Models of Christian education

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In early 21st century Australia, proponents of Christian faith are in an *Acts* (Acts 17:6,22 NIV) situation: we contend amidst the smorgasbord of multiple faiths and designer spiritualities, where any sense that Christian faith is privileged by culture, history or exclusive truth claims, is rapidly eroding. In this multi-faith, pluralistic and the increasingly secular environment, we are ironically surrounded, like Paul in ancient Athens, with many Gods, mostly of a secular nature. The Christian church needs to discover effective ways to communicate the unchanging truth of the Gospel into a society which is undergoing rapid change in its belief systems, methods of communication and modes of learning, and amidst a cacophony of messages and sounds which trumpet different world views.

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The enormity of change within society, and the implications of these changes for sharing Christian faith, have dawned slowly on some segments of the Christian Church. Many have been slow to appreciate the evaporation of a Christian consensus in our land, and indeed reluctant to accept the end of Christendom. Attempts to reach the bulk of our population through church-centred activities are not working, for the very good reason that the majority are at best very intermittent attendees of any church activities. However, the youth of the land, between the ages of 5 and 18, although they rarely attend church, mostly do attend school. The ministry of Christian faith within schools is highly strategic in that it provides access to all Australians in the formative years of life. This opportunity occurs through government schools using whatever opportunity exists for Special Religious Education (variable between states), Christian Chaplains within schools and teachers who are themselves Christians. In Anglican schools the opportunity exists through Chapel Services, Christian Studies classes and the ministry of Christian teachers. All these opportunities, away from the physical domains of churches, are analogous to the Apostle Paul contending for faith in the market place, both because schools exist as constructs within the secular world, but also because schools represent the market place of educational and philosophical ideas.

How the Christian church in general might best maximise the opportunity of faith nurturing through schools, is an issue that has received too little thought in the Australian context. The lack of analysis is problematic, given that in many respects the access of faith in schools to succeeding generations of young people, represents the Christian churches' best opportunity to minister to broad masses of Australians.

In the Anglican schools of more traditional persuasion, Christian faith has been manifested mostly in liturgies and catechisms. Researchers such as Harkness (2002) have demonstrated that such approaches are unlikely to resonate with today's youth, or lead to deep learning. Indeed, catechised responses do not necessarily indicate actual belief.

Strategising

It is a mistake to think that the presence, even a preponderance, of Christian teachers will of itself lead to purposeful Christian activities in schools. It is also inadequate to leave thinking about Christian education to the Chaplain alone, no matter how excellent that person may be. Schools must plan their Christian goals and the implementation of those goals. They must avoid the Chaplain being isolated and marginalised. To this end the Christian Principal must provide leadership, thereby deploying positional authority, and modelling the importance of faith in the life of the School. To do less is to risk the gradual debasement of the primacy of Christian faith within the ethos of the School. Without strategic thinking, Anglican Schools can easily decline to a position where faith is little more than tokenistic. This is what Macnaught (1995) found in his Churchill Fellowship funded investigation of church based schools in Britain and Europe. Indeed, Macnaught found that while giving formal adherence to a Christian position, the real paradigm through which such schools operated, was the paradigm of the market. In such schools he found:

> the spiritual is reduced to the conventional sentiments of civic religion promoting only values such as self-control and respect for property—the values that might domesticate the feral young and persuade them to submit to the invisible hand of the rational economic order. (p. 9)

Young people these days are subject to far more stimuli than has been the case with any previous generation. They are bombarded by the messages of advertising, the mass media and the entertainment industry. Amidst these many voices, it would be unrealistic, if not naive, to expect that very limited Christian input would be decisive in shaping their thinking. For this reason it is important to maximise the scope of Christian influence within the school. Such influence should therefore extend beyond the very small proportion of the school's contact time with students represented by formal Chapel and Christian studies classes in Anglican or other denomination schools, or the Special Religious Education ('Scripture') offered in government schools in some Australian states.

