

## **Go and Make Disciples: Education as Christian Mission**

**AASN Conference: Perth, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2008**

### **Shaping the Future**

My current post involves me in a lot of speaking engagements. One of the things that I am often asked is to provide a biography so that those coming to an event where I am speaking know something about the person they are coming to hear. I find these difficult to write, because the most important thing I want to say is not really what professional audiences regard as relevant: I'm a granddad!

One of the reasons why being a granddad is important to me is because it personalises the future. There are significant people in my life for whom the future is still open. I can dream dreams on their behalf. I can have great hopes for what they might become, for the difference that they might make to the world. And I have the privilege of contributing significantly to the shaping of their future.

One of the great things about being a teacher is that it's like being a granddad. The *Times Educational Supplement*, the weekly "must read" for educators in Britain, always carries a feature where a well-known personality reflects on a teacher who had an impact on them. What amazes me is just how many people can clearly specify a teacher whose professionalism and humanity made a significant difference to their future. For me it was Tim Lawrence. No doubt you can name names too.

Shaping people's futures is one of the huge privileges of teaching. And this is even more so if you are a school leader, because the decisions that you make about the nature of the education in your school will shape certainly hundreds, probably thousands, of people's futures.

For a moment, I want you to visualise one pupil that you know. Visualise that pupil as she or he is today. Now let's move into their future. Imagine your *pupil-of-the-future* without their school uniform. Age their face a bit – go to twenty, thirty, forty. Now dream the dream. How do you hope that the education that you are providing will have shaped your *pupil-of-the-future*? What sort of person will they be? What contribution will they be making in the world of their day? What difference will they make to people's lives? Can you sum up your aspirations in a phrase, or perhaps even one word?

### **Aspirations for Education**

Of course teachers' aspirations for their pupils are significantly constrained by those who regulate them, particularly government. In Britain there is an emerging tension in this respect. On the one hand politicians are heavily influenced by an economic agenda, which usually gets translated into a concern for "raising standards". This approach is rooted in anxieties about Britain's international performance; its focus is the need to generate a skilled workforce to ensure continuing economic growth in a rapidly changing and fiercely competitive world. The result has been a huge emphasis on measuring standards and tracking progress, with high-profile league tables of schools' results being published. In this case, the government's aspiration is to produce high-performing citizens who contribute to the economic success of Britain.

In many ways this emphasis has benefited pupils hugely and has, thankfully, made it unacceptable for pupils to languish in poorly performing schools. But like all good things taken to excess, the impact has also been negative. For example, a major review of primary education in Britain conducted by the University of Cambridge<sup>1</sup> has revealed unacceptable levels of anxiety in schoolchildren. One contributory factor is concern about tests, which is hardly surprising in a culture where “a headteacher's job is only as secure as the last set of results” (to quote the leader of the main headteachers' association)<sup>2</sup>. Pupils have an uncanny ability to sense the anxieties of their teachers.

On the other hand, the second strand of governmental aspiration is encapsulated in the high-profile initiative called *Every Child Matters*<sup>3</sup> (ECM). ECM was the government's response to the horrific death of eight-year old Victoria Climbié, tortured and then murdered by her aunt and partner in 2000. This tragic event highlighted the failure of various child-care agencies to take a holistic view of any given child's life experience. ECM is now top priority for those working with children and young people and draws together the work of schools, social services, health care, the police and voluntary agencies in a unified approach to child well-being. Schools are routinely inspected against their success in delivering the five ECM outcomes. The continuing importance of ECM is underlined by the UNICEF report<sup>4</sup> published in 2007 which placed Britain at the bottom of 21 developed countries in relation to child well-being.

What this discussion reveals is a tension in the British government's aspirations for the children and young people of the nation. On the one hand is the concern about their future economic contribution reflected in the use of terms like “excellence, standards and success”. On the other hand is the holistic concern that they should develop as human beings expressed in the use of such terms as “well-being, flourishing and happiness”. It is an interesting question as to which is the real priority.

I wonder whether you have found this tension present in your own envisioning of a desired future for your pupils? The other day I was in a sauna at our local leisure centre. I don't know what Australian saunas are like, but the English still haven't worked out the social conventions for sitting clothed only in swimming costumes with complete strangers in a small room whilst you sweat. My natural inclination is to use the “London Underground” approach; silence, avoid all eye contact and ignore the unnatural physical proximity! Anyway the other person in the sauna, a man in his thirties, treated it more like a cocktail party and started chatting. He talked about his family, and particularly about his concerns for the future of his two young children. How were they ever going to afford to buy a house? What about their pension, not to mention student debts? Although he was a man who clearly cared about the well-being and happiness of his children, the first thing he talks to a stranger like me about is their economic prospects. In rich countries it seems we are possessed by anxiety about the economic future.

I suggest there is a real challenge here for those of us leading and working in Anglican schools in rich countries. Allow me to take you back to the exercise near the start of my lecture where I asked you to visualize a *pupil-of-the-future*? Was the word or phrase

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.primaryreview.org.uk> for further information

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *Times Educational Supplement* ???

<sup>3</sup> See [www.ecm.gov.uk](http://www.ecm.gov.uk) for further information.

