

Why Church schools: for what purpose and for whom?

Reflecting on his former experience as the Chairman of a diocesan board of education, one retired bishop wrote to us saying:

‘I came to the job thinking Church schools were an ecclesiastical irrelevance; I left it convinced that they are jewels in the ecclesiastical crown’

- 3.1** The statement in our terms of reference that the Church schools stand at the centre of the Church’s mission to the nation has the authority of the General Synod and the Archbishops’ Council. Action on this report must however be based on conviction as well as authority. We are moreover aware that what may be desirable in the light of Synod’s Resolution has not been the practice in all parishes.

One diocese in its consultation response said:

‘We feel that there is much ground to be covered, many hearts and minds to be engaged and won over before the nub of the motion (i.e. the General Synod motion) is in place in the mind of the Church. This is particularly true when it comes to matters relating to schools’ relationships with clergy and their relationships with parishes, deaneries and dioceses.’

- 3.2** We are also conscious that what we have to say in Chapter 7 requires a reassessment both of the training of clergy and of the way some parish churches respond to Church schools and Christian teachers in Community schools. We therefore begin with our own reflections on the desirability of Church schools being in fact at the centre of the Church’s mission.

The Church’s need to reach the young

- 3.3** The Church has a major problem in attracting young people to its services as a means of discharging its mission, and one that causes much concern. This bears directly on the future of the Church.
- 3.4** In contrast the Church has some 900,000 young people attending its schools. Not all of these schools are everything that they might be, but our experience is that the vast majority give their pupils the experience of the meaning of faith and of what it is to work and play in a community that seeks to live its beliefs and values. We set out in section 4.6 what we see as the fundamental characteristics of a Church school. These include meaningful daily worship and quality religious education as well as a distinctively Christian ethos.

- 3.5** We do not have a detailed analysis of Church attendance by young people under and over eleven years old. Observation suggests that attendance by those over eleven is a modest proportion of the 175,000 children who are currently counted as attending Church services on Sunday. One of the Review Group's central concerns is that, with our limited provision for this age group in Church secondary schools, we are not able to provide secondary school places for more than one in five of the children attending Church primary schools. This means that we are losing contact with most of the Church primary school children just at the time of life when they need answers to their questions and support in their faith. It is not that there is a lack of demand for places in many of our secondary schools. We comment elsewhere on their popularity (see 5.9) The gap between available places and demand for them is increasing: a reverse image of attendance at church services.
- 3.6** We conclude that while current practice in some parishes, and perhaps many, may not place Church schools at the centre of their mission, without the Church schools the Church would be reaching only a small minority of young people. We also conclude that the Christian life of parishes and the experience of staff and pupils in Church schools are enriched once there is an affirming relationship between them, and we have more to say on this in Chapter 7. The closer the schools are to the centre of the mission of the parish, the better for parish and school.
- 3.7** From observation we would add that, while we have had reports that in a small number of cases Church schools have lost their distinctiveness, this is far from the case in the many schools we have visited. These visits have often been heart-warming experiences, with the school's Christian character being evident as a continuing statement to the surrounding community of the Church as a living reality, seeking to practise what it preaches in a way that is wholly meaningful in a busy world.
- 3.8** We have also noted that through the children attending its schools, the Church has an opportunity to reach out to parents. The 900,000 children provide access to parents, very many of whom would otherwise have no contact with the Church.

The Diocese of London said in its evidence:

The Archbishop of York, as Bishop of London, was fond of pointing out that clergy will meet far more family members in a school than they are likely to encounter in Sunday services.

As of necessity adults will increasingly be engaged in the practice of lifelong learning. If Church schools can become family learning centres in response to this development, so also the opportunity to reach out to parents will be enhanced.

- 3.9** It has been put to us that a measure of the effectiveness of Church schools should be found in the number of young people they bring into Church services or other Church activities for children. Whether they come into Church or not, Church schools are giving them the opportunity to know Christ, to learn in a community that seeks to live by his word, and to

engage in worship. Where pupils come from homes which are not Christian, or only nominally Christian with parents who have little knowledge of the Bible, this is a gift they would not otherwise experience. For those from Christian homes it will help to develop their faith and endow them with knowledge they can pass on to their own children. To the extent that they do not go to church in their teen years or in their twenties, it may well be that the Christian grounding at school will bring them into church when they have families of their own. The justification for Church schools lies in offering children and young people an opportunity to experience the meaning of the Christian faith.

