

Rector's Welcome – Saints Parents in Dialogue Breakfast

Gender Matters: Raising Children in a Non-Binary World

Dace Hall 20 November 2019

Dr Tim Nuttall

As Rector and Executive Head of St Stithians College, representing our seven schools, I welcome you warmly to this occasion.

This event is the second in a series, inaugurated last year, in which St Stithians offers a campus-wide opportunity for our parents to gather and to engage with a topic of relevance and importance.

The purpose of the Saints Parents in Dialogue Breakfast is to provide an opportunity, among many other 'parent connect' activities, for our parents across our College of schools to meet one another.

Each year, one of our schools takes responsibility for organising the Saints Parents in Dialogue Breakfast. This year has been the turn of the Girls' College, and I thank our Head of School, Dr Sally James and her team, for your initiative and hard work.

As with last year's breakfast, today's event is shaped by a number of over-arching ideas:

1. Engaging with our fast-changing world of today and tomorrow.
2. Embracing the future.
3. Being on an intentional journey of diversity and transformation, the collective journey of South Africans towards authentic and affirming human relations, grounded in dignity and mutual respect.
4. Articulating and living out values as a Methodist Church School within our South African and global context.
5. Living out our educational mission as outlined in our Statement of Intent and Purpose.
6. Being a thought leader.

Today, we engage with the theme:

Gender Matters: Raising Children in a Non-Binary World

The wide-ranging interest and relevance of this theme is indicated by the fact that present today, in addition to our parents, there are Saints staff members and attendees from a number of schools and organisations across Johannesburg and even beyond the city.

This phrase Gender Matters has been chosen because it highlights that gender matters are plural: there are many aspects, features and issues associated with gender, gender relations, gender awareness, gender bias, gender equity, sexism and sexual identity.

I want to invite you to think about an image.

In our College chapel, there are stained glass windows which are striking in their array of colour and light. The shapes of glass are not uniform – each one is a unique shape and colour. The windows are striking and beautiful because they allow the light to shine through – individually and collectively.

We take this as a metaphor for our educational purpose at St Stithians – we strive to create opportunities for each one of our children, and staff members, to learn, grow and develop in ways that allow the light to shine through their unique individuality.

In all that we do, including this breakfast dialogue, we seek to integrate the educational experiences of St Stithians into a language that expresses our intent. We embrace both tradition and innovation. We are a progressive, future-oriented school, relevant to our present.

The College motto, One and All, speaks directly to the topic of today's dialogue. Each person is affirmed as being unique, an individual. Each person belongs to something bigger, the collectives of All.

Our statement of Saints Character: Know yourself, Be yourself, Make your contribution, also frames today's dialogue, with its focus on identity and self-knowing. The education of authentic selves is core to our mission.

Our Honour Code -- Honour God, Honour Others, Honour Self – inspires our approach to today's topic and gives us purpose.

I conclude with a few thoughts:

The language that we use

Working in an educational institution, we are very aware of the power of words. Words are at the core of learning and teaching.

Words carry meaning, emotion; words represent power relations; words can build and create, they can break down, they can destroy.

Words are shaped by their context, and their meaning, significance and relevance change over time. We need to be sharp readers of words in context.

Today, we will grow in our understanding of gendered words and the views they represent.

We need to reflect on both binary and non-binary thinking

There is a strong human tendency to think in a binary mode – hot/cold, happy/sad, left/right, black/white, men/women, boys/girls.

This binary thinking can create clarity, but it can also reinforce stereotypes and essentialist thinking.

In today's world, we are far more aware of complexity, of a spectrum rather than simple binary opposites. Of holistic, inter-connected ways of thinking and making sense of our world.

This applies to gender and gender relations.

How well do we as individuals and as an institution include a diverse spectrum of identity and human experience in our thinking and practices? How well do we embrace difference, in relation to norms?

Gender Matters and the institutional context of St Stithians

St Stithians began as a boys' primary and secondary school in 1953. In 1995, the girls' schools, primary and secondary, were launched. In 2001, the co-educational Junior Prep began. In 2005, the Thandulwazi Academy was launched, including a co-educational Saturday School which had existed in this format for some years before the Academy was created. In 2011, Kamoka began – its camps are mostly single-sex in nature, although including a small number of co-educational primary school camps.

Gendered identity in the character of our schools is therefore a hallmark of St Stithians, integral to our value proposition. It is from this institutional space that we engage in our Gender Matters conversations.

Gender relations are multi-faceted, and it is our collective responsibility to advance honest and open conversations, to recognise the range of deep emotions, and to affirm one another in this space. Let St Stithians be a place where One and All is reflected in all that we do and be, making a 'world of difference'.

'Gender Matters' have been engaged with amongst our students and staff, in a number of ways. Here is an opportunity for our parents to join the conversation and opportunities for learning and reflection.

Introducing the panel

To assist us in this journey of embracing diversity and transformation, we have a fascinating panel of individuals in our midst this morning. A special warm welcome to you.

The panel discussion will be led and facilitated by Graeme Codrington – a leading thinker about the future and about our contemporary world. We are indeed privileged to have Graeme with us this morning.

Graeme's biography is outlined in the programme booklet, so I will not repeat those details.

I add that Graeme is a parent and a Methodist lay preacher.

In conclusion, a warm welcome, One & All.

Thank you.