

Transforming Lives

TEACHING AS A CHRISTIAN VOCATION IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN

We don't do God!

According to a recent research study, 17% of Christian teachers find their church helpful in relation to their daily work. Of course we all can work out what that means. An incredible 83% of Christian teachers find their church to be of no help or support in their day-to-day task of seeking to be a disciple of Christ in education. Here is an email that reached my inbox:

'In my church it has puzzled me that, once a year, I am "commissioned" and prayed for in my capacity as a temporary helper in the church crèche, which involves very little of my time and energy, but am never formally prayed for and supported in the extremely demanding job I do as a teacher of children with special needs; a job that God has specifically called me to do.'

Over the years, I have collected many stories like this from teachers who recognise the significant transformational role that they play in pupils' lives, but who find little interest being shown by their churches. Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair's infamous

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Director of Communications and Strategy from 1997 to 2003, once told the media 'we don't do God' when his boss was asked about the impact of his Christian faith on his politics. It is as though churches adopt the same policy. When it comes to the role of teachers in society, the church 'doesn't do God'. It is true that most churches are very enthusiastic about supporting Christian initiatives in schools; but what they find difficult to comprehend is how the day-to-day work of teaching and learning can be described as Christian work.

Galvanising support

I worked for ACT at Stapleford House, serving and supporting Christian teachers in this capacity from 1985 to 1998. I am currently Director of Transforming Lives, a project funded by the Jerusalem Trust to promote teaching as a Christian vocation; having a vocation means that Christians bring something distinctive to teaching. Transforming Lives works with organisations like ACT, ACT Scotland, ACTW and NIACT to galvanise churches into supporting Christian teachers, and into promoting teaching as a distinctive Christian ministry. In my own church we have a target to recruit people into mission work. The Transforming Lives vision is that when someone becomes a teacher that will count towards meeting the target. The key obstacle to this happening is that many Christians simply don't understand how a teacher's work can be seen as Kingdom of God work.

In order to address this challenge Transforming Lives is producing resources and participating in training events which exemplify how teaching and learning are at the heart of the church's mission. In particular we emphasise two key elements of being a teacher in contemporary Britain.



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Teaching distinctively

If it means nothing else, to be a distinctively Christian teacher surely means working under the authority of the Bible. But what does this mean in practice when teaching a curriculum laid down by the secular authorities?

Tom Wright, now Bishop of Durham, has developed a most helpful analogy. He asks us to imagine that a previously unknown Shakespeare play has been discovered, but with the fifth act lost. What is the best way, Wright asks, to complete this play so that it can be enjoyed by theatre audiences? His suggestion is that we commission several 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 to complete the story in the final fifth. The result 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. Wright suggests that the Bible operates like the unfinished Shakespeare play for Christians. The written text constitutes the first four acts. In our daily responsibilities we are seeking to complete the story of Scripture by the way we live our lives; we are seeking to be faithful, fifth-act Christians in the story that we tell through our lives.

Fifth-act Christians

Tom Wright's analogy illuminated for me the really important work that was done by the groundbreaking ACT Charis project in the 1990s. Charis, led by John Shortt and Alison Farnell, produced resources to support spiritual and moral development in subjects other than RE. Let me illustrate the approach from the work that David Smith did on teaching languages as part of the Charis team.

As a young teacher of modern foreign languages (MFL), David had a niggling question: 'What is the point of what I teach?' After three or four years of using the standard textbooks, he came to the conclusion that he was basically teaching his students to be effective tourists. They could negotiate a bus journey, ask directions and buy an ice cream; but so what? Putting it crudely, they



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Trevor is the author of *A Christian Vision for State Education* (1994, SPCK); co-author (with George Oliver) of *Church and School: The Contemporary Challenge* (1989, Grove Books); and co-author (with John Shortt) of *Agenda for Educational Change* (1997, Apollos).

were equipped to get from foreigners what they wanted to fulfil their own immediate needs. David realised that the modern languages he was teaching was reinforcing the consumerist story that significance in life comes from shopping.