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF, An overview of child well-being in rich countries, 2007. (See [http://www.unicef-irc.org/presscentre/presskit/reportcard7/rc7\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unicef-irc.org/presscentre/presskit/reportcard7/rc7_eng.pdf))

that summed up your aspiration more akin to the success/standards model than the well-being/flourishing model? As teachers who are we really proud of? The pupils who succeed in their exams and sports or the ones who successfully build positive relationships? Of course this is a totally false dichotomy, but it is easy for schools to celebrate the one because that is what matters in society at large, but not to prioritize the other that much. Pupils always pick-up the real priority.

### **What then of Anglican Aspirations?**

What aspirations then should Anglican schools have for their pupils? Do they have something distinctive to offer? What does the ideal *pupil-of-the-future* emerging from an Anglican education look like? In answering this I will draw on two recent documents published by the Church of England.

The most recent official statement of Church of England aspiration for its schools was in *the Way Ahead* report<sup>5</sup> published at the start of the millennium. It built on General Synod's resolution from 1998 that "Church schools stand at the centre of the Church's mission to the nation" (para 1.1) Lord Dearing, the report's author, was emphatic that this meant that "no Church school can be considered as part of the Church's mission unless it is distinctively Christian" (para 1.11).

This vision has raised huge, and largely unresolved<sup>6</sup>, challenges for Church schools, not least the question of how to recruit school leaders who can articulate and implement this vision when there are few, if any, teacher education programmes that focus on Christian distinctiveness<sup>7</sup>. Here, I will focus on the core question of exactly what aspirations the church has for children and young people in its schools. Dearing lays this out clearly when he states that: "Church schools are places where a particular vision of humanity is offered" (para 3.11). Later this is encapsulated in the sentence: "Our commitment is to developing the potential of each child as an individual, made in the image of God" (para. 3.42). Emulating the doting grandparent, the church hopes to realize its dreams for the future of this generation of pupils through the agency of its schools. But what is the distinctive vision of humanity that it offers?

To probe this question further, I will turn to another important document, namely the Archbishops' Council report of 2004, *Mission-shaped church*<sup>8</sup>. This identified the core

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<sup>5</sup> Archbishops' Council, *The Way Ahead*, London, Church House Publishing, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Helen Jelfs *Is it the dance of life Miss? An exploration of educational paradigm and pedagogical practice in Church of England schools*, Unpublished PhD, University of Bristol, 2008 and Roger Street, "The impact of the Way Ahead on Headteachers of Anglican voluntary-aided secondary schools" in *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, Vol. 28:2, 2007, pp 137-150.

<sup>7</sup> See Perry Glanzer "Searching for the Soul of English Universities: an exploration and analysis of Christian Higher Education in England" in *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 56:2, 2008, pp 163-183 for a discussion of the British Anglican universities by an American academic. See also James Arthur, *Faith and Secularisation in Religious Colleges and Universities*, London: Routledge 2006

<sup>8</sup> Archbishops' Council, *Mission-shaped church*, London, Church House Publishing, 2004. In this paper I am treating this report as authoritative in the sense that it gives an indicative picture of the developing consensus on the role of the church in modern Britain. This is not to say that I am happy with everything in it and share some of the reservations expressed by John Hull when he says the report in fact advocates church-shaped mission and fails to embrace a more prophetic tone. See John Hull, *Mission-Shaped Church: a theological response*, London, SCM Press, 2006.

task of the Church as cross-cultural mission in a post-Christian world. To quote: “the gap is as wide as any that is experienced by a cross-cultural missionary” (p40). In saying this the report’s authors were echoing the sentiments of the pioneering missionary bishop Lesslie Newbigin who, when he returned to Britain in the middle of the twentieth century after many years service as a bishop in India, was struck by just how far British culture had drifted from its Christian roots and concluded that living in contemporary Britain was as much a missionary task as living in India. If *Mission-shaped church* is correct in its analysis, the key mission task facing the Church in western democracies is to learn how to engage in what Lesslie Newbigin calls “the missionary encounter” with a culture that has largely lost its connection with its Christian roots. One job for the Church then is to produce disciples who can engage in this mission task.

According to the authors of *Mission-shaped church* this will entail a change of mindset amongst Anglicans in terms of how we think about the place of Christianity in relation to the world around us. The mindset it seeks to replace can be illustrated from the remark by Richard Branson that a “businessman’s (sic) job is to try to dominate”<sup>9</sup>. This might be called the *market share* mindset where the aim is to beat your competitor by gaining as much of the market share as possible with the ultimate goal of putting your competitor out of business. I suggest that this model is one that many Christians feel, somehow, they *ought* to adopt. We *ought* to be interested in maximizing Christian influence in the world. Is this after all not to advance the Kingdom of God? However I suggest this mindset is a legacy of Christendom<sup>10</sup> - the idea that a successful Church is one that has the upper hand in society and is able to determine the culture and legislation through weight of numbers and political influence. Applied to Anglican schools, it makes recruitment into the Church their primary purpose. Disciples are viewed as loyal followers who promote the interests of the Church.

I suggest that the fundamental weakness of this approach is that it adopts a mistaken idea of advancing the Kingdom of God. It assumes that to advance the Kingdom means to grow in political influence. This does not appear to be in tune with Jesus’ understanding of mission since, when offered the possibility of a huge “market share” by Satan during his temptation in the wilderness, he declined (Luke 4:5-8). Furthermore this mindset reinforces the charge made time and again against Christians that we are a tribal people who pursue the sectarian promotion of our own beliefs and interests at the expense of other people. In what follows I will propose an alternative, mission-oriented mindset.

