

New Christian Schools

what are they
really like?



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A national crisis

Every day the news about the young people of modern Britain seems to get more depressing. From details about teenage pregnancies, bullying at school and violence against teachers, to descriptions of marauding, 'feral', youth gangs, the reports could hardly be bleaker. Of course, we all know delightful young people who do not fit these stereotypes. Nevertheless, there is a problem and it seems to be getting worse by the day.

Much has been said, and could be said, about the causes of this crisis. No doubt in 50 years time we will be able to look back and see clearly what went wrong, but that will be too late for two or three generations of children. Parents need a solution *now* to the problems engulfing our young people.

What is the solution?

The UK Government has made great efforts to control the situation by increasing police powers to deal with 'yobs' and 'hoodies'. Government has also suggested that the way to curb Britain's appallingly high rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases is to provide more and more sex education for younger and younger children. (See: *The Guardian*, 23 October 2006, 'Teach contraception to primary pupils, says report.') To date, the latter approach has been spectacularly unsuccessful. 11 November 2006 saw the launch of a hard-hitting Government advertising campaign aimed at teenagers. This had

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become necessary because of what the BBC news that day described as ‘the exponential increase in sexually transmitted diseases.’ For Christians, there must be better answers than these. As a small contribution to a very complex debate, I would like to tell the story of a movement that I believe has found at least a part of the solution.

A hidden movement

For the past thirty years something significant has been happening in the UK, almost unnoticed by the churches. A network of small, independent schools run by evangelical Christians along very sacrificial lines, first began to appear in the 1970s and has now become an established movement. The first such school, The Cedars, Rochester, opened in 1969. During the 70s, and particularly the 80s, many more schools opened, usually independently of each other. There are currently about 100 such schools with numbers of pupils ranging from a handful to more than 200.

Some schools cover the full age range from 4 to 16 and have been in existence for at least 20 years. Examples include: The King’s School, Witney near Oxford; Christian Fellowship School, Liverpool; and Trinity School, Stalybridge, Greater Manchester. Others have been founded much more recently and are tiny. For example, Emmanuel Christian School, Leicester, opened in September 2003 and at present has just a handful of pupils.

In wider society today, there are thousands of young adults who have been educated in these ‘New Christian Schools’. It should now be possible to evaluate the success, or otherwise, that the

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schools have had in educating them. Ofsted reports on the schools are usually good or very good and GCSE results are often excellent. But have the schools been able to produce stable, mature young people who know what they believe and have been trained to live successfully as Christians in an increasingly secular and amoral society?

Some definitive answers to these questions are now beginning to emerge. My research into 240 past pupils from eleven of the schools, aged between 17 and 32 when they completed the questionnaires, shows that the young people were very positive about the education that they had received and the way in which it had prepared them for ‘real life’. 80% described themselves as practising Christians and 73% were members of churches. They were succeeding in many different walks of life, but especially in those types of careers that involve the service of others.

Professor Leslie Francis of the University of Wales, Bangor, has also recently published some relevant research in the *British Journal of Religious Education*. He investigated 13 to 15 year-old boys in 19 of the schools and compared their views with those of nearly 13,000 boys of the same age who attend state-maintained schools. His conclusion was that the New Christian Schools produce model citizens. Boys in the Christian schools had higher levels of social concern, higher levels of personal well-being and considerably higher levels of sexual morality than their counterparts in state schools. In his book *Urban Hope and Spiritual Health*, Professor Francis concludes: ‘Young people in [New] Christian Schools enjoy a higher level of spiritual health compared with young people in non-denominational schools. [They] benefit from closer relationships with friends and from less fear of being bullied. [They] are less racist in their attitudes and more concerned about world development issues’ (pp131–132).

What is the secret?

How is it that New Christian Schools have been able to achieve so much? Those who know them well will tell you that these little schools have few resources. For the past thirty years they have received no Government funding yet neither do



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they serve rich communities. On the contrary, it is often those with very little money who have made great sacrifices to send their children to the schools and teachers have perhaps made the greatest sacrifices of all, with many of them working for little, or even no, salary. They will tell you that it has been a hard struggle and yet God has greatly honoured them. For many of the parents the results exceed their wildest dreams. Of course, some of the young people do occasionally rebel and cause their parents heartache, but such situations have usually been short-lived. The secret perhaps lies in the principles that originally led to the setting up of the schools.

The presence of God and His truth

It must have required strong convictions to sustain parents, teachers and governing bodies through so many years of difficulty. They will tell you that they set up the schools under the effects of a powerful burden from God Himself. What He was continually saying to them was that He wanted their children to be brought up to know Him and His truth, and that this could not be achieved by teachers who held quite different, non-Christian, views of life. God wants home, church and school

to work together to provide a consistent upbringing and education for young people based on His truths and values.

New Christian Schools are able to develop just the same atmosphere and ethos as you would have in a Christian home. The Lord is invited to be present in every classroom and to help both the teachers and the pupils with all that they have to do. If a child is distressed for any reason, as well as bringing other kinds of comfort, the teacher is able to pray with him or her, just as a Christian parent would do at home or at church.

The Bible has much to say that is relevant to every subject taught. It is not that the Bible has to be endlessly quoted; rather, biblical truths and principles underlie everything that happens in the schools. The alternative in most state schools would be that God would not be mentioned from the beginning of the school day to its end. This can have a powerful educational effect, training the child to live as though God does not exist, as though He is irrelevant to everyday life.

Great benefits for the nation

Even the difficulties involved in running the schools can be seen to have had a positive aspect to them. For one thing, they keep everyone involved constantly in prayer – it is the only way to survive! The children are often able to experience the answers to these prayers first hand. What a valuable lesson that is for life!

When school, home and church all agree, the benefits in the lives of individual pupils and wider society are major and profound. Further research is planned to document in more detail the highly successful outcomes of an education that is based around the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's hope that, for the sake of our nation and its citizens, both the UK Government and the Christian Church at large will heed the research findings and recommendations. Without more support from Church and State, some of the little schools that have accomplished so much may well not be able to continue.

■ Sylvia Baker

References

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