Why Proverbs Really Matters

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[0:00] Well, no one likes looking like a fool, do they? Do you? Yeah. No. No. And no doubt the teacher at an education centre who put up this sign on the next slide felt like a fool once they realised what they'd done.

And it could be deliberate humour, though I doubt you'd risk it if you were an education centre. Just the difference is spelt incorrectly. You've got that? Yeah. But more likely they rushed the job and did not check.

And so what they needed was Proverbs 19 verse 2, which on the next slide says, desire without knowledge is not good. How much more will hasty feet miss the way?

And they needed to check. I'll take one of my relatives. When digital cameras first came out, they received one for Christmas, but they were too impatient to listen to their children about how to operate it.

After all, they'd given birth to these children. They can operate a camera. And so they tried to take a photo like this on the next slide, like this lady is doing here. The camera back to front

[1:07] And they looked rather foolish. And what they needed was on the next slide, Proverbs 18 verse 13, which says, to answer before listening. That is folly and shame.

They shouldn't have been so quick to answer. They knew what they were doing. You see, there are moments in life where we act like fools, but no one likes being a fool. Rather, we all want wisdom to live well, don't we?

That's why we go to various consultants and experts who have great wisdom in their field and pay them lots of money to tell them their wisdom. But financial consultants or medical specialists or architects and the like.

In fact, one of the mums from the school that my daughter goes to and my wife Michelle knows is an image consultant. It's a real job. And people pay big money to her for her to shop and buy clothes for them so they look good.

You see, people pay lots of money to consultants to give them wisdom so they won't look like fools but live well. And Proverbs is God's consultant to us, free of charge, I might add, to help us live life truly well in this world.

[2:22] It's God's word of wisdom to help us avoid looking foolish. And that is the first reason why this book of Proverbs really matters. So point one in your outline and verse one to three in your Bibles.

The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel, for gaining wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair.

You see, the book of Proverbs is about giving wisdom to live well, to understand things, to make good choices or have prudent behavior in life, and to also do what is right and just and fair.

Of course, wisdom is different to cleverness. I'm pretty sure you realize this. Perhaps on the next slide, this famous cartoon from the far side illustrates the point. He's clearly gifted, but he's pushing on the door that says pull.

So he's clever but not wise. Or as someone once said, cleverness is knowing that tomato is a fruit and a fruit. But wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad. You see, wisdom is knowledge, insight, understanding or instruction.

[3:41] Any of those words that our reading used today to help us, verse two and three, live well and avoid looking like a fool or worse.

But notice verse one. This wisdom comes to us in Proverbs via God's king, Solomon, son of David. Now, Solomon didn't write all these Proverbs.

Chapters 23 to 24 and 30 to 31 were written by others, and we're told that in the book of Proverbs. But Solomon did write many of them and perhaps even collected those he didn't write.

What's more, he was the epitome of wisdom in the Old Testament, at least before he ignored his own wisdom that God gave him. And so the next slide from our one Kings chapter four, we read this.

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the east and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt.

[4:43] He spoke 3000 Proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. And so because God gave Solomon wisdom as king of Israel, then it means that this book of Proverbs that is attributed to Solomon is part of salvation history.

It's part of God's word to God's people via God's king. And this word gave Israel wisdom to live in the land and enjoy the life God had secured for them.

And it gives us wisdom to live in this world and enjoy the life that God has secured for us in Christ. But this word of God comes to us, as it says in verse one, in Proverbs, hence the name of the book.

Now, I don't know about you, but the book of Proverbs can seem like a random collection of sayings, can't it? And sometimes it's hard to make heads or tails off them. So in this mini series, I want to not only teach you from Proverbs, but also about Proverbs, as Mark said.

So to help you read it for yourselves. I will spend a bit more time, therefore, on point one, thinking about how to read them. And here I want to briefly show you the broad structure of the book, which is on the back of your handout.

[5:59] So if you turn there, now I'm not going to go through all of this. Except to point out that chapters one to nine are like an introduction to the book. So it's a very long introduction.