Jesus commanded his followers to go and make disciples of all nations<sup>11</sup>. If Anglican schools are to be at the centre of the Church’s mission to the nation, I suggest they should have a vision for promoting discipleship. When we visualize our *pupil-of-the-future*, do we see a Christian disciple engaged in cross-cultural mission? Or do we see a loyal party follower seeking to expand the market-share of the Church?

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<sup>9</sup> Following his tussle with Rupert Murdoch over the ownership of ITV. Quoted in the Daily Telegraph on 23 November 2006. See

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/money/main.jhtml?xml=/money/2006/11/22/cnity22.xml>

<sup>10</sup> For a critique of Christendom from an Anabaptist perspective see Stuart Murray *Post-Christendom*, Carlisle, Paternoster, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 28 v 19

## Discipleship, Transformation and Kingdom-building

The literature on discipleship is huge. What I propose to do here is to focus on one characteristic explored in *Mission-shaped church*; namely the concept of incarnational mission. This is described as imitation of “both Christ’s loving identification with his culture and his costly counter-cultural stance within it” (p87). It captures the idea that Christian discipleship is essentially concerned with living a life that serves the culture in which we live, but with a view to transforming it so that more and more it reflects God’s kingdom. I like the description of this as “kingdom building”<sup>12</sup>.

I will illustrate this way of thinking from a substantial report<sup>13</sup> published by the British Evangelical Alliance in October 2006. Two quotations will give a flavour of the Alliance’s vision.

“When Christians, motivated by their faith, get involved in their community, especially through community-based projects, to work for justice, healing and human well-being, they may also be considered to be engaged in work for the Kingdom of God, enlarging the sphere in which God’s reign may be willingly and gladly acknowledged” (p.117)

“In today’s conditions probably a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of lifestyle evangelism is called for. The personal ministry of leading other individuals to Christ of course remains indispensable, but also overall strategies for bringing the transforming power of the gospel to bear on the life of the nation, backed by vision involving the possibility of societal transformation across the widest possible front, is necessary” (pp119-120).

In many people’s minds Christian mission has been identified with the concept of personal evangelism. The EA certainly has no intention to undermine the importance of this, but is seeking to *broaden* the concept to embrace the wider idea of the *transformation of culture* so that it reflects more of the values of the Kingdom of God. The aspiration is to see Christians engaged in missionary encounters with modern culture, which spread the Gospel and promote the well-being and flourishing of all people through the transformation of the prevailing culture. As Joel Edwards, the General Director, said the vision is that through Christian social engagement “some will be saved, but everyone will benefit”<sup>14</sup>.

But is this not to return to a social gospel that ignores the radical message of salvation achieved through Christ? To answer this question I will turn to eschatology. A recent story told by Bishop James Jones, the Bishop of Liverpool illustrates the point<sup>15</sup>. He

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<sup>12</sup> From NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, London, SPCK, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> See *Faith & Nation: Report of a Commission of Enquiry to the UK Evangelical Alliance* (2006). Available at <http://www.eauk.org/faithandnation/>. The earlier ideas that laid the foundations for this report can be found in David Hilborn (ed.) *Movement for Change: Evangelical Perspectives on Social Transformation*, Paternoster, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Quote from Joel Edwards talk at the launch of the *Faith & Nation Commission Report* on 26/10/06 at One Whitehall Place. See also Mike Morris “Uniting to change society” in *Idea*, September/October 2006, p.16.

<sup>15</sup> BBC Radio 4 Thought for the Day, 20<sup>th</sup> February 2008. The transcript is available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/programmes/thought/documents/t20080220.shtml>.

recounts a visit to Africa during which he urged Christians to engage with the urgency of climate change. He was challenged by someone who remarked that they were shocked that a bishop should be encouraging them to be anxious when Jesus commands us not to worry. They also said that since the earth is to pass away at the end time, it was not a Christian responsibility to worry about climate change. Christians, they thought, should be concerned with preparing for their heavenly destination, not with solving the problems of the earth. In Bishop James view, it was a defective eschatology that was leading to this view.

You may be surprised at my suggestion I am about to make. Eschatology is profoundly important in defining a vision for the mission of the Anglican school. In arguing my case, I will draw on a recently published book by the influential theologian and current Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright<sup>16</sup>. Central to the book's message is a reaffirmation of biblical teaching on bodily resurrection. Wright's argument is that many Christians have been seduced by ideas of disembodied souls existing in some heavenly state. In contrast he proposes that the biblical view of the future is not an escape to a heavenly realm, but the renewal of creation. The resurrection of Jesus is central to Christian faith because it is the first fruits of something that is going to happen to the whole of creation. "With Jesus the future hope has come forwards into the present" (p. 163)

Why is this important? Because, Wright says, what we believe about the last things fundamentally affects our practical theology, which he describes as "Christian reflection on the nature of the task we face as we seek to bring God's kingdom to bear on the real and painful world in which we live" (p.xiii). In other words our eschatology will fundamentally affect how we think and how we act in the world now. It will shape our understanding of the mission of the Church and of what it means to be a disciple.

