

## EDUCATION SUNDAY, 29 January 2006

Some years ago I was asked to talk about Church schools and I recall noting that (in sharp contrast to our Roman Catholic colleagues) the Church of England rarely stated clearly what was the role of the Church school and that this ought to be an issue for debate for the whole community

Twenty years ago the distinctive nature of many Church schools wasn't clear. There was a confusion about how the school should serve the community and some saw the Anglican ethos of the school as creating a separateness from other schools and their communities. Some argued that Church schools were not only exclusive but excluding.



The picture today is very different. In 2001 the Church published a review of Church schools entitled *'The Way Ahead: Church of England Schools in the New Millennium'* (*The Dearing Report*). Here at last was clarity. It recognised that *'Church schools stand at the centre of the Church's mission to the nation'* and that schools are the Church's main opportunity to serve young people. They are a core activity for the Church and not a rather inconvenient bolt-on.

At this point, it's probably worth recalling that nationally 25% of all primary schools are Church of England schools and almost one in five of all primary children are in Church schools. The picture at secondary level is different: 6% of all secondary schools are Church of England and just over 5% of all secondary students attend a C of E school. And to relate that to the Diocese of London:

There are       133 primary schools  
                  15 secondary schools  
                  50, 000 pupils  
                  4500 staff  
                  2500 governors

These are significant figures which show that the Church has an important influence on education in the 18 boroughs in Greater London north of the Thames.

What is evident in London and elsewhere is that there are relatively few secondary C of E places for children currently in Church primary schools. In the London Diocese a new secondary school is due for opening in 2007 and two more are in the planning stage. These will go some way to meeting a growing demand.

Because of this discrepancy between primary and secondary places there has been a view in the past that the Church is really only involved the education of children up to the age of 11 – reflecting a view perhaps that exposure to a little Christianity doesn't do any positive harm to younger children as long as they don't take it too seriously when they get older!

I mentioned earlier that Church schools (and faith schools in general) now have a much higher profile. Since 1997 successive Secretaries of State have actively supported the development of faith schools. Of course, we here today have a particular interest in Church of England schools but it's worth noting that the Church of England nationally supports the development of other world faith schools. – you'll be aware of Muslim and Sikh schools in adjoining boroughs and the proposed Sikh school in Norwood Green. One of the effects that my colleagues and myself have noticed since faith schools assumed a

greater prominence in national debates is that a greater sense of partnership has developed between the Diocese and the local authorities. This can only have a positive effect for the Church schools in London.

While survey after survey indicates the popularity of Church schools, there is no lack of critics. Church schools are seen as divisive, elitist, outmoded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, anachronistic... the list goes on. However, this has brought into sharp focus the discussion about the role of the Church school. Is it there for the children of Anglicans or is it there to serve the community?

The trust deeds of many of our schools date from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (there are some whose origin is as old as Edward Betham) and these speak of their purpose being to educate the children of the parish, village or town (the more quirky refer to providing servants for the middle classes or boys for the merchant marine...). In other words, they were established to educate children of the local community. The original proposers of those schools could never have envisaged that parents would be travelling long distances in crowded traffic in 4 X 4s...

As the Bishop of Oxford noted last week<sup>1</sup>, the Church is 'deeply committed to the educational life of this country, not in a narrow sense of making good members of the Church of England but on the basis of a clear and strong Christian faith, wanting to make a contribution to the educational development of children in the community as a whole. It is fundamental to the Church of England's philosophy on education that we are there to serve the community as a whole'.

As with the parish church, the school was set up to serve the local community. Of course, there is real tension when Church schools are oversubscribed and the admission criteria of many schools acknowledge this by offering a percentage of places to pupils from other world faiths. Edward Betham is a very good example of a school that is true to its founder's aims yet is open and welcoming to families from other world faiths. I know from my own experience as a head of a Church school that families from other faiths seek places in Church schools because they want their children to be in schools where God is acknowledged. Church schools are committed to supporting the Government's inclusion agenda – they welcome families from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences and reflect the Church's commitment to '*those who have least in life*'. In the diocese we set up a school-home liaison project to support children who are in challenging circumstances and who are finding school difficult. Last week we were talking to the Children's Society about whether we could collaborate on supporting vulnerable children and those from marginalised families

As Rowan Williams put it, '*We want our children to grow and learn in such a way that their intellectual and emotional development doesn't appear to be going on in a quite different world from that of their faith community. We want them to feel that the belief of this community is a natural part of a full human life*'<sup>2</sup>.