And verses one to seven are like the preface, the introduction to the introduction, if you like. Now, chapters one to nine are made up of longer poems or speeches that often have consistent themes.

But when we get to chapter 10, we come to the Proverbs proper, which are shorter sayings, each with its own theme. And then in chapter 30, and particularly 31, Proverbs returns to a longer poem.

Now, it's worth noticing that these Proverbs are like this, and particularly that they are usually short, pithy sayings that present truth to live by. And sometimes they do this by using analogy.

In fact, the Hebrew word for proverb comes from the verb to be like or to represent. And so a proverb often uses an aspect of life to represent a truth.

[7:04] It's an analogy. Our own English proverbs do the same as well. So let's see if you can finish this proverb. Too many cooks. Yep, there you go.

Here, the aspect of cooking is used as an analogy to represent a truth that too many bosses mean disaster. Or take the famous Proverbs 6, verse 6 on the next slide.

Here it says, Go to the ant, you sluggard. That's how you have to say sluggard. Sluggard. Consider its ways and be wise. And the following verses show that it's talking about working hard like an ant.

But you see there, it uses the analogy from our world, from the animal kingdom. Now, Proverbs don't always use analogy. Sometimes they're more straightforward. So on the next slide, Proverbs 10, verse 4, says, Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth.

The meaning is pretty straightforward, though the application might be contentious. But because Proverbs sometimes represent truth with analogy, they also call in verse 6 of our passage, parables and riddles.

[8:14] Do you see that in verse 6? Proverbs are equated with parables and riddles. And like parables and riddles, they force us to pause and ponder them before we apply them.

That's why when we come to chapter 10, they seem so random. You know, there's a proverb or two about one topic and then it switches to a proverb or two about a different topic and then it switches again to another topic.

But you see, that's deliberate. Why? Well, so that we don't read too much at a time, but are forced to stop and reflect on what the proverb is talking about.

They're deliberately giving us a bite-sized piece of wisdom so that we can digest it, understand it and rightly apply it.

And so the first trick to reading Proverbs, at least from chapter 10 to 29, when they're very kind of bitsy, is actually not to read too much at a time, but to read one or a few verses that seem to have the same theme and then stop and chew them over for a while, like a rich morsel of steak and extract their juicy wisdom and consider their application.

[9:34] And we need to do this, especially because sometimes one proverb will be more applicable in one situation than another. So, for example, take some of our proverbs, see if you can finish this one.

It's a modern one. Absence makes the heart. Yeah, but then there's the contradictory proverb, out of sight, out of mind.

So which is it? At the moment, my wife is still on holidays in Sydney, so which proverb do I apply? Someone will tell her, so I know exactly which proverb I'm going to apply.

We'll take the next slide, Proverbs 26, verse 4 and 5. Verse 4 says, Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him.

But then the very next verse seems to contradict that. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes. So which is it?

[10:36] Well, it depends on the situation. Sometimes it's not worth answering a fool because it's just too silly a statement, or they just won't listen. And so you'll end up being lowered to their level of argument.

But other times it's serious and they need to be answered. And sometimes it's a combination of both. We need time to think through these proverbs and think about, when would this apply?

So that when a similar situation comes along, we'll actually be able to speak and live wisely, you see. See, the very nature of proverbs requires us to pause and ponder them.

That they're deliberately short and seemingly random, so that we can't read too much, but just read a bit and chew them over. Think about their meaning and how they might apply in life.

Now, for many people, including myself, this can be somewhat frustrating. I like things to be black and white. And so my response to reading proverbs has sometimes been, just tell me straight what to do and I'll do it.

[11:44] Easy. That's why I like God's law, which is more black and white. Do not murder. Okay, got it. But the thing is, life is not always black and white, is it?

The decisions we need to make and pray for guidance about are not always black and white. I mean, if our boss at work is bullying us, our prayer point is not, help me to know if I should murder him or not.

If so, God's law would help in that situation, wouldn't it? The answer is no, just to be clear. Rather, our decision and our prayer points are usually, how do I respond? Do I persevere or do I lodge a complaint?