*"The point of the resurrection.... is that the present bodily life is not valueless just because it will die. God will raise it to new life. What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it.....What you do in the present – by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbour as yourself – all these things will last into God's future. They are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable...They are part of what we may call building for God's kingdom."* (p205)

The relevance of all this for Anglican schools is that they are at the centre of the Church's mission by being in the forefront of producing "agents of transformation" (Wright, 2007, p214), kingdom builders who will shape the future of creation and whose actions in the world will have eternal consequences. When Anglicans in education dream dreams for what our *pupils-of-the-future* might be, should not the dream be that we will produce disciples; people who can carry forward the mission of the church, people who set up the outposts of God's Kingdom in the world and act as co-workers with God through serving and transforming the culture around them?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, London, SPCK, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> The authors of *Mission-shaped church* share Wright's view of mission as restoring and reconciling creation, citing a quote from Stuart Murray (2004, p. 85) and echoing Wright's use of the language of liberating the enslaved (2007, p.107).

## Building the Kingdom through the Anglican School.

It may feel as though we have drifted far from the realities of school with the curriculum to be taught, exams to be sat and the extra-curricular life to be developed. But I hope not. Recent PhD research in England<sup>18</sup> has indicated that many heads and governing bodies are inspired by the vision of *the Way Ahead* report and want to offer a distinctively Christian education, but are floored by what that might mean in practice. The challenge is with connecting this vision with the everyday tasks of school education (in the classroom, on the sports field and so forth). The temptation is to just view distinctiveness as the tasks of evangelism and the nurturing of Christian faith in chapel, Christian Union and Christian studies courses.

What Tom Wright helps us to see is that the *distinctively Christian* contribution of an Anglican school is not simply to do with conversion; important though that is. Rather it is to do with producing disciples who will be kingdom builders through their life and work. The daily round of teaching and learning should contribute to this vision by nurturing the mindset that will enable pupils to be agents of transformation; people who seek to serve and transform their culture by imitating both Christ's loving identification with culture and his costly counter-cultural stance which pointed to a better way.

This raises the sensitive question of whether the vision of Anglican schools producing disciples applies to all students in school or only to those who are Christians. To answer this properly would require a separate paper; however I am going to assume that non-Christians have the capacity to be "kingdom-builders" because everyone is created in the image of God. As Darrell Cosden expresses it:

"All people were created to image God, and thus all people, by virtue of their humanity, are included in God's purposes for creation. However, not all people image God in fellowship with him"<sup>19</sup>.

Although, clearly, the Anglican school will desire that its students come to personal faith in Christ, that does not mean that the student body is divided into those who are on the journey and those who are still in the waiting room when it comes to them being potential co-workers with God. The Anglican school offers everyone the same, distinctive model of what it is to be fully human; namely to be a kingdom builder.

It goes without saying that if schools are to educate students to be kingdom builders in a world where the culture is no longer Christian, they have to equip them with the appropriate skills. Space does not allow me to justify my next assertion, but in modern, western nations I suggest the predominant culture is secularized, postmodernism<sup>20</sup>. The

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<sup>18</sup> Helen Jelfs *Is it the dance of life Miss? An exploration of educational paradigm and pedagogical practice in Church of England schools*, Unpublished PhD, University of Bristol, 2008 and Roger Street, "The impact of the Way Ahead on Headteachers of Anglican voluntary-aided secondary schools" in *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, Vol. 28:2, 2007, pp 137-150.

<sup>19</sup> Darrell Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work*, Carlisle, Paternoster, 2006, p140.

<sup>20</sup> Mission-shaped church identified consumerism as the predominant cultural feature of contemporary England. In many ways I agree with this. Along with celebrity culture and the influence of advertising, this adds up to what Professor Terence Copley of Oxford University calls the "me" culture. Anecdotal evidence from teachers is that many British young people aspire to the lifestyles of fabulously wealthy megastars like Paris Hilton and David Beckham. This is certainly a framework of values that will need challenging by

widespread assumption is that Christians (or at least those with enthusiasm for their faith) are narrow-minded, intolerant fundamentalists who have bought into a dangerous mindset and are nostalgic for an irrelevant past. The question is what skills, dispositions and attitudes will be necessary for young people to become kingdom builders in this cultural context? My suggestion is that there are at least four clusters that Anglican schools should be nurturing in their pupils<sup>21</sup>.

## 1. A thinking faith<sup>22</sup>

It was a Thursday afternoon in 1985 and I had just picked up my foster-daughter from her school. We pulled in to the petrol station to refuel in advance of our regular journey home. Three hundred yards away from the forecourt, the engine died. Three hours later a mechanic finally diagnosed the problem. The garage had sold me a full tank of pure water. The resulting repair meant the engine had to be thoroughly flushed through with petrol. All traces of the offending water had to be removed. Only then would the engine function properly.

I was reminded of this incident when listening to a Christian educator speaking about equipping Christian young people for discipleship. His view was that students had to be thoroughly “de-programmed” and then “re-programmed” with biblical teaching. In the speaker’s view, this was essential to being a Christian disciple. It seemed that he viewed his students in the same way I had viewed my car. Their minds and hearts needed “flushing through” to remove the contaminating “water” of secular ideas and to replace it with the “petrol” of correct Christian ideas.

