remind too me that this identity needs continued deepening in formation and continued support in community. Finally, on this feast of St. Ignatius,

these men help me gratefully remember that the spirit of Ignatius lives on today, even amidst very difficult circumstances, and that it is a spirit that makes a difference for the good in this world.

Our concern this morning is to reflect on how we too can sustain and deepen that Ignatian spirit in our schools, in the light of our own challenges and difficulties, as well as new possibilities and hopes. In fact, however, this is a theme about which you know far more than I. The issue of the Jesuit identity of our schools—how to specify this identity; how to promote it; how to create formation programs, instruments of assessment, processes to determine sponsorship, etc—all this you have struggled with and made significant, even dramatic progress in, over recent years. I don't think it is inaccurate to say that at no time in the past have our schools been so aware of, so insistent on, and so successful in promoting their Jesuit and/or Ignatian identity as today.

Thus, my goal is very modest. I view my presentation this morning as an aid, a stimulus to reflection, if you will, in preparation for the more important workshops this afternoon, when you will, I believe, be given the chance to share about your experience, your achievements, challenges and hopes, in promoting Jesuit identity in your schools. You will also be pleased to know then that I don't intend to rehash documents that you are all already familiar with. Instead I invite you to journey with me from Asia to Africa, to the recently concluded 70th Congregation of Procurators, held two weeks ago in Nairobi. I would like to raise ten points for reflection, ten issues, ten sets of questions, connected with the Jesuit identity and mission of our institutions that emerged, it seems to me, from that important international meeting of the Society of Jesus.

The 70th Congregation of Procurators

First, though, a word about this Congregation of Procurators. What is a Congregation of Procurators anyway? As you may (or may not) know, all other religious orders and congregations have regular chapters or international gatherings mandated by their law. The Society of Jesus alone does not, because Ignatius didn't want to waste time on too many international meetings, feeling that they were a distraction from ministry. However, in the Constitutions, Ignatius stipulated that regularly, persons were to come from the Provinces to give the General information. By the time of the third General, St. Francis Borgia, this stipulation became formalized as the Congregation of Procurators, which was to gather representatives from every province every three or four years to do precisely that: to give the General information about the state of the Society.

Procurators are elected from the Provinces to allow a voice different from that of the Provincial to share its perspective of how things are going in the Province. Each Procurator visits the communities and works of the Province and reports directly to Fr. General. In a way, it's a kind of internal audit. Maybe it's a structure that all the Presidents and Directors here might want to introduce into their schools!

When they come together in a Congregation, the Procurators have two related functions: to discuss, under the leadership of the General, the state of the Society of Jesus and other universal concerns; and, mostly on the basis of that discussion, to discern whether a General Congregation is called for or not. This CP voted NOT to call for a General Congregation.

In a sense, though, that vote is not what is most important about the Congregation of Procurators. What are perhaps more significant are the discussions on the state of the Society. During this Congregation, there were four key moments of reflection and discussion. First, the General

delivered his *de Statu Societatis Jesu*, his State of the Society of Jesus address. After listening to the General's address, the procurators broke into small groups to discuss the *de Statu*, and to raise concerns and questions related to what the General said or what he may have failed to say. About 90 questions were raised, which a group of us synthesized and streamlined into 42. The next day, Fr. General responded to all 42 questions.

Second, there was a day given to reflecting on Jesuit mission today. Fr. General has created three new secretariats to help animate three dimensions of mission which he feels should be present in *all* Jesuit ministries of whatever kind: the service of faith, the promotion of justice, and collaboration. A day was given to reflecting on the lights and shadows of the Society in these areas today, and to eliciting recommendations for Fr. General and the Society to act upon.

Third, there was a day devoted to a relatively new understanding of community life in the Society. Jesuit community has traditionally been described as community for mission. GC 35, however, insisted that Jesuit community is not only *for* mission, but it *is itself, mission*. The way we Jesuits live together is not just an adjunct or a support to mission, but should be seen as a constitutive element of mission. The procurators reflected on the way this new paradigm for community has been appropriated in the Society: best practices; shadows and challenges; and ended, as always, with recommendations.

