

# Exploring teaching and transforming learning

Education Sunday on 31 January 2010 will focus on Vocation. In particular it will be a chance to celebrate the vocation of teaching. ACT is delighted to be a sponsor of Education Sunday. In this article Trevor Cooling, a longstanding member of ACT, reflects on the vocation of teaching from the perspective of his work in the *Transforming Lives* project.

## Prancing pirates

The sight of pirates prancing round the room looking for someone to walk the plank is not perhaps what everyone was expecting. After all they had come to a Christian event which was advertised as suitable for those wanting to know more about becoming a teacher. Despite appearances, they were not in the wrong place.

Actually they were at a *Transforming Lives Explore Teaching* event that was co-sponsored by ACT. *Transforming Lives* was set up in 2006 as an initiative to promote teaching as a Christian vocation. The *Explore Teaching* event was designed to inspire students and others with the



Trevor Cooling is currently the Director of the *Transforming Lives* Project. With his wife Margaret, he led the work at The Stapleford Centre during the 1980s and 1990s when it was owned by ACT. Trevor regularly writes and speaks on Christian education and is a regular contributor to the *Journal of Education and Christian Belief*, an ACT sponsored publication. He has a PhD in Religious Education and is currently Treasurer of the RE Council of England and Wales.

opportunities for ministry available to Christian teachers. During November 2008, would-be teachers in Leeds, Birmingham and London participated in the day-long event.

You may still be wondering about the pirates. True, you wouldn't find many at a recruitment day run by the government's *Training Development Agency for Schools*, so what were they doing at this Christian event? The answer lies with Footprints Theatre Trust who ran *Explore Teaching*, and created a highly enjoyable, interactive day. Their theme was a (fictional) reality TV show called *Venture Island Paradise*, a desert island where the show's participants had been living for so long that they now needed to recruit teachers for the families' children. The day consisted in discovering what sort of people were needed to be these teachers.

Lots of fun was had by everyone as we played games, sang songs, watched drama and listened to interviews. But it was definitely not a trivial experience and participants considered challenging questions like:

- How do you know you are called to teach?
- What is distinctive about being a Christian teacher?
- Can you be openly Christian when you teach in a religiously diverse situation?

Oh, and the pirates ... well they kept popping up to interview real classroom teachers about what the job is really like.

I would love to meet some of the *Explore Teaching* participants in five years' time. I am sure some of them will be teachers and will look back on their day with the pirates as a turning point in their decision to join teaching.

## Teachers count

'The single most important factor in determining a student's achievement isn't the colour of his skin or where he comes from, but who the child's



*'An excellent day. I wasn't sure what to expect, and was concerned it would be boring. I have learnt so much and feel very fortunate to benefit from the teaching and ideas. The catering was great and all the speakers were wonderful. Thank you.'*

Comment from an *Explore Teaching* participant



teacher is' (Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, p161).

Teachers, for good or for ill, do transform lives. Barack Obama is one of the many who recognise this fact. That is why it is important that significant numbers of Christians become teachers. If the Church is really concerned to influence the life of the nation, it really is a no-brainer that the ministry of Christian teachers is affirmed, supported and resourced. Unfortunately that is not obvious to everyone. Since *Transforming Lives* began in 2006, the one thing that has saddened me is that I have met so many Christian teachers who feel that their church simply does not acknowledge the strategic role that teachers play. Alison Brown's story below, which you can also read on the *Transforming Lives* website, is but one of the many I have heard.

'It did take time to think carefully about my calling. A close friend and I, another Mum, helped each other a lot as we went through a process of testing the idea. She ended up being ordained and I decided to teach, but we both felt our respective callings very strongly. The irony is that on the Sunday before I started my teacher training and she went off to begin her ordination training, only one of us was called out to be prayed for in church. I leave you to guess who.'

*Transforming Lives* has tried to do something about this. In October 2008, in partnership with the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC), we published a pack for churches which consists of a DVD of short video clips called *Teachers Transform Lives*, lots of ideas for using the clips in church and youth groups, and a booklet for church and youth leaders called *Supporting Christians in Education*. This pack is now being widely circulated by LICC and will provide the focus for Education Sunday on 31 January 2010. This is a real opportunity to highlight the ministry

of Christian teachers. So don't delay, from mid-September visit [www.educationsunday.org.uk](http://www.educationsunday.org.uk) to discover how your church or school could be involved.