In a seminal book, John Hull<sup>23</sup> argues that curiosity is intimately linked with the thinking faith characteristic of mature discipleship, but that “programmed” Christians are not curious about their faith. He attributes such lack of curiosity to defensiveness because asking probing questions about our faith will be painful and unsettling. To avoid the risk of creating a “theological mess”, Hull believes that many Christians suppress their curiosity and defer to experts to “programme” them, telling them what it is safe to think, rather than grapple with challenging issues that the more curious notice in their faith<sup>24</sup>. Certainly, I have met Christian educationalists who will not ask open-ended questions in case learners “speculate” and give the “wrong” answer.

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Anglican schools as part of their counter-cultural stance. Here however I am focussing on the intellectual culture that students inhabit.

<sup>21</sup> In the following section I am drawing on the approach that is widely known as critical realism. In brief this offers an alternative to both fundamentalism and modernism (both of which aspire to interpretation free, uncontroversial knowledge derived from revelation in the one case or reason in the other) and postmodernism, relativism and subjectivism, which deny that there is anything objective to know and see all knowledge as a purely human construct. Critical realism values the search for objective truth and knowledge that is outside the human condition, but accepts that that search is always from within a human worldview so is always an interpretation of that knowledge/truth and is therefore open to disagreement.

<sup>22</sup> See my chapter ‘Curiosity – Vice or Virtue for the Christian Teacher? Promoting faithfulness to Scripture in teacher formation’, in *Engaging the Culture: Christians at Work in Education*, Edlin, Richard (ed.), Sydney, National Institute of Christian Education, 2006 for a detailed development of this idea.

<sup>23</sup> Hull, John *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?*, London: SCM, 1985

<sup>24</sup> Hull (1985) p. 135

A recent advertising campaign in England for Persil washing detergent illustrates the point nicely. It features a child covered in paint. The text was: *Its not mess, its curiosity*. The message was that curiosity is a good thing. The sub-text was that, for many people, curiosity is problematic because it creates mess. I suspect many Christians feel that a questioning, curious, thinking mindset can lead to theological mess. They believe that Christian nurture should provide people with neat and reliable answers with which to demolish the objections of the sceptics. In contrast, I am suggesting that theological curiosity is an essential attitude for disciples who will be agents of transformation in a secular world.

I agree with Hull when he suggests that an approach to Christian nurture which seeks simply to programme pupils with correct answers is counter-productive. In today's world young people cannot escape being exposed to challenging questions. If they think Christian faith is simply about regurgitating simplistic responses, then they are likely to experience what Hull describes as "bafflement", unable to match their faith with what they are encountering. Two dangers emerge. On the one hand they might retreat into the securities of a faith "once taught" (into which they might have been programmed) and adopt a puerile dependency on authority figures and slogans. This can lead to "ideological hardening", a fundamentalist, threatened and tribal approach to faith. On the other hand, overwhelmed by the experience of dissonance, they might give up on their faith because they do not know how to engage with challenging issues. Ideological hardening makes engagement with modern culture impossible; loss of faith destroys disciples and, sadly, is what happens to far too many Christians<sup>25</sup>. Neither of these outcomes equips people for being agents of transformation in the modern world.

Allow me to illustrate with an example. I was once helping to lead a church sailing holiday for young people. In the evening bible studies we were looking at the experiences of the Israelites in Canaan. Amongst us leaders there was some discussion as to how to deal with the difficult issue of the slaughter of Canaanite tribes. One of my colleagues thought it was an issue of trust. He had no time for "wimpish" Christians who couldn't "stomach" what God does to those who oppose him. His view was that the youngsters needed programming not to question God. There was no hint of sadness at the fate of the Canaanites; no suggestion of an issue to be dealt with in relation to God's love and God's justice. They should accept what the Bible taught. I was horrified that he was about to tell young Christians that feeling the dissonance that most people experience on encountering these biblical stories, was "lack of faith". This was a recipe for bafflement as they grew older.

Hull's suggestion, with which I agree, is that young people should be taught to welcome and negotiate the challenging questions raised by the encounter of faith with modern culture. They should not see this as a threat, but as an opportunity to learn. In other words, Anglican schools should nurture thinking faith. This is in contrast to an approach which seeks to re-programme young people to be Christian automatons. That is why I welcome approaches to Christian Studies which engage pupils with the big questions of life and which explore the interface between biblical studies, theology, ethics and philosophy. Hopefully the same attitude is promoted in other subjects as well where questions of science and religion, human suffering, the interpretation of literature and so forth should be tackled. The evidence is that when Christian teachers move from a

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<sup>25</sup> See for example Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*, London, SPCK, 2002 who documents the departure from the church of Christian leaders.

programming mindset to one that promotes theological curiosity, students find it much more helpful for their own faith development and are much less resistant to the school's Christian ethos<sup>26</sup>.

A possible objection to promoting theological curiosity is that it undermines commitment to biblical authority. I will now seek to show that this is not the case.

## 2. A biblical faith<sup>27</sup>

Many in today's secularised western world believe that a thinking faith that is also a biblical faith is a contradiction in terms. Living by the Bible is not "cool" in modern culture, so would-be disciples need support here. In particular they need to understand how to interpret and apply the biblical text in a responsible way.

To illustrate the point, I will return to an analogy I used when I last addressed the AASN conference in 2005<sup>28</sup>. Again I am in the debt of Bishop Tom Wright for this in his attempt to answer the question "what does it mean to live a life that is faithful to the Bible?" He uses the analogy of an unfinished Shakespeare play to explore this<sup>29</sup>.