Finally, there was a day focused on Africa and Madagascar. GC 35 affirmed that the Society of Jesus has five universal apostolic preferences: which is to say, five apostolic challenges that are so significant and so complex that no single province or region can respond to them adequately but rather require the combined resources and dedication of the entire Society of Jesus. These five universal preferences are: the Roman Houses, the intellectual apostolate, displaced people (refugees and migrants), China and Africa. CP70 was held in Nairobi precisely to highlight Africa as a universal preference of the Society. Three Jesuits from Africa gave brief but substantial presentations on Africa. The procurators spent a day learning about Africa—or perhaps, more importantly, unlearning stereotypes and biases—and reflecting on the gifts and opportunities of Africa and Madagascar for the universal Society and the Church

I might add the decision of Fr. General to hold this Congregation in Nairobi was historic—the first Congregation of the Society in almost 500 years outside Europe! 65% of Jesuits in formation today are from Africa and Asia. The future of the Society “will be very different from what we have been used to in the past centuries . . . [and] we are here in Africa precisely to experience this change, to reflect on it, and to celebrate it!” And celebrate it we did. Fr. General summarized the experience wonderfully when he pointed out that, while in the East, in Asia, there has been a focus on spiritualities of the *way*, and while in the West, there has been a passion for the *truth*, we experienced in Africa the most important of all: *life*, which means energy, hope, joy. Since Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, we need to deepen this exchange of riches among the continents, so that we might come to the fullness, the totality of Christ.

It is from Fr. General's *de Statu* and these discussions of the Congregation that I draw the following points. This is an entirely personal synthesis, and has nothing of an official nature about it. I asked myself whether what was discussed at the Congregation might have relevance or implications for the Jesuit identity of our schools. There are probably others, but I wish to share with you ten points.

Ten Points for Reflection

1. **APOSTOLIC INSTRUMENTS:** First, I think it is significant that, in the section on Jesuit apostolates in his *de Statu* address, Fr. General presented four challenges, and the last one “has to do with the Catholic and Jesuit identity of our works.” Fr. General noted that the procurators report that much is being done to “clarify and strengthen” the Catholic and Jesuit identity of our institutions. Yet, a large number of procurators still feel that more needs to be done, and Fr. General indicated that he agrees with this judgment, particularly in the light of three factors: the expansion of institutions, the increasing secularization of cultures, and the fact that our institutions are functioning in much more competitive contexts—competition, as you know, that is sometimes based on criteria that are not necessarily those that Jesuit schools should consider most important.

What is most interesting for me, though, is the way Fr. General framed the question of Catholic and Jesuit identity. He said: “This is not an issue of control or power, but of how and whether our institutions continue to be **primarily apostolic instruments**, clear about their primary aim of serving the mission of the Church and of the Society.”

The essential criterion then for judging whether an institution authentically lives out its Jesuit identity is that its primary *and operative* self-understanding is that is, first of all, an apostolic instrument, at the service of the mission of the Church and the Society of Jesus.

A first set of questions might then be the following: Do our schools understand themselves and function as primarily apostolic instruments? To what extent is the vision that a Jesuit school is not just an academic institution, but an instrument for the mission of God, operative and shared by governing boards, faculty members, staff, parents and students? What are we doing to keep that apostolic perspective?

2. **SERVING FAITH:** I mentioned earlier that Fr. General has created three new secretariats to animate three dimensions of mission. Actually only two of the three secretariats are completely new since a secretariat associated with issues of social justice issues has existed in the Curia since 1980. The secretariat for the service of faith was established partly because there is a sense that we have presumed this dimension of mission too much in our institutions and works, and that the time has come to give it more explicit attention. Some of the factors that make faith more difficult and threatened in our time were mentioned during the discussions of the Congregation: aggressive secularism or widespread indifference; fundamentalisms; the popular perception that religions are related to violence or intolerance; the loss of credibility of the Church in many places.