What do I do? This is the realm of wisdom and real life. And just as God graciously gave his law through the prophet Moses, so he graciously gave his wisdom in proverbs through his king Solomon.

And it complements the law. And these proverbs force us to reflect and think about how they might apply in different situations in the gray parts of life, which is really what real life is.

[12:48] In other words, proverbs really matter because it is God's word to God's people in a real world, which is not always black and white. And it helps us to live well, enjoying the life he's secured for us and not look foolish.

But proverbs also matter because it is for all people. Point two, and we'll move more quickly now. Point two, verse four. He says that proverbs are also for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young.

Let the wise listen and add to their learning and let the discerning get guidance. The word simple here in verse four means naive or gullible, which is why it's connected with the young, because often it's the young who will believe anything.

Isn't it? I heard once about some parents who played a trick on their children. They told their children that they could grow doughnuts and even gave them some doughnut seeds, like on the next slide.

I don't know if you can see it. It says doughnut seeds up there. It's actually just Froot Loops in a bag. And then they encouraged their kid on the next slide to go outside and start to plant them in the pot plant.

[14:05] And then the next day, after the kids got up from bed, they planted some doughnuts. And so the kids thought they could grow doughnuts. The point is, young are often the most gullible or naive.

And so they can be easily misled. And so Proverbs really matters for them to give them wisdom so they won't be easily misled.

But Proverbs matters not just for the young and naive, but also for the more seasoned and wise. Do you see verse five again? It says, let the wise also listen and add to their learning and let the discerning get guidance.

See, Proverbs is also for those who are already wise, those who are already discerning. It says they can add to their learning.

In other words, we never graduate from the school of wisdom. There's always more to learn. In fact, on the next slide, Proverbs 26 verse 12 says, Do you see a person wise in their own eyes?

There is more hope for a fool than for them. You see, anyone who thinks they have nothing left to learn is worse than a fool. That's what the Proverbs is saying. Proverbs really matters for all people, both the simple and the wise.

And so you'll be glad to know that you've not wasted your time coming here tonight. Whether you are simple or wise. I'll let you work out which you are. But thirdly, the book of Proverbs also matters because it trains us in understanding.

Do you see verse six? It says that it's also for understanding Proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. Now, at first glance, this verse doesn't seem to make sense.

It's saying that Proverbs help us to understand Proverbs and riddles. What's it saying here? Well, like anything, the more we practice doing something, the better we become at it

And so the more we read this book of Proverbs, the better we'll become at understanding other Proverbs and riddles and so on. And how to apply them rightly to our life and situations.

[16:24] It's like one of our modern day Proverbs, which says, give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man a fish and you feed him for a life. Also to the book of Proverbs.

It's not only God's word of wisdom to live well in the real world for all people. It also trains us that we might be fed with wisdom for a life. What's more, point four, it teaches us the foundation of all wisdom so that we can truly live well.

Do you see verse seven? The famous verse, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Here is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge, it says.

Not in the sense that we start with fearing God and then forget him. No. But in the sense of it being the first and foundational principle that governs all wisdom.

Without it, we cannot truly know anything, is what Solomon is saying. Oh, sure, we might know the water cycle, which one of our girls learnt at school this year. You know, with evaporation, then condensation, then precipitation.

[17:38] I think they even had a song about it. But we will not know that its aura points to a creator who provides for us. You see, the fear of the Lord is foundational to truly gain wisdom.

So what is the fear of the Lord? Well, in the Bible, the fear of the Lord can refer to two things. First, it can refer to God's word. So it has a content, if you like. So on the next slide, Psalm 19, verses 8 to 10, we read that the commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous. Now, do you notice here how the commands, decrees are equated with fear of the Lord?

In other words, it can refer to God's word. But secondly, and more often, it refers to our attitude towards God, which is not to be one of terror.

After all, we as Christians, more than anyone, know God's love and grace in Christ. But it's to be an attitude of reverent awe, of love and humility, which in turn leads to obedience.

[18:56] So on the next slide, Deuteronomy 5, verse 29, says, well, God's speaking about Israel. Oh, that their hearts, here's the attitude of our hearts, would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands.

