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Teaching scripture in public high schools

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Key words: Religious education, public schools, scripture, ministry

What is SRE?

Special Religious Education is a ‘period allowance’ for religious education in public high schools. It is not only for *Christian* education, but also for other religious persuasions.

I love *The Message* translation of Ephesians 2:20, and its message for those accepting the role portrayed.

God is building a home. He’s using us all – irrespective of how we got here – in what He is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now He’s using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day.

The verse emphasises the need for teamwork and for each of us to play our part because we each *do* have a part to play. The prophets of old have done their part and we are invited to build on their contribution. Christians in the past ‘stood their ground’ and petitioned that Scripture continue to ‘have a place’ in schools. This led to government legislation that permitted one period each week to be allocated to Special Religious Education in public schools for all religious persuasions. In public high schools, this was not taken advantage of for many years, possibly due to a lack of resources and difficulty in finding those willing and skilled to teach high school students. In many areas Christian churches were not even aware that this entry entitlement into high schools existed.

This situation, however, is now changing and high school Scripture teaching is becoming the norm in many schools throughout the state of NSW. Its format may vary from school to school, but many students are benefiting from receiving Christian instruction in public schools from SRE teachers on a regular basis—every week or second week. Some schools operate with students going to Scripture classes every week for a term, then change over classes to allow students in other Year Groups to attend in the second term.

“If it were not for Scripture teaching in public schools many would never hear the Gospel message”

The efforts and commitment of those Christians ‘gone before’ are as evident as in the days of the apostle Paul, when he declared: “According to the grace of God, which was given to me, as a wise master builder, I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it “ (1 Corinthians 3:10, NKJV). The openings available to us today are a result of our predecessors’ hard work and it is exciting to see the Church making great use of a very unique opportunity. Indeed, we live in a fortunate country. It is one of a few where Christians are freely able to teach the Bible in our public schools. Let’s continue to make the best use of the existing window of opportunity to teach the Gospel to students. Our heartfelt response should be: “Father we praise you and thank you for this great opportunity.”

Why SRE?

In Matthew 28:19-20 (The Amplified Bible) Jesus tells us:

Go then and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded you, and behold, I am with you all the days, to the close and consummation of the age.

We are commanded to go and share the Good News with all nations, including our own. So we bring the Good News of Jesus to public high schools and teach the students. What I love about Scripture teaching is that God promises to be with me (as He is in all aspects of life). We do not go alone; He goes with us.

SRE efforts in public schools have been pioneer work. In bringing the Gospel message into those places where Jesus has not been known or worshipped, my personal ‘assurance’ text has been: “Those who were never told of Him—they’ll see Him! Those who’ve never heard of Him—they’ll get the message” (Romans 15:20; *The Message*).

There is a great mission field on our own doorsteps. Many students have never heard the Good News of Jesus. If it were not for Scripture teaching in public schools (both primary and high schools) many would never hear the Gospel message. Many students

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no longer attend Church or Sunday Schools. They no longer come to us, so we go to them. This gives students the chance to consider the truth of God's Word, which they may not have previously heard. But now they have a choice. I tell my classes that they are all welcome, with their belief or unbelief; to listen and hear God's Word, and then to make up their own minds about what they believe. It's my passion to introduce them to what the Bible *really* says.

Seed sowing

There are times when we wonder how effective our efforts are. Is it worth it? Am I making a difference? Am I the one to do this? Could someone represent you better, Lord? I keep in mind: It is God's work, *His* work, not our work, but what a privilege to be used by Him to teach His Word to these school students. Without Him we can do nothing, as the apostle Paul reminds us: "It's not the one who plants or the one who waters who is at the centre of this process, but God who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6, *The Message*). It is the Holy Spirit that draws all people to Himself. It is our task to be faithful—faithfully preparing and presenting the Gospel to our students, in the best way we know.

We do not always see the results we would like to see. We may never see the results of the seeds that have been sown, for we do not know the hearts of the students. We can't see behind the tough masks that some wear; hiding behind rebellion, apathy, or bravado. It is often in the hearts of the most unlikely students that God is doing a surprising work. We just do not always see.

As SRE teachers we frequently water seeds sown by those who have 'gone before us' (in primary schools); a process familiar to Paul in the early New Testament Church: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase" (1 Corinthians 3:6, NKJ). There is also opportunity to plant new seeds; and long after high school more seeds continue to be sown by friends, family and strangers. Sometimes another will see the harvest; there will be a harvest. The Word of God is truth and it will produce fruit; it will not be a waste of time (Isaiah 55:11, KJV).