Wright observes that much of the Bible is actually narrative, stories of God's dealings with the human race. A relatively small amount of the text is made up of instructions that can be straightforwardly applied in the day-to-day life of twenty-first century people. And even those that appear to be like that often turn out to be more culturally specific than may first have been appreciated. My own experience of this as a teenager in the 1970s was being given a haircut of biblical proportions on the basis of the statement in 1 Corinthians 11 v 14 that it is a disgrace for a man to have longhair. So how does one, according to Wright, apply the narratives of the Bible in today's world?

Wright asks us to imagine that a previously unknown Shakespeare play has been discovered, but the fifth act has been largely lost. How best, Wright asks, to complete this play so that it can be enjoyed by theatre audiences? His suggestion is that we commission a number of highly experienced Shakespearean actors to complete the unfinished play. Their task will be to immerse themselves in the first four acts and then to use their extensive knowledge of Shakespeare's work to write an ending that respects the integrity of the parts of the play that we do have, but, and this is most important, utilises their own creativity to craft an ending which reflects their own experience of life. The result, suggests Wright, will be a number of different endings, all of them written under the authority of the original four acts, but each of them reflecting a contemporary application and interpretation. The result is not however anarchy. Although each actor has freedom, every one of their endings is restrained by the text we already have. They

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, John Collier and Martin Dowson, "Applying An Action Research Approach to Improving the Quality of Christian Education – One School's Experience" in *Journal of Christian Education*, Vol. 50:1, 2007, pp27-36

<sup>27</sup> For elaboration see the important book by John Shortt and David Smith, *The Bible and the Task of Teaching*, Nottingham, The Stapleford Centre, 2000.

<sup>28</sup> 'Transforming Hearts and Minds: the Contribution of Christian Values to the Curriculum' in *Journal of Christian Education*, 49(2), 2006, pp35-50.

<sup>29</sup> See *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, 1992, pp139-143. Helpful modifications are made to the analogy in Walsh and Middleton *Truth is stranger than it used to be*, SPCK, 1995.

cannot simply do anything with it! The important point, however, is expressed by Wright as follows:

“The authority of the first four acts would not consist – could not consist! – in an implicit command that the actors should repeat the earlier parts of the play over and over again. It would consist in the fact of an as yet unfinished drama, containing its own impetus and forward movement, which demand to be concluded in an appropriate manner. It would require of the actors a free and responsible entering in to the story as it stood, in order to understand first how the threads could appropriately be drawn together and then to put that understanding into effect by speaking and acting *with both consistency and innovation.*” (p140) (Emphasis added)

Wright goes on to suggest that this analogy helps us to understand what it is to seek to live biblically in the world of our own time. He maintains that the biblical story itself is like an unfinished play with four acts, and that the task of Christians is akin to that of the Shakespearean actors, namely to immerse ourselves in these with a view to acting out our own fifth act that is faithful to the text but innovative in its application<sup>30</sup>. To quote Wright again:

“We are not searching, against the grain, for timeless truths. We are looking, as the material is looking, for and at a vocation to be the people of God in the fifth act of the drama of creation.” (p142)

What this means is that living a life faithful to the Bible is usually not about finding propositional gems that can be lifted straight from the biblical context and reapplied unchanged today. It is not simply, as I was taught as a teenager, to attempt to recreate the life of the early church. Rather it is about carefully listening to God’s word to understand the intended message and discerning what that means in today’s world. He is highlighting the fact that the key to being biblically faithful is not simply to *know* the text, but to be able to *interpret* and *apply* the text in appropriate ways. This means that being faithful to the Bible will often produce more than one response. The complexity of life in the modern world means that Christians will often come to different conclusions. How are they taught to respond to this? To condemn the heretics or to listen carefully to their brothers and sisters?

Developing biblical faithfulness involves, amongst other things, asking careful questions about the genre of a text, studying its original context and placing its apparent meaning in the teaching of Scripture as a whole. It also means being aware of how easy it is to read our own ideas into the text. The example of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, which found apartheid in the Bible and subsequently had to repent of that, is enough to illustrate the point. Is it not intriguing how the rich find prosperity theology in their Bible whilst the poor find liberation theology? A healthy dose of self-suspicion at our ability to find what we want in Scripture is an essential ingredient for the would-be agent of transformation. Developing this skill of biblical faithfulness will equip a young person to use their Bible in conversation with people outside the church.

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<sup>30</sup> Later versions of the analogy include a sixth act as part of the given script, reflecting the fact that we do know how the story finishes in the Bible. We still have to write our own fifth act.

An important question then for an Anglican school is how its Christian Studies or Religious Education programme is conducted if a thinking, biblical faith is to be nurtured. Does the programme tend to encourage the idea that the Bible is replete with one-liner, proof texts or does it promote the skill of being a fifth-act Christian? And how does the rest of the curriculum deal with the Bible? Is it treated as a book replete with spiritual meaning, but of no relevance to the different subjects? Or does it communicate the message that the Bible conveys a distinctive vision of what it means to be human which radically affects the context within which each subject is learnt and challenges and transforms secular understandings of each subject? Pupils and teachers alike will need to be encouraged to fulfil their responsibility to be “fifth-act Christians”, whatever their subject specialism. There is no escaping the fact that every subject tells a story through the choice of worldview framework within which it is set<sup>31</sup>.