Interestingly, some shared their impression that, while we have been quite successful in our schools in promoting social concern and responsibility, we have perhaps been less successful in bringing our students to faith: that is, in leading them to the joy of friendship with Jesus in his community, the Church. Someone suggested that what is going on in many of our institutions might best be described as “evangelization light”—and that this is not sufficient to meet the challenges of our time. Another person mentioned that, in his Assistancy, there seems to be a very sharp distinction between sectors: the parishes take care of the service of faith; the social centers occupy themselves with the promotion of justice; and the schools . . . well, they take care of education.

Thus, we might ask: How are we doing in terms of serving faith? How do we help bring those we serve to the joy and hope of friendship and service with Christ in the Church? In non-Christian contexts, in which our mission calls us to inter-religious dialogue, how do we serve faith? One suggestion that emerged was that each institution be asked to do an Examen, or a self-assessment of itself in terms of its service of faith. This would be an interesting exercise, especially if it is done honestly. One could gather best practices, and at the same time, this process might invite schools to give renewed attention to the service of faith as a primary element of its mission.

3. BRIDGES TO AND IN THE CHURCH: Part of the service of faith is to lead people to know, love, and find their place in the Church. In his *de Statu*, Fr. General underlined the fact that Jesuit identity, as the *Formula of the Institute* indicates, is fundamentally linked to service of Christ and of the Church. Strikingly, Fr. General, recalling that GC 35 spoke of our mission as reconciliation, pointed out that all Jesuits and all JESUIT INSTITUTIONS should “build and be bridges in the Church,” particularly in local Churches where there is much polarization and division.

A third point of reflection then: How are we bridging the gap between young people and the Church, between our school community and the Church? What are the difficulties we experience in this area and how are we responding to them? As one procurator observed, if people develop a love for the Society or the Jesuits apart from a love for the Church, one wonders whether we have been bridge builders or whether we have intensified the barriers.

4. COLLABORATION AS MISSION: The secretariat for collaboration is also new. In his *de Statu*, Fr. General pointed out that, while, in some places there have been magnificent developments in Jesuit-lay partnership, in sharing spirituality, mission and leadership, in other places, unfortunately, collaboration is not adequately understood, there is a lack of systematic and sustained formation programs for collaboration for Jesuits and lay partners, and not enough venues for shared leadership and planning. Not to mention the more basic fact that some Jesuits find it very hard to work with any one else, whether lay or Jesuit!

There was an honest admission during the discussion that a major obstacle towards collaboration is the clericalism that exists in many parts of the Society where the Society is growing—a clericalism shared by both priests and laity. In some places, it is lay people who do not want other lay people to assume leadership in apostolates.

However, perhaps a subtler and probably more powerful block to collaboration also emerged, namely the false understanding that collaboration is not on the same level as the service of faith and the promotion of justice, because collaboration is simply a strategy, a means. This instrumental view of collaboration would see collaboration primarily as a strategic adaptation in view of the diminishing numbers of Jesuits.

But GC 34 had already clarified that collaboration is a good in itself, the coming to life and practice of the ecclesiology of Vatican II, an understanding of the Church in which all are called to serve the mission of God, which is larger than the mission of the Society alone.

A fourth point for reflection therefore: in our schools, is collaboration viewed simply a means or is it valued as an integral part of mission itself? What are we doing to change attitudes like clericalism or an instrumentalist view of collaboration?

5. ANIMATED BY AN APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY: Several times during the Congregation, Fr. General pointed out that, in many and perhaps most places, the Society does not “run” our institutions the way it may have done in the past when a Jesuit community was directly in charge of a school, providing leadership and governance, and ensuring the apostolicity, as it were, of the venture.