Scripture at Morisset High School (MHS)

At MHS, students attend Scripture lessons each fortnight for 1 hour. Students have the opportunity to opt out if they (with their parents' permission) wish to do so. Currently Scripture is offered to all Year 7 & 8 students (272 students), with 34 students choosing to opt out; so a total of 238 students (87.5%) attend Scripture classes at MHS each fortnight. Throughout the year their Scripture curriculum covers the following themes: Identity (Who are you to God?

Who is God?); Relationships (Love, How to treat others, Dealing with conflict); Choices (Free will, Consequences); Introduction to the Bible (Bible history, How to find verses); Who is Jesus? (His life, Why he died, What it means to you).

I must admit that sometimes I wonder if it's all worthwhile, for some students are so antagonistic to anything to do with God and the prophet Ezekiel's description, in a different context, seems apt:

And the children are impudent and hard of heart. I send you to them and you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord God. And they, whether they will hear or refuse to hear—for they are a rebellious house—yet shall they know and realise that there has been a prophet among them. And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, neither be afraid of their words; though briars and thorns are all around you and you dwell and sit among scorpions, be not afraid of their words nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. And you shall speak my words to them whether they hear or refuse to hear (Ezekiel 2:4-7, *The Amplified Bible*).

So I ponder, is this a good use of time?

Yet amongst this, there will be an experience of hope, as students listen intently to a story, ask a really great question and then wait for and listen to the answer. No class is the same; and each class can be so different from one week to the next. All I know is that it is a wonderful opportunity. It is not for me to decide which student is open to God, for the Holy Spirit is the One that draws all people to Himself. Often I just pray silently, "We love you Lord, we worship you. Let us tell them of your goodness."

But hope remains

Christ loves these students—who do not know Him, who do not care about Him and who mock Him. He loves them despite their antagonism and anger and rebellion. He loves them so much that Christ died for them. How do we know of that love and hope? Because he assures us: "But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8, ESV); and again, "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13, NASB). So let us show them how much He loves them. Let us tell them of the love of Jesus.

God does not give up on us easily. God's Word speaks clearly on this matter:

A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig

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tree and find none. Cut it down, why does it use up the ground?' But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down' (Luke 13:6-9, NKJV).

He did not give up on me personally. He is forever patient and persistent with us. He gives us many opportunities to come to Him. Not giving up, he continues to draw us. Even the hardest of hearts can be softened by God, for He is the God of the impossible.

I recall a particular Year 7 student who was often most provocative and resistant to the very existence and goodness of God. Now in Year 9, he is reading his Bible. "I believe it now, Miss."

Another student, in Year 8, who had often seemed uninterested and almost asleep during Year 7 Scripture classes, was found retelling a story that I had shared the previous year with another student. He had actually been listening!

Some students have been asking for prayer. One student called out (and I believe it was in sincerity) in front of the whole Year 8 class: "My knee doesn't hurt now, Miss; after you prayed for it." Yes, praise be to God; He is doing a work through this ministry.

GenR8

If you are interested in the ministry of teaching Scripture in high schools or in Chaplaincy, look into the work of organisations such as GenR8. They employ many teachers and chaplains and advertise positions on their website: www.genR8.org.au. They are also responsible for working with local churches to develop committees and for liaising with school principals to set up Scripture classes in their schools. GenR8 has extensive experience and

is a great asset for your church if it wants to extend ministry into its area but is unsure about how to start.

Testimonies

Few things can be more exciting for me than personal testimonies. The two that are given below tell of adults recounting the long-term impact of adolescent and childhood spiritual experiences.

Testimony 1

My teacher had such confidence in the love that God had for her. I was a difficult student at high school and very rebellious, but I remember thinking that if God could love her he could love anybody (I wasn't very nice). That thought stayed with me. I knew that God could love even me, though it took some years to take hold.

Testimony 2

Sunday school—I did not go all that often—only now and then. But I know what I learnt there has kept me aware of God and prepared the 'soil of my heart' to accept Jesus later, in my high school years. I asked God which people were significant to my salvation. He brought to mind my Sunday school teacher (though I can't remember her name) and the many prayers of my godparents.

To these testimonies I want to add my own, particularly in relation to the teaching of Scripture in public high schools: "Lord, I give you what I have and ask you to take it and use it for your glory." **TEACH**

Endnote

¹ Besides teaching Scripture classes in high school, Kim Watts teaches Maths and Science as a casual and relief teacher.

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