### Teaching as cross-cultural mission

Leslie Newbiggin was a missionary bishop in the Church of South India for much of his working life. On his retirement he returned to England and began to write about the challenge of living as a Christian in the western world, subsequently becoming one of the most influential Christian commentators of the late twentieth century. His conclusion was that the gap between the prevailing culture and the gospel message was as wide in Britain as it was in India. The fact is that overseas missionaries spend considerable time in professional development that equips them for working across cultures, equipping them to contextualise their faith sensitively and effectively. Christian teachers receive little, if any, support in doing this even though they are probably working in one of the most complex, cross-cultural situations that exist in Britain.

The authors of the influential report *Mission-shaped church*, published by the Church of England in 2004, developed and applied Newbiggin's ideas. In particular the report commends the model of incarnational mission by which is meant the imitation of Christ's loving identification with the culture of his day alongside his costly counter-cultural stance which meant that he always offered

*'An imaginative and informative day. Clever way of introducing the idea of teaching.'*

Comment from an *Explore Teaching* participant

*'The day as a whole was brilliant; it really helped me think about being a Christian teacher in a way that was different and engaging.'*

Comment from an *Explore Teaching* participant

a God-centered alternative to the established ways of his own culture. The big question for me is what this means for the Christian teacher working with the National Curriculum? How do you teach as a Christian in a way that demonstrates love of the subject, but offers a counter-cultural Christian perspective?

### **Distinctively Christian?**

ACT member Elizabeth Green, a PhD student from Oxford University, recently compiled a report for The Stapleford Centre and the Christian think-tank Theos, in which she reviewed the academic research literature on schools with a Christian ethos. One of the nuggets in her report was the discovery of a couple of PhD theses that revealed that headteachers of Church schools have little idea what is distinctive about a Christian school. At interview, if asked to describe the characteristics of a *Christian* school, most candidates for headship talk about the characteristics of a *good* school. In other words Christian faith is no different from a good secular education. This may be a bit sarcastic, but in Britain it seems that most of us assume that what we do as Christian teachers is the same as any other teacher, except perhaps we smile more.

*Transforming Lives* wants to do something constructive to support teachers in offering a distinctively Christian contribution. Many *ACT Now* readers will be familiar with the work of David Smith on teaching foreign languages from a Christian perspective (see *ACT Now* Summer 2008, pages 18-20 where I wrote about David's ideas). David worked at The Stapleford Centre for a number of years and was a member of ACT's Charis project team. He is now a professor at Calvin



College in Grand Rapids in the USA, where he leads the Kuyers Institute. There his job is to promote Christian initiatives in pedagogy. David was the keynote speaker at the 2009 EurECA conference in Switzerland when he challenged and inspired delegates. (Visit [www.eureca-online.net](http://www.eureca-online.net) to access podcasts of David Smith's conference sessions.)

### **Transforming learning**

Following on from the conference, a group of teachers worked with David for a day, developing a proposal for a new online resource that will support Christian teachers in teaching high quality lessons that take seriously the fact that their students are spiritual beings. There is a long way to go, but sometime in 2011, this resource, *Transforming Learning*, will be available. Watch this space!

Maybe if the pirates return in ten years' time there will be a generation of teachers for them to interview who are teaching in a distinctively Christian way.

■ Trevor Cooling

### **Websites to visit**

- ACT: [www.christians-in-education.org.uk](http://www.christians-in-education.org.uk)
- Education Sunday: [www.educationsunday.org.uk](http://www.educationsunday.org.uk)
- EurECA: [www.eureca-online.net](http://www.eureca-online.net)
- Kuyers Institute: [www.pedagogy.net](http://www.pedagogy.net)
- London Institute for Contemporary Christianity: [www.licc.org.uk](http://www.licc.org.uk)
- Transforming Lives: [www.transforminglives.org.uk](http://www.transforminglives.org.uk)

*'I enjoyed every bit of it. This show has really motivated my thoughts of becoming a teacher. God bless you.'*

Comment from an *Explore Teaching* participant