Notice there that fearing God has to do with our hearts, and it leads to obedience. But at the bottom of the screen there, it's also equated with love.

Moses continues to say, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and so on. Do you see how fearing God also means loving God?

And what's more, fearing God means humility. So again, on the next slide, Proverbs 22, verse 4, we read, humility is the fear of the Lord. It's pretty straightforward, isn't it?

Perhaps the best summary, well, I think perhaps the best summary of the fear of the Lord is expressed in Isaiah chapter 66 on the next slide.

[19:58] And this is from God's own mouth. He says, this is the one I esteem. He or she who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

Here is humble and reverent all that seeks to obey God. I put simply, the fear of the Lord is really knowing that God is God and you are not.

And this means that true wisdom, therefore, is primarily about right relationship. Yes, verse 2 and 3, it's about understanding for prudent behavior and doing what is right and fair and just, yes.

But if it begins with and is governed by the fear of the Lord, then above all else, wisdom is relational. It's about a life lived in right relationship with God, fearing him such that we humbly treat him as God and not ourselves.

And tremble at his word than the word of others. Above all, this is what it means to be wise and live well in this world.

[21:10] For God created us to live in right relationship with him. And so if we don't do that, no matter how well we're living, no matter how wisely we're living, there'll be always something missing.

You see, we have all sorts of people and places offering us wisdom in this world, wisdom to live well, so they say. And some is more helpful, help wisdom than others.

And so on the next slide is some fortune cookie wisdom. And this one says, marriage lets you annoy one special person for the rest of your life. I heard a yes, but I won't go. Or on the next slide, it says, this is important, life or death.

Make sure you... Not so helpful, is it? But when we visit our consultants, whether they're financial consultants or medical specialists, their wisdom is much more helpful.

And yet, no matter how much helpful wisdom we receive, no matter how much wisdom we can glean from just observing the world and life, it will always be of limited worth when it comes to living well.

[22:20] For there will always be something missing in our life, something foundational. God. It's why New Year's Eve, I think, is getting bigger and bigger.

Seven million dollars on the harbour bridge went up in smoke on New Year's Eve. Because people are looking for things to find joy and the hope of a fresh start in.

Because they don't have God who gives lasting joy and certain hope. It's why people continue striving for success at university or work to find meaning and worth.

Because they don't have God who gives us meaning and worth. You see, God's word in Proverbs really matters because it teaches us the foundation for true wisdom is fearing Him.

It's living in right relationship with Him. For only this gives true wisdom that enables us to live life truly well with joy and meaning and hope.

[23:25] But the fool, verse 7, Well, they despise such wisdom that begins with God. And in doing so, they despise God Himself. And this is particularly foolish because doing so leads to death.

Point five. Now, we don't have time to look at the rest of chapters one to nine in detail. But on the back of your outline, if you turn there for a moment again, I've got the structure of the introduction, which is just chapters one to nine.

And a comment about it. And as you'll see there, I've just written that chapters one to nine designed to motivate the reader to read the rest of Proverbs in chapters 10 to 31.

And I've listed three ways it does this. But there's two main ways. First, by simply telling the reader to listen. So let me show you from a couple of sections.

So grab your Bibles and have a look at verse 8. Just have your outline on the other side. Bibles, verse 8. Here we enter the world of the Father and the Son.

[24:33] And we hear Him say, Listen, my son, to your father's instruction. And do not forsake your mother's teaching. So here, wisdom is often taught in the home.

And hence the setting of the Father and the Son. But notice what the first word of the Father is. Listen. Now, while this Father-son relationship continues to be the context in which Proverbs speaks to us in the introduction, there are other points where wisdom herself speaks and also says, listen.

So look at verse 20. Just come across the page, verse 20, where the NIV has a heading for us, Wisdom's Rebuke. And this is what she says. Out in the open, wisdom calls aloud.

She raises her voice in the public square. On top of the wall, she cries out. At the city gate, she makes her speech. How long will you who are simple love your simple ways?