What do we mean by Church schools being *at the centre of the mission of the Church to the nation*?

- 3.10** We do not take the Resolution of the General Synod to mean that Church schools are the centre of the Church's mission, but as the Resolution says, '**at the centre**'. We take this to mean that they stand alongside the parish churches, which lead the missionary work of the Church, as an integral part of the Church community, offering Christ to the young and through them, to varying degrees, offering parents the opportunity to learn from children and to engage in the life of a Christian institution. As one headteacher aptly put it of her school at one of our consultation meetings, 'We do not admit children, we admit families.' In its full realization, then, a Church school admits families to its community with the child, and in so doing enriches family life. Through partnership with families the Church is better able to foster the educational achievement of pupils. **It should be a special objective of every Church school to engage the parents in the education and the broader school life of the child.** In this way the school enlarges its mission of service and of nurture.

The Church's mission to the nation

- 3.11** If the Church schools are at the centre of the Church's mission, their work must derive from the mission of the whole Church. In a sentence, the Church's mission is to open up people to what God desires for them: Church schools are places where a particular vision of humanity is offered. More fully, but still very briefly the mission of the Church is:

to proclaim the gospel;

to nourish Christians in their faith;

to bring others into the faith;

and

to nurture and maintain the dignity of the image of God in human beings through service, speaking out on important issues and to work for social justice as part of that mission.

Our purposes in Church schools

- 3.12** These elements are present in the proposals we offer for consideration in this report. Church schools are places where the faith is lived, and which therefore offer opportunities to pupils and their families to explore the truths of Christian faith, to develop spiritually and morally, and to have a basis for *choice* about Christian commitment. They are places where the beliefs and practices of other faiths will be respected. Church schools are not, and should not be, agents of proselytism where pupils are *expected* to make a Christian commitment.
- 3.13** Turning now to the distinctive mission of the Church schools within the Church, we see it as an important and challenging part of our task to offer advice on that mission for the present times. In doing so, we would counsel that today's Church should be respectful of what was achieved by previous generations in responding to the needs of their times as they saw them, and of the devoted way in which a host of Christians today is carrying their work onward. Our concern is to support them in their ongoing tasks, in very varying and changing circumstances; to offer a developmental way forward, which will need to be interpreted according to the circumstances in which individual schools find themselves; and in particular to offer some guidelines to the dioceses in giving effect to our recommendations on expanding provision.
- 3.14** Our statement of the purpose of the Church in its Church schools is one that reflects the needs and opportunities of the present times. When Matthew Arnold was writing his famous poem on the melancholy long withdrawing roar of the sea of faith along 'the vast edges drear / And naked shingles of the world'¹ in the nineteenth century, some two million children attended Sunday school. Today, the numbers are very different, **and if the children are not coming to us we must go to them. Church schools are the Church's major opportunity to serve young people. It is an opportunity more and more parents are asking the Church to take.**
- 3.15** It would not have been possible for the Durham Commission of Enquiry² to write in these terms 30 years ago, when the Church's role in education was regarded with some scepticism, and the emphasis was being placed on the Church's mission of service to the community, through education, rather than on the role of the Church schools as combining a mission of service with that of nourishing children of the faith in their faith.
- 3.16** The ministry of service is well established, and has historically been understood as the 'general' purpose of the Church in education as opposed to the 'domestic' purpose of offering education in a Christian context to the children of members of the Church of England. The general purpose proceeds from the fourth of the elements in the mission of the Church – work for human dignity – we identified in the eleventh paragraph of this chapter. It is underpinned by a theology of service. As put at a gathering of the World Council of Churches in 1968 (amended to include women as well as men):³

'It is a Christian's concern for the wholeness of the human being, for the quality of the common life, for the direction in which humanity goes, that turns us towards education now and sets us inside it and will not let us disengage.'

It expresses the Church's concern to serve all humanity as children of God.