### 3. A relevant faith

Our next challenge is how to address the question of how a thinking, biblical faith is to be expressed in a culturally relevant way. One of the innovative features of *Mission-shaped church* was to draw on insights from the theological concept of contextualization<sup>32</sup>, developed by missiologists trying to rethink the role of “expat” missionaries in overseas contexts in the light of the charge made that they were cultural imperialists. This quote from the Sri Lankan theologian David T Niles illustrates the aspiration.

The gospel is like a seed, and you have to sow it. When you sow the seed of the gospel in Palestine, a plant that can be called Palestinian Christianity grows. When you sow it in Rome, a plant of Roman Christianity grows. You sow the Gospel in Great Britain and you get British Christianity. The seed of the gospel is later brought to America, and a plant grows of American Christianity. Now, when missionaries came to our lands they brought not only the seed of the gospel, but also their own plant of Christianity, flowerpot included! So, what we have to do is break the flower pot, take out the seed of the gospel, sow it in own cultural soil, and let our version of Christianity grow. (King, 2001, p8)<sup>33</sup>

If, as *Mission-shaped church* maintains, “everything we face in mission is now a cross-cultural task”<sup>34</sup>, Christians cannot assume that everyone else talks their language and understands their concepts. In this model of mission, Christians see themselves as “resident aliens” in society, offering the gospel message in a form and manner that makes sense in the prevailing culture but also challenges it. The core insight of this approach is that no version of the gospel is culture free and that the work of a kingdom builder is to translate the gospel message from their own culture to that of another culture.

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<sup>31</sup> See the example of teaching modern languages in my lecture ‘Transforming Hearts and Minds: the Contribution of Christian Values to the Curriculum’ in *Journal of Christian Education*, 49(2), 2006, pp35-50. See also Julie Mitchell, *Worlds of Difference: Exploring Worldviews and Values in English Texts*, Melbourne, Council for Christian Education in Schools, 2004 and David Smith “Does God dwell in the detail: how faith affects (language) teaching processes” in *Engaging the Culture: Christians at work in education*, Richard Edlin & Jill Ireland (eds.), Sydney, National Institute for Christian Education, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Inculturation is another word meaning the same thing used in the Roman Catholic tradition.

<sup>33</sup> From Janet King et al. *Global Perspectives on Christianity*, RMEP, 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Archbishops’ Council, 2004, p.30

An example may help. In the early 1990s I was invited to help with the development of a post-communist moral education programme for Russian state schools. I was involved with an American team, all of whom worked in Christian schools in the USA. They brought their Bible knowledge programme with them, intending simply to translate the text into Russian and then implement it as a stand-alone package. This included every lesson being opened with prayers led by the teacher. Needless to say the programme was not adopted because it completely ignored the Russian context of an education system emerging from atheistic-communism staffed by non-Christian teachers and instead assumed an American Bible belt approach to morality as the universal norm. I was subsequently told by one of the Americans that the programme failed because they were unequally yoked with unbelievers. I thought he had missed the point. The seed they wanted to bring was great; the problem was not unequal yoking, but their failure to distinguish the American Christian cultural flowerpot from the seed.

The Americans were however expressing a legitimate concern about the dangers of syncretism, where gospel teaching is accommodated to a prevailing culture. All Christians face the challenge of assimilation, whereby their faith is adulterated through absorption into alien beliefs. This is a constant danger warned against in Scripture from Canaan to Corinth. Usually the danger is greatest when we are least aware of it. It is highly unlikely, for example, that western Christians will become assimilated into, say Muslim belief and culture. It is, however, very likely that we will be found wanting in our relationship with capitalism and consumerism. The key challenge for any cross-cultural mission is to distinguish between successful contextualization and inappropriate syncretism. That is why the skill of biblical faithfulness is an essential component in education for Christian discipleship. Robert Webber sums the situation up well when he writes “post-modernism is the context we work in, not the goal”<sup>35</sup>. He describes the task as “ancient-future evangelism” meaning the effective translation of an ancient gospel so that it speaks to those inhabiting a post-modern world.

Kingdom builders in Australia, I suggest, need to understand *both* their own faith *and* the culture around them well enough to be able to undertake this contextualization. This is a skill that can only be developed with practice and perseverance and can be developed in every subject. Some young people in Britain wear a bracelet with the acronym WWJD on it. Meaning “what would Jesus do” it is meant to remind of the importance of obedience in life. If we were to take seriously the implications of biblical faithfulness and contextualisation skills the bracelet would be changed to WWJDN; “what would Jesus do NOW”? The now reminds the wearer of the importance of taking account of their current cultural context.

#### **4. A respectful, non-threatened faith**

Secularized postmodernism is a mindset that prides itself on its tolerance. When it comes to religion this usually means one of two approaches.

The first I shall call pluralism<sup>36</sup>. One influential British writer describes it as “acceptance that there can be many pathways for making spiritual progress”<sup>37</sup>. This is often

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<sup>35</sup> Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2002, p218.

<sup>36</sup> By this I mean the ideology which treats all religions as equally valid. Another sense of the term is factual, identifying the indisputable fact that our world is replete with religious diversity.