How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge? Repent at my rebuke. Then I will pour out my thoughts to you and I will make known to you my teachings, she says.

[25:50] Wisdom here is a little less gentle than the Father. But essentially has the same message. Listen to my teaching. And on it goes through chapters 2, 3, 4, all the way to 9.

Listen. That's the first big way the introduction motivates us to keep reading the Proverbs. But the second big way that the chapters motivate us to listen is by telling us the consequences of listening or not.

So come back with me to verse 9. Here we have a positive consequence. If the son listens to the wisdom and teaching, they are a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck, the Father says.

See, to truly listen to wisdom means positively that it will make you attractive. You want to look good? Then listen to Proverbs and get wisdom.

And this is true, is it not? I mean, there is something attractive about a humble and wise person, isn't there? Others look up to them and listen to them and are drawn to them.

[27:01] But a boastful fool is not so attractive. I mean, on the next slide, does this person ooze humility or overconfidence?

On the next slide, Emma. And boastfulness. And does he endear himself to you?

But this garland of grace and wisdom doesn't just make us attractive. It is also a symbol of victory. The garland was a wreath or a crown that victors wore, you see.

And so the idea is that such wisdom will also give you victory in life. It will keep you from being a fool and from listening to the bad advice of others and ultimately from death.

This is the alternative consequence that the father warns the son about. Have a look at verse 10 to 19. He says, My son, if sinful men entice you, do not give in to them.

[28:00] Don't listen to them. If they say, come along with us, let's lie in wait for innocent blood. Let's ambush some harmless soul. Let's swallow them alive like the grave and whole like those who go down to the pit.

And we will get all sorts of valuable things and fill our houses with plunder. Cast our lots with us, they say, and we will share the loot. My son, do not go along with them.

Do not set foot on their paths. For their feet rush into evil and they are swift to shed blood. How useless to spread a net where every bird can see it.

And these men lie in wait for their own blood. They ambush only themselves in the end. And notice verse 19, such are the paths of all who go after ill-gotten gain.

It takes away the life of those who get it. So here we have the rival invitation to the son of the gang, the worldly way.

[29:01] And they entice the son with the promise of easy gain and loot at the expense of others. Of course, we may not be tempted to literally shed blood to get loot.

But we can be tempted to backstab or tear down others to get ahead in life or at work. Or perhaps fudge our tax returns or tell white lies to save face.

But those, verse 19, the path of all who go after unjust gain is death. It takes life away. Or take wisdom's warning at what happens to those who ignore her.

Have a look at verse 24 to 33. But since you refuse to listen when I call, and no one pays attention when I stretch out my hand, since you disregard all my advice and do not accept my rebuke, I in turn will laugh when disaster strikes you.

I will mock when calamity overtakes you. When calamity overtakes you like a storm. When disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind. And when distress and trouble overwhelm you.

[30:14] Then they will call to me, but I will not answer. They will look for me, but will not find me. Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord. Since they would not accept my advice and spurn my rebuke.

They will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes. For the waywardness of the simple will kill them. And the complacency of fools will destroy them.

But whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease without fear of harm. You see, Proverbs really matters because it is a matter of life or death.

Do you see? And this is how the rest of the introduction speaks right up to chapter 9. Of course, it doesn't seem to always ring true, does it? I mean, fools are not always killed and destroyed.

And wise do not always live in safety. Well, come back next week when we think about does Proverbs promise too much. But for now, the final reason Proverbs matters is because it points us to Christ.

[31:23] Point six. You see, Israel did not listen to God's word of wisdom in Proverbs. Indeed, Solomon himself did not listen to it either. So instead of becoming attractive to the nations, they faced death, judgment, exile.

But God promised another king who would also be a son of David and would, on the next slide, from Isaiah chapter 11, possess the spirit of the Lord and the spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord.

And he will delight in the fear of the Lord. Of course, this is David's greatest son, Jesus, the king. And through this king, God continues to give his word of wisdom to us, his people.

In fact, we just celebrated Christmas with the birth of Christ, who was God's word become flesh. And Jesus himself said that he is greater than Solomon.