- 3.17** The hitherto expressed 'domestic' function proceeds from a theology of nurture: the nurture of the worshipping community, and the nurture of young people in and from the faith. From now on, we propose to use the terms 'service' and 'nurture' as our own description of the Church's purposes in education.
- 3.18** Over the last 15 years in particular the priority the Durham Commission gave to the service function has come under increasing challenge. In a paper to the General Synod published in 1984 (*A Future in Partnership*) the case was made that in every Church school both the service and nurture purposes should be consciously present, the school contributing to the provision of general education in the neighbourhood whilst offering an education grounded in faith. The relationship between the Church and the state has developed into a willing partnership in which the distinctive contribution of the Church schools is welcomed. This spirit of partnership, which has characterized recent governments, has been reflected in a succession of legislative instruments over the last twelve years which have helped the Church to foster the Christian character of its schools and to engage at local level in partnership with other providers, and the local education authorities in particular.

The balance between the service and nurture purposes of the Church in education

- 3.19** The balance between the service and nurture purposes of the Church school is not one that can be prescribed for all time. It will rightly need to respond to the needs of the times. As we have said, since the time of the Durham Commission the nurture purpose of the Church, as part of a partnership with Community schools, has gained in emphasis. Following the increased standing of Church schools with parents and more generally with society, and the associated increase in demand for places, it has been inevitable that governing bodies in Voluntary Aided schools should respond to the demand from Christian parents. Moreover, in an increasingly secular society the Church is right to respond to the concern of Christian parents to give their children the opportunity to experience what it is to learn in a distinctively Christian environment.
- 3.20** The only way in which the Church can adequately respond to that demand and continue to fulfil its service purpose is to expand the provision of places in Church schools. We recommended increased provision for secondary schools in our interim report in July 2000 and in our Consultation Report. We confirm such a recommendation now, and we also make recommendations for some increased provision in primary schools (see Chapter 5).
- 3.21** In noting today's increased welcome for distinctive approaches to education, we see no dichotomy between the service and nurture purposes of the Church in education. Rather we see the Church serving the nation in a distinctive way as a gospel imperative. The Church has a commission to engage with society and its institutional structures precisely because there is good news to offer. It is part of the Church's wider sense of mission to society to engage with the community in a distinctive manner, recognizing the

common elements within the experience of its people and sharing in their life. This compels us to be in education, and visibly in the bricks and mortar of our schools themselves.

- 3.22** It was Christ's wish to 'let the little children come to me' (Mark 10:14). Today's society is one where medical and technological progress proceeds apace, often challenging once established norms of morality and ethical understanding. Telecommunications have seemingly made the whole world accessible at the touch of a button. Globalization and the ascendancy of consumerism have emphasized personal choice, but have not so far generated a balancing sense of community or a coherent sense of responsibility for sustaining the earth's own well-being or for the quality of our civilization. In a world of shifting sands, many parents have welcomed the stability offered by schools that offer an enduring alternative to the growingly secular values of society.
- 3.23** In offering an invitation to children and young people from all backgrounds to participate in a Christian community, Church schools can provide a real experience of God's love for all humanity. In a Church school, pupils not only learn about religion but they can experience it as a living tradition and inheritance of faith. Church schools are therefore a unique gift from the Church to an increasingly secular culture. The Archbishop of Canterbury has written:⁴

Church schools are as concerned as any other school to equip pupils for lives marked by rapid change, global competition and insecurity. But Church schools know in their viscera that this is not just about acquiring skills and good examination results. It is about forming people who have the moral strength and spiritual depth to hold to a course and weather ups and downs. It is about forming people who know that economic competition is not more important than family life and love of neighbour, and that technical innovation is not more important than reverence for the beauty of creation. It is about forming people who, however academically and technically skilful, are not reduced to inarticulate embarrassment by the great questions of life and death, meaning and truth. Church schools themselves embody the truth that a context of firm principles suffused by faith and love is the best and right basis for learning and growing.'