Thus, an interesting point that surfaced during the discussions was the need to think today in terms of a wider *Ignatian apostolic community*, composed of Jesuits, other religious, lay people, people of other faiths, all sharing a depth of commitment to mission. This apostolic community (not a community in the sense of people living together) would be a group that sees the school primarily as an apostolic instrument and would protect and promote this apostolic dimension. In fact, it was pointed out that it may be that the governing boards of schools are not necessarily this apostolic community. One indicator that the Society should withdraw from sponsorship of an institution is if an apostolic community cannot be identified in that institution or if that apostolic community has no real influence in the school.

One can ask therefore: What is the Ignatian apostolic community in our schools? Who comprise it? How is it sustained? How is it empowered to keep the school primarily an apostolic instrument?

6. THE ROLE OF THE JESUIT COMMUNITY: This notion of a broader Ignatian apostolic community responsible for a school raises the question of the role of the Jesuits and the Jesuit community. Some pointed out that the presence of collaborators has provoked real questions of Jesuit identity for some Jesuits. Why be a Jesuit if our collaborators can essentially do everything we can do?

At the same time, if the Jesuit communities are no longer the “power” in the school, what is the role of the Jesuit community? Can the Jesuit community still continue to think of a school as “our” school, over which we Jesuits expect to have some control or say—particularly if the Jesuit community is composed of a significant number of senior members who may be retirees or have no direct dealings with the school?

Two related responses emerged to these questions. First, Fr. General pointed out in his *de Statu* that the positive experience of collaboration underlines the need for Jesuits who “will be in special way custodians of the spirit of Ignatius and the Society.” Secondly, if, for Jesuits, we live community as mission; if our life together becomes a witness to the power of the Gospel to overcome all the forces that divide people in the world like caste or tribe or race, then clearly the community retains a role, but it is not primarily one of power, but of accompaniment and witness.

A sixth point that we might reflect on: How should we understand the role that the Jesuit community plays in our schools? How do Jesuit communities understand their mission

within the mission of the larger Ignatian apostolic community? What needs to be done to change mindsets and attitudes?

7. **CLOSE TO THE POOR, CONCERNED ABOUT STRUCTURAL CHANGE AND THE ENVIRONMENT:** The promotion of justice has been a strong point in the Society in recent years. Fr. General pointed out that, among the lights of the Society today is the fact that the service of the poor informs all Jesuit ministries, whether social, educational, pastoral or spiritual. He particularly commended outstanding initiatives for the education of the poor in South Asia, Latin America and the United States.

Paradoxically, however, in his *de Statu*, Fr. General also lamented the fact that, while the social dimension of our mission has grown in acceptance and practice, at the same time, communities of Jesuits living with and like the poor have decreased in number. Fr. General expressed concern that direct contact with and friendship with the poor seems to have declined, and he encouraged the renewal of shared life with the poor.

Furthermore, during the Congregation, some pointed out that, in recent times, there seems to have been a decline in a sense of and concern for the structural causes of poverty. While direct assistance to the poor is valuable and needed, some felt the need for a renewed attention to structures and structural change. In this time of economic crisis, for example, some expressed the need and hope for a more comprehensive structural analysis, and the development of alternative economic models. At the same time, others brought up the importance of developing our sense of intergenerational justice: our obligation to care for the ravaged environment not just for ourselves, not even just for the poor who are most deeply affected by the effects of environmental devastation, but for the sake of future generations.

I wonder if Fr. General's comments about Jesuit communities might apply in some ways to our schools. As we have grown in our commitment to forming men and women for others, serving the poor, have we, at the same time, grown farther from the poor? How is friendship with the poor encouraged and promoted? At the same time, how have we helped our students understand the structural roots of poverty and the present ecological crisis and how have we created a passion to work for their transformation?

8. **THE DIMENSION OF UNIVERSALITY:** In his *de Statu*, Fr. General recalled that one of the great contributions of GC 35 was its emphasis on a "perspective of greater universality." As Fr. General pointed out, from the reports of the procurators and from his own observations, there seems to be, in the past few years, a happy re-discovery in the Society of this dimension of universality, this sense that we Jesuits do not belong to a Province, but to the whole Society. Among the young, there is an increased willingness to be sent for mission anywhere in the world where there is need.