Indeed, Paul writes that in Christ, they hidden all the treasures of wisdom and understanding. And then he says, Christ crucified is both God's power and God's wisdom on display.

[32:46] For by Christ's death on the cross, God saves all who trust in him. From eternal death to eternal life. In other words, Christ is God's ultimate word of wisdom who brings life.

If we trust in him, if we listen to him, if we build our lives on his words like a wise builder, which we heard in our second reading.

Otherwise, our house will come crashing down in the storm of judgment, just as wisdom herself warned in Proverbs 1. We had to listen to Christ, trust in him and find life.

For he is God's ultimate wisdom. And so for the first question for us tonight is one I often ask each Sunday. Have you put your trust in Christ?

Now, I take it all of you here have, because I doubt you'd be here on a Wednesday evening in January if you didn't. And so for us, then, we are to continue to listen to Christ.

[33:55] To bid our lives on his words like a wise builder. And like Christ, we are to live our lives in reverent fear of God. For this is the beginning of wisdom and living well in this world.

And so can I ask you then, do you fear God? Do you tremble more at his word than the word of the world? For Proverbs tells us that there's no way we can live truly well in this world if we don't fear God.

So do we? I was desperately trying to think of another example other than this one. But this just happened to be the most recent one that I can remember.

There's a guy from our 1030 congregation who works in the city. And this is about the marriage vote, so I'm sorry to drag it up again. But when the vote came up, he said he was voting no.

When his work colleagues asked him, he said he was voting no. And when the vote got through, everyone in his office, he told me, had a big party, big morning tea. But he just simply declined to go. He wasn't rude about it.

[35:05] He was polite. But he just simply declined to go. In fact, he noticed someone else from his work, he didn't go either. And he found out that they were a Christian as well. He didn't know that before. But here is a guy who had every worldly reason to fear what his boss and his colleagues thought of him.

And yet, he feared God more. Here is a person who could have feared the words and arguments of the world, which were very emotive, if you remember them.

But he didn't. He feared God's word more. He trembled more at God's word than the world's and sought to please God more than his colleagues.

It's a big call, isn't it? I know and love people who voted yes. I think we all do. But you see, to live well in this world, says Proverbs, means fearing God.

And secondly, fearing God means continuing to listen to his wisdom in his word. Both his word become flesh, Christ, and his word in the Bible, Proverbs.

[36:14] After all, if this is what God's wisdom has done for us in sending his son to die for us, then why would we ever not continue to listen to his wisdom in Christ or his wisdom in the Bible?

Let me finish with a confession. I remember one time, not long after I started working here at HCD, almost seven years ago, I was leaving the Coles car park down at Tunstall Square.

I think most of you will be familiar with that one. And I was driving out the driveway to turn right on the road to near the Caltech service station.

The kids were yelling and arguing in the back of the car. I was losing my patience. And then I'm on this road, and then out from another car park, there's this car. Now, my nose was in front of this car, but this car was trying to push in and get in front of me.

And I'd lost my patience at this stage, so I just turned to them and went, What are you doing? Only to realize it was a provisioner from HTD. Now, I'm not going to mention who they are.

[37 : 28] In fact, one of them's here tonight, but I'm hoping they're forgotten. But I haven't forgotten. What I needed on the next slide was Proverbs 14, verse 29.

Whoever is patient has great understanding. But the one who is quick-tempered displays folly. You see, Proverbs really matter. For it is God's wisdom for all his people to live well in this real world and avoid looking like a fool.

Me included. All right. You see, Proverbs 14, verse 29. But now I'm looking for everything to sell the paint on this. So many people to pay for a lot of ■fer on this Thank you. So many people to lose weight.

And all wynfs are op. That way, people sprinkle 40 minutes. All Fortunately, everyone that's fine. They're all in recent years, there's great storage lab. I've got the one that's fine. The original Police serve a cesp confidently for everyone. We have a choiceboo for every looking homem to get interested. We look actualkaar to do.

And I've got plenty of aant fall here. I'm not even ■■able to get it. There's a lot of a lot of marrow that records are their students.