Ideally, Christian thinking may be advanced by large bodies of the teaching staff whose Christian presuppositions shape the world views which are discussed in their classes. Presumably a Christian teacher of Economics will critique unfettered capitalism, with the environmental degradation and exploitative Third World Labour policies that have been its correlates. A Christian teacher of Economics will want to temper unbridled capitalism with notions of Christian social justice and stewardship of God's creation. Such broad thinking is essential in painting a broad canvas of Christian beliefs to youth largely two or three generations removed from the church, and therefore lacking broad Christian conceptual understanding.

It is also important for Christian faith to exist beyond the level of ideas. It must be 'actioned' in terms of quality pastoral care, exercised by Christian staff to all students. It should be manifested in programs of service to the community, emanating from a Christian ethic. Such visible examples of Christian love can be winsome in commending the Gospel.

Yet, it is necessary to assert that Christian schooling is more than good pastoral care; it has a cognitive domain. Pastoral care as the totality of Christian education is a reductionist position which fails to address the full scope of Christian faith. If Anglican schools, or the work of Christian teachers in classrooms of schools in other sectors, is to be deeply influential, it needs to affect the fundamental thinking of students. In the words of the Apostle Paul, we want our students to "not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of [your] mind" (Romans 12:2).

As they think through the prism of the school's formal curriculum, we want them to think holistically within a Christian truth framework about "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy" (Philippians 4:8).

If students, with the help of teachers, can mediate their understanding of the world through a theology of Creation, Fall, Redemption and the whole counsel of God's dealing with humanity, they will have a sound and comprehensive paradigm within which to categorise and assimilate their learning. This will, in effect, enable them to "demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and…take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Such attempts to extend the range of Christian penetration within the School will help move faith towards what Cooling (1997) sees as the primary culture of the School, that is, faith is mainstreamed rather than seen as an oddity or a cultural misfit within the school's context. It is certainly a great irony where adherence to Christian faith is seen as culturally aberrant in an Anglican School.

Curriculum

Where schools have the opportunity to do so (and this opportunity certainly exists in Anglican Schools) they need to think carefully about the components of Christian curriculum choosing to pause and ask, "What will be taught in Junior School Devotions and Chapel, and in and through high school Christian Studies classes?" It will not be adequate to be piecemeal, lest individual teachers, albeit with the best of intentions, repeat an endless cycle of the most sparkling adventures from the Old Testament: Daniel in the lion's den, David and Goliath, Samson pulling down the temple, etc. Such cherry-picking of Bible stories runs the risk of building no theological scaffold and no development over time. Hence schools need to sequence their curriculum and attempt to integrate the message of Chapel with other in-class Christian teaching. Mindful of the fact that so many students will come from homes where there is no familiarity with Christian ideas, schools will need to give some attention to what Cooling (1994a) describes as 'Concept Cracking'. By this he means literally breaking open new conceptual ideas by building a bridge from the known to the unknown. This will be very important if the Christian message is to take root, as evangelistic preaching will resonate best with students if it is firmly grounded in a prior context of solid evangelical teaching.

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Pedagogy

The question of what modes of teaching practice will be the best vehicle for Christian teaching is one that needs considerable exploration. However,

prior questions concern the nature of the context of schools and of the teaching relationship between staff and students. In the past zealous Christian staff within schools, have sometimes regarded the school's setting as little more than a platform for administration of a strong Christian message. Schools however are not churches, with the liberty of teaching from a single vantage point. They are increasingly being required to acknowledge the contestability of ideas. In short, a school's instructional processes must not smack of indoctrination but must be entirely educative, that is they must allow students space to think, and indeed encourage critical thinking. The dichotomy between indoctrination and education has been well explored by Thiessen (1993). In this society, any attempt to indoctrinate will elicit strong opposition. Moreover, indoctrination is unfaithful to the educational charter of schools, that is, recognition of the rights of young people as persons, who are able and entitled to think for themselves. Attempts to indoctrinate pose ethical dilemmas in terms of the possible abuse of the power gap between teacher and student. Staff who are inclined to badger students into adherence to Christian faith need to be advised that such attempts are counter-productive. By building up a bank of hostility, all they may succeed in doing is, in effect, inoculate students against faith adoption (Collier & Dowson, 2007). What teaching and learning processes then, are more effective and desirable?