New possibilities

David felt that this was not a particularly Christian underpinning for his ministry as a languages teacher. With others on the Charis team, and after much discussion and reading, he turned to the biblical concept of the importance of offering hospitality to the stranger for inspiration. What would, for example, German teaching look like if this became the underpinning story for his teaching rather than being an effective tourist? David and his friends set to work.

Of course the internal structure of the language did not change. What changed radically were the learning exercises used. To be hospitable to other language speakers entails learning to build relationships with them. Instead of having lots of work on, for example, buying things in German shops, the focus moved to understanding what it is like to be German and what can be learned from Germans. This approach means understanding German people as whole people with beliefs, doubts, struggles, fears and hopes. For example, David taught his students how to forgive in German; the textbooks only taught how to apologise. Building a

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relationship requires the language of forgiving; tourists can get by on the language of apologising!

I suggest that, in taking this approach, the Charis team were showing how it is possible to be distinctively Christian by paying attention to the story we are conveying through our approach to teaching and learning. This models being a fifth-act Christian teacher; someone who seeks to be biblically faithful. Transforming Lives and ACT promote this vision across all subjects.

A religiously diverse context

A challenging question for many Christians today is: 'How can teachers be distinctively Christian when they have to work in a context where religious diversity is treated as the norm?' Doesn't this inevitably mean they compromise their faith?

Here we can learn from Daniel. Taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel found himself an alien in a foreign land, but also a public servant in the King's court. In his brilliant book, *Stretch: lessons in faith from the life of Daniel* (2005, Authentic Media), Gerard Kelly describes Daniel as a resident alien; someone whose working life was spent amongst people who did not share his commitment to God. From everything written about him in the Old Testament, it seems Daniel excelled in his role and was highly regarded. However Daniel's ultimate loyalty was not as a successful public servant, but as a faithful follower of Yahweh.

Daniel offers us a model of how to live out a God-faithful vocation in a religiously diverse world. His desire to be faithful to Scripture whilst working as a public servant meant that he sought to transform the culture around him so that it was shaped more by Jewish values than the prevailing Babylonian values. His skill was in identifying the shared territory where Jewish values and Babylonian values overlapped and then reinterpreting the Babylonians' experience such that they became convinced of the excellence of Daniel's Jewish vision.

Daniel won the admiration of those he worked with, even though they didn't share his faith, because he was seen to be a person of integrity. But when asked to make loyalty to the state his ultimate loyalty, Daniel chose the lions' den. Had Daniel been a teacher in modern Britain, he would have been well-equipped for embracing his profession as a Christian vocation. I suggest that the Charis teams were showing us one way in which Christian teachers today can emulate Daniel.

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More information

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Get involved

Transforming Lives and ACT want to spread the message so that all Christians currently working in education are inspired to be distinctively Christian, and Christians not yet working in education are inspired to consider becoming a teaching assistant or teacher. You can help by:

- Encouraging Christian church leaders to use the Transforming Lives electronic Toolkit which is available free of charge from transforminglives@stapleford-centre.org
- Encouraging Christian church leaders to visit the website of the relevant Association of Christian Teachers:
 - ACT: www.christians-in-education.org.uk
 - ACT Scotland: www.actscotland.org.uk
 - ACTW: www.act-wales.org.uk
 - NIACT: www.niact.org.uk
- Making the relevant ACT website (see above) and the Transforming Lives website (www.transforminglives.org.uk) known through church newsletters, magazines and other outlets.
- Encouraging potential teachers to attend one of three Transforming Lives 'Experience Teaching' days (supported by a number of organisations including ACT) in:
 - Birmingham 8 November
 - Leeds 22 November
 - London 29 NovemberFor more information, email: transforminglives@stapleford-centre.org

■ Trevor Cooling