This more universal mindset has taken concrete form in the reality of apostolic networks. Fr. General noted several times that the growth of these networks has been a positive recent development in the Society. The walls between provinces, which used to be so high, are becoming increasingly porous: there is greater cooperation between provinces and between conferences, greater sharing of resources. The sharp, even competitive, distinctions between ministry sectors are also dissolving, as networks all over the world bring different

ministries together in apostolic platforms or shared projects. Fr. General gave as an example how responding to ecological concerns or to migrants has brought together social centers, schools, parishes and spirituality centers, all working together for mission.

During the discussions about networks, an interesting point that was raised was that how little those from Asia, Africa and Latin America know about each other. We know far more about Europe and the United States, due to our colonial histories. Thus, several argued convincingly about the need to privilege and strengthen South-South networking and cooperation.

An eighth point then: To what extent is there a sense of universal mission in our schools? Most of our schools are part of networks or educational associations within our provinces or conferences, but how much sharing of perspectives, capacities and resources beyond our own countries exists? How much cooperation goes on between our schools and other ministries? What can be done to promote South-South networks in the Society?

9. THE CREATIVITY OF THE KINGDOM: In 2014 the Society of Jesus is celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Restoration of the Society. In his letter to the Society convoking the Congregation of Procurators, Fr. General said that he wanted to use the moment of the Congregation as a way of preparing for that commemoration of new life for Society. Thus, he asked the Procurators to reflect on creativity in the Society.

Fr. General addressed the theme of creativity in his moving final discourse, as he looked to the future. For him, the deepest reason why we are called to ceaseless creativity is because we have an alternative vision given to us by Jesus: that of the Kingdom of God. Everything can be different if we see the world against the horizon of this Kingdom. Christians are supposed to be people of the Kingdom who are creative because they are not satisfied with anything in the present state of affairs that is not part of God's plan. Ignatius' emphasis on *Magis*, properly understood, also leads to creativity, because it is the refusal to be bound by anything that limits the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Insightfully, Fr. General contrasted *Magis* with competition. *Magis* is too often understood in competitive terms, being better than others. But this is a misapprehension, because competing with others means that we only do the same things everyone else does, only we try to do them better. Competition is not yet creativity because it is "lower than the Kingdom," it is bound by the existing rules, rather than the newness of the Kingdom.

We might ask ourselves: To what extent are our schools inspired by competition, to what extent are we limited by our aspiration to be as good as or better than some other school? And to what extent are we moved by the creativity of the Kingdom to transcend the expectations of others, to initiate the vision of Jesus for a new heaven and a new earth? How is this creativity of the Kingdom promoted in our institutions?

10. DISCERNING ABOUT THE FUTURE OF INSTITUTIONS: One of the somewhat unexpected emphases in Fr. General's *de Statu* report was that Jesuits seem to be over-worked and over-extended. As he pointed out, Jesuit overwork and over-extension was, strikingly, a recurrent theme in many reports from the procurators. The problem is that overworked Jesuits cannot respond with the depth and the creativity the Church expects of us.

What is responsible for this state of affairs? Several times in his *de Statu*, and many times throughout the discussions of the Congregation, the main problem identified is the refusal of Jesuits to be realistic about the number of institutions and apostolic works for which they are responsible. This is essentially a problem of poor discernment. Jesuits know how to begin works, but we get too attached to them; we don't know how or when to entrust them into the hands of others who can keep them thriving better than we can. Thus, both in his *de Statu* and in his final allocution, Fr. General insisted that one of the most important challenges to the Society today is that of discerning about the future of our institutions, or perhaps more precisely, discerning about the Society's commitment to all its present institutions.