With the constant and very public concern with 'standards' (league tables, SATs, GCSEs, etc) there is a temptation to judge children and adults on academic standards - (and that's assuming that we could get some agreement in that area!) - and to forget that most important of Christian insights: that we are to love people not for their qualities but for their own sakes: this doesn't mean that we don't mind what they do – that would be indifference, not love. A school that claims a Christian foundation and does not express this truth when dealing with its members will see the failure of its Christian witness.

One of our previous Board chairmen, Tim Raphael, summed it up rather neatly: '*A Christian school may be one which proclaims the loving God as much in the teaching of maths as in the teaching of RE. Faith, hope and love are not taught directly but are picked up "in the space between the bars". The Church is most in communication when least self conscious. The Gospel is not only what is said but how it is said*'<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> House of Lords 19 January 2006 – Hansard Col.781-784

<sup>2</sup> Presidential address to the Governing Body of the Church in Wales, Lampeter, 10 April 2002

<sup>3</sup> Tim Raphael – The Role of the Church School in a Multifaith City – London Diocesan Board for Schools, January 1991

The world of education is increasingly complex for parents, pupils, teachers and governors. We have a multiplicity of types of school – set to increase if the recent White Paper becomes reality – choice is the pre-eminent theme (*see Rowan Williams 2000 for a discussion of this<sup>4</sup>*) – and a recent national newspaper headline read ‘*If we treat schools like market stalls we will end up with vegetables*’ – There seems no immediate solution to the debate between academic and vocational education. However, there’s a realisation that we need to have a more creative approach to learning in schools and that a mechanistic approach to learning won’t produce citizens of the future who are flexible, adaptable and prepared for several career changes in a working lifetime. And so the initiatives continue...

Central to the success of any school is the leadership of the headteacher and this is a hugely demanding role – and recruitment of good heads doesn’t become any easier. One of the justifiable complaints of heads is that they are swamped by paper, whether in tangible or e-mail form. It’s worth remembering that more doesn’t always mean better. It’s worth reflecting on the length and significance of some statements:

- The Lord’s Prayer – 56 words
- The Ten Commandments – 200 words
- American Declaration of Independence – 300 words
- The European Commission Declaration on Export of Duck Eggs – 26,000 words!

In the Church school community all that it aspires to do is underpinned by Gospel values – these should support and challenge teachers, pupils, parents and governors. There’s an increasing awareness that spirituality has a vital role to play in all schools – and that education can’t be measured solely by league tables and qualifications – there’s a lot of work now on the notion of spiritual intelligence and one of the leading writers on school leadership talks of no school being able to be judged as effective unless it has a clear sense of moral purpose.

The post-Dearing Church school expects those who lead it to have a commitment to a ‘specific pattern of shared life and work dependent on a religious conviction about human nature’. There’ll be visible signs of this commitment and a willingness to explain it. This isn’t indoctrination but offers an opportunity for young people to see what a community with these convictions looks like and to experience some of the results – this should encourage the young to consider what they might want to defend for ‘the common life, loyalty and openness’.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, may I share with you something that written about schools almost 70 years ago but which, I think, speaks to us today:

*‘I may reach God through Keats, you by Beethoven, and a third through Einstein. Should not education to the Christian mean just this enlarging and cultivating the country of God; and the subjects on any school timetable be thought of as avenues to an increasingly fuller life on God... This may seem a fantastically idealised view of what happens in a school, especially in these days of examinations, but is there any other open to the religiously-minded teacher? Is the commercial side of school and college life, marks, which is so terribly dominating nowadays, to be allowed to the exchange of intellectual wares for examination results, so many facts and opinions for so many weaken the allegiance of the young to knowledge and beauty as bringers of God to mortal men? No examination has been devised the passing of which will guarantee wisdom or culture. For these are slow- growing breeds, matters of character as well as of intellect and sentiment, the outcome of long exposure to the influences of truth and beauty’<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams (2000) – Lost Icons – Reflections on Cultural Bereavement - London, T & T Clark (*see especially Chapter 1, ‘Childhood and Choice’*)

<sup>5</sup> Rowan Williams – Presidential address to the Governing Body of the Church in Wales, Lampeter, 10 April 2002

<sup>6</sup> Caroline C. Graveson (1937) cited in Christian faith and practice in the experience of the Society of Friends – London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (1960)