<sup>37</sup> Jay Lakhani, *Face to Faith*, Guardian, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2007

represented through the Jain parable of the blind people exploring the elephant with their hands. One finds a leg and visualises it as a tree trunk. Another finds the tail and visualises it as a rope. A third finds the ear and visualises it as a sail. Who is right? The implied answer is that they all are right because each interpretation is a valid understanding of their own experience. But they are also all wrong because none of them has perceived the elephant.

The second approach is the secularist strategy of privatization, which is actively promoted in England by the British Humanist Association.<sup>38</sup> In this case tolerance is achieved through religious faith being treated as a purely private matter, with no determining or authoritative role in public life. The aspiration is for the neutral public square where all are equal because none is heard.

Both of these approaches are antagonistic to the concept of kingdom building. They will welcome the idea that Christians should serve the culture of public life through “loving identification” but would object strongly to the idea of Christians adopting “a counter cultural stance” in the public square. In the post-modern world, Christian beliefs and values are deemed to be for the private life of the church not the public life of the school. Both these approaches emasculate the concept of Christian discipleship.

Unfortunately the Christian response to them is often over-bearing, even aggressive, and can be driven by a “market-share” motivation which see others religious believers as the competition to be marginalised. This is a disaster for community cohesion and a slur on Jesus who responded in a very different way to the diversity of human beings. The key challenge is to find a way of responding to religious diversity that maintains a clear witness to Christ without treating other people in a less than Christian fashion. An opportunity-oriented mindset is required that welcomes encounter with religious diversity rather than interpreting it as a threat.

An example of such a mind-set is provided by *Scriptural Reasoning*, a model of interfaith relations developed by Professor David Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge<sup>39</sup>. Its aim is to create an environment where “Muslim, Jewish and Christian believers can study, reason and work together in a way that does not compromise their religious integrity and respects others religions’ integrity”<sup>40</sup>. The approach involves members of the three faith communities meeting to discuss common concerns and to listen to insights from each others’ scriptures. The aim is not consensus but is rather to create a collegial approach where the differences and commonalities of the three religions are explored. Central to the experience is the concept of mutual hospitality between people with deep commitment to their respective scriptures which is based upon “respectful witness which can allow for radical differences and unresolved debate”<sup>41</sup>. A key metaphor adopted in the approach is the creation of a tent of meeting; a

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<sup>38</sup> Humanist Philosophers’ Group, *The Case for Secularism: a neutral state in an open society*, London, British Humanist Society, 2007. For an excellent rebuttal of this view see Nick Spencer, *Neither Private nor Privileged*, London, Theos, 2008.

<sup>39</sup> See <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2006/20060428ford.cfm?doc=101> and *The fruit of hospitality and desire* in Church times, 12/05/06 page 12.

<sup>40</sup> David Ford and CC Pecknold (eds.), *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*, Blackwell, 2006

<sup>41</sup> From Ford’s paper *Gospel in Context: Among many Faiths* delivered at the Fulcrum Conference Islington in 2006. See <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2006/20060428ford.cfm?doc=101>

place which is both sacred and mutual, but is certainly not attempting to be neutral. Maybe Anglican schools can themselves aim to be “tents of meeting”?

To cultivate this approach means encouraging an attitude of listening with respect whilst speaking with confidence when meeting those of other faiths. It means having the courage to take the Bible into the public place and the confidence to hear insights from people of other faiths. *Adopting a Scriptural Reasoning* approach has two important implications for the Anglican school. Firstly there needs to be an emphasis on developing young people’s knowledge and understanding of the Bible through Christian studies programmes. The emphasis must however be on developing the skills of interpretation and contextualisation, not on amassing biblical sound bites. Secondly the skill of developing dialogical friendships with people from other traditions needs to be cultivated. This will involve the empathetic study of other religions within a missiological framework.<sup>42</sup> If this skill is not nurtured in school, it is unlikely to be acquired afterwards<sup>43</sup>.

## Conclusion

To contribute to shaping the future of a generation is the privilege of schools. For Anglican education, the vision of the *pupil-of-the-future* should be derived from the Church’s mission to imitate Christ’s loving identification with culture and his costly counter-cultural stance in transforming it. This is the task of the Christian disciple and Anglican schools nurture this mindset by offering their pupils a different vision of what it means to be human.

The vision I have explored is that of the Christian disciple as a kingdom-builder; someone who participates as a co-worker with God in building a future that reflects the values of God’s kingdom. I have suggested that to be effective in the required missionary encounter with modern culture, Anglican schools need to nurture *pupils of the future* who:

- value theological curiosity,
- pursue Biblical faithfulness,
- practice contextualization of their faith, and
- are at ease with religious diversity.

To achieve this requires:

- A curriculum that emphasises these across all subjects
- A staff that models the skills, dispositions and attitudes, and
- An approach to the wider community which is outward looking and hospitable.

To return to NT Niles provocative image, an Anglican school should be aiming to produce pupils who can break the flowerpot, release the seed and who are expert in growing relevant versions of the Christian faith in a world in which religious diversity is a fact of life.

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<sup>42</sup> By missiological framework I am challenging the popular phenomenological approach to teaching religions which sees itself as objective and neutral and proposing an approach which sets such study within the framework of a missionary encounter.

<sup>43</sup> For a downloadable booklet on how to set up Scriptural Reasoning groups see <http://www.stethelburgas.org/sr/pitchatent.pdf>.