> ***Interactive pedagogy where students discuss and explore issues will need to be added to a transitional mode. Modelling of faith by respected young adults will also be highly influential.***

Historically, Christian education has tended to operate through a transmission model, that is, where the teacher as authority figure has transmitted in narrative style the doctrines and ethics of Christian faith to students. Research (Collier & Dowson, 2008) suggests that such pedagogy is ineffective with current generations of young people. Seminal research in the Australian context by Astill (1998) has shown graphically that Christian staff in government and Anglican schools, are remarkably unsuccessful in transmitting a Christian values framework to young people, unless that framework first emanates from the home. Something more than transmission will be needed to resonate with student thinking. Interactive pedagogy where students discuss and explore issues will need to be added to a transitional mode. Modelling of faith by respected young adults will also be highly influential.

Another perennial debate within Christian Schools needs to be acknowledged. This debate is best termed the 'nurture Vs exposure' argument. That is, to what extent should the content and methodology within Anglican Schools expose students to the world as it actually is, with all its fragility and indeed horror, and to what extent should it protect students from these realities in order to nurture them? This argument has been well canvassed by Andersen (1983) whose analysis depicts a metaphorical seesaw, where the balance between nurture and exposure tips more toward the latter as a student matures. Even in this case, the exposure is within a nurturing structure, which critiques reality from the stand point of a Christian world view. There are some within the Christian schooling movement, although not commonly found in Anglican Schools, who tend to argue for only very limited exposure to the harsh realities of the world. The question that such proponents of protectionism need to answer is, how they will equip school graduates for entry to the world, post schooling, in order to have coping and critiquing skills.

Anglican School pedagogy ought to grapple with a concept which originated with the English philosopher of education Hull, that has been extrapolated by Cooling (1994b), who argues that teenagers almost invariably go through a stage of 'bafflement'. In this stage they have trouble relating what they know about faith to their growing understanding of the world itself, particularly as it is compromised by the problems of pain and evil. A pedagogy which closes down discussion by glib and formulaic answers, may very well lead to a faith cessation or to a retreat into fundamentalism, where the real world is kept at bay by an ideological enclosure. Cooling argues that good pedagogy will give students space to wrestle with such problems within a nurturing structure (1994b, p. 11).

Staff development

One of the impediments to generating comprehensive Christian education in schools is that teachers are the products of secular universities and in general are not familiar with attempting to relate faith considerations to their teaching. A staff development program therefore needs to consider the ongoing support of staff as they grapple with what it means to be a Christian educator. Few Christian teachers, whether in government or Anglican schools, have read within the corpus of quality literature in the domain of Christian education. Many are dualistic. They form a false distinction between what is sacred, that is 'church', reading the Bible, praying and other forms of church and para-church Christian ministry, and the rest of functioning in God's world, which they see as a secular domain. Staff need assistance to integrate their thinking such that they live all of life in the presence of God and in active service of Him.

For some, where opportunity offers, this will necessitate the school, or at least those who

can be deployed by the school because they are theologically apt, assisting staff in the formation of their biblical understanding.

Articulation

There is a natural end to the ministry of schools with their students, the end point of graduation. In their care for their spiritual journey of young people, schools ought to attempt to enfold them into other sustaining Christian contexts, including local churches, tertiary Christian groups on campuses and Christian youth movements. Conscious attempts to form networks with such organisations can be important strategies in 'passing the baton', particularly during the senior years of secondary education. Youth workers and ministers from local churches can be invited to speak at the school, perhaps for Chapel, and to advertise church activities throughout the school. Staff workers from the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students (AFES), the umbrella group for Evangelical Christian movements in universities, and state branches of Scripture Union can usefully be invited into school, in the hope that sustaining links will be formed.

Conclusion

In an age where youth have largely forsaken churches, schools represent a strategic opportunity for Christian ministry. A comprehensive penetration of faith through the curriculum and life of the School will prove much more influential than relegation of faith matters to Chapel and Christian education classes alone. A scaffolding curriculum will be far more formative than a piecemeal approach.

Didactic transmission of the content of Christian faith is unlikely to resonate weil with current youth. A more interactive and engaging manner is likely to achieve better student commitment than resort simply to narrative teaching styles. Schools will do well to attempt to articulate students into sustaining faith communities, and support their staff in exploring viable models of Christian education. TEACH

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