As one Jesuit put it, institutions are important because they give flesh to the spirit of St. Ignatius; but the problem is, for the Society today, with our reduced numbers, and many new challenges we are called to respond to, there is not enough spirit to animate all the flesh that we have accumulated. In the end, Fr. General called for a "delicate but firm discernment that determines what we can do reasonably well today with the resources and numbers that we have." In his final discourse, Fr. General added that this discernment will require a creativity that recognizes the blessing of various forms of collaboration and diverse levels of Jesuit involvement and commitment to institutions.

This is surely a point that touches many of us here, because the schools comprise the major institutional commitment of the Society of Jesus. One discernment that will probably have to take place in the near future will be to decide, following a distinction made by GC 35, which institutions might be described as Ignatian (that is, sharing the spirit of the Exercises and the spirituality of Ignatius) and which will remain Jesuit (that is, not only sharing the Ignatian spiritual heritage, but also sharing the Society of Jesus' understanding of its mission, and involving some form of Jesuit institutional responsibility). I imagine that more schools that are Jesuit may become Ignatian in the near future.

Such a move might, of course, be interpreted negatively as abandonment by the Society. However, I think it can and should be interpreted much more positively: as a sign of trust and respect for our collaborators. Jesuits typically begin parishes and then hand them over to the diocesan clergy when it is felt that the parishes are sufficiently strong and stable. Shouldn't we think of schools (without neglecting all the differences between a parish and a school) in a similar way?

This gathering might be a good time to begin reflecting. What is the quality of the discernment about the future in our schools? Should we start thinking of ourselves more and more as Ignatian rather than as limited Jesuit works? What kinds of structures and programs do we need to put in place to maintain a helpful connection to the heritage and vision of the Society of Jesus? What do we need to do to convince Jesuits, students, parents, and other interested publics that the vision and values of St. Ignatius infuse a school so that no one needs to fear what future direction the institution will follow?

Conclusion

Here I end my report from Nairobi. Allow me then one final brief recollection. While we were in Nairobi, I had the chance to talk to a scholastic from the Eastern African Province who was heading

for regency in one of the high schools of the Province—the one in Uganda, if I recall correctly. When I asked him how many high schools the Province was running, he answered “Four”: one in Uganda, one in South Sudan, and two in Tanzania. He added that all were new schools, about two to three years old, with the exception of one in Tanzania, which was “very old.” When I asked when this “very old” high school had been founded, he answered, in all innocence, “1994!”

I wanted to end with this to highlight one last point, a reality that we experience very much in my part of the world, Asia Pacific, as they seem to do in Africa as well. In Asia Pacific, we have places with strong and established high schools—“very old” high schools that were certainly founded before 1994—in Australia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Macau, the Philippines, Taiwan. And yet, we also have many places where the Jesuit educational apostolate does not mean tweaking stable institutions or refining already well-developed programs, but actually beginning new schools, in places where, due to poverty, repression and violence, quality education remains a basic need and a Jesuit school can make a significant contribution to the country. In places like East Timor, Cambodia, Myanmar, Eastern Malaysia, Thailand, Micronesia, Vietnam, we are starting, planning or dreaming of new schools, daunted by the great challenges, including our lack of resources and capacity, but with much hope as well.

I say all this to underline that the apostolate of Jesuit education remains an important way of going to the frontiers of mission, to those places where, as Pope Benedict told the 35th General Congregation, others “do not reach or find it difficult to reach.” That we should still be starting new schools means that the Society continues to believe that, through this ministry of education, we can still make a difference in the lives and futures of people and the world; that through schools, Jesuit schools, one can still help bring a bit of the light and hope and life of the Kingdom of God to this dark world. I hope that our reflections on the Jesuit identity of our institutions, whether old and new, allow us to make of our schools more effective, more evangelical, more transformative apostolic instruments. May St. Ignatius help us live his spirit more authentically, more generously, more joyfully in our schools, so that we might contribute to the redemption and healing of God’s children and all creation, for the greater glory of God.