- 3.24** We believe that the revelation of God's love for all humanity within a holistic approach to education is at the heart of the Church's purpose in our Church schools. This is reflected in the ethos statement that was offered to all Church schools two years ago after consultation with diocesan directors of education. It has been widely adopted, and reads:

Recognizing its historic foundation, the school will preserve and develop its religious character in accordance with the principles of the Church at parish and diocesan level.

The school aims to serve its community by providing education of the highest quality within the context of Christian belief and practice. It encourages an understanding of the meaning and

significance of faith and promotes Christian values through the experience it offers all its pupils.

- 3.25** The way this ethos statement is interpreted will reflect the individual circumstances of schools, which vary greatly. But it will be the aspiration of all that Christian values and principles will, as one diocese put it in evidence to us, ‘run through every area of school life as the writing runs through a stick of rock’. If the Church has a calling to participate in education, then it must be in a bold and decisive manner, not seeking to impose its faith but offering it as a gift to be experienced through the enjoyment pupils have in working in a community where Christian principles are practised.
- 3.26** The gift is Christ. Through him the Church has a model of what it is to grow towards full humanity. The Church takes and derives its stand from the love of God and the commandment to love your neighbour. The Church has a clear point of reference that supports Christians in upholding the values of the faith. In this context, the Church school offers a spiritual and moral basis for the development of human wholeness and a sure foundation for personal and social values based on the person and ministry of Christ. The Church school offers a distinctive language for understanding life and interpreting human experience. As a community of faith, the Church school should, in its best expression, reflect the nature of the Trinity, a life shared and defined by reference to others. Here we can begin to discover who we are, why we are, and – perhaps most importantly – what we might be.
- 3.27** Writing of ‘the heart of education’, the Archbishop of York has said:⁵

‘The school is called to reflect these qualities: a fellowship and community which gives individuals scope fully to be themselves, yet participating equally in the common life. Furthermore, to stress that the school is a community of persons (reflecting the Trinitarian life) is to emphasize relationships; the personal is thus prior to the institutional; the institutional exists not for its own sake but solely for the purpose of nurturing and sustaining the relations of the persons who comprise any particular community or organization.’

- 3.28** In a Church school, the offer of a Christian understanding of the world and the place of humanity in it will be reflected in worship. In particular, it will be reflected in the everyday life of the school, quietly respectful of the beliefs of others and of other faiths, but confident in its own faith. Church schools will not actively seek to convert children from the faith of their parents, but pupils will experience what it is to live in a community that celebrates the Christian faith; to work within a framework of discipline and yet to be confident of forgiveness; to begin to share the Christian’s hope and the Christian experience that the greatest power in life and beyond it is selfless love.

A policy of inclusiveness

- 3.29** The Church’s approach to education as a whole, while admitting of diversity of practice in the light of particular local circumstances, is one founded on a notion of inclusiveness rather than separation from the community.

The composition of its school population, especially in primary schools where parents generally want their children educated close to home, will reflect the composition of the neighbourhood and must therefore be inclusive of all ethnicity, belief and social class. The Church will seek to develop its provision as part of a wider partnership with communities. Its schools will seek to engage actively with all parents and to be distinctively welcoming to them.

- 3.30** The policy of inclusiveness is most apparent in Church schools where, over the years, the community has become predominantly one of minority ethnic families, notably Muslim or Sikh. In these cases the school may be predominantly or even wholly of children of these faiths. We find that, in these cases, the schools are respectful of the faith of parents, but nevertheless offer the children an experience of the Christian faith, both through the everyday life of the school and through inclusive forms of worship. The advice to us was that parents welcome the opportunity to send their children to a faith school where there is belief in God.
- 3.31** The policy of inclusiveness extends also to children of no faith where, without seeking to convert these children to the faith, the school offers the practice of faith, worship and a school life founded on Christian values, all of which give the children an opportunity to make an informed choice that they might otherwise not experience.
- 3.32** The Diocese of London wrote movingly in its response to consultation in terms that could equally apply to some Community schools:

In some [of our] schools, one only has to walk through the door and meet the children to know which part of the world is at war this week. In those schools, there are children who do not speak English, who have been traumatized by what they have witnessed, who have experienced real suffering and who can, within a few short weeks of being in a stable environment, begin to smile and play again. At school they can begin to flower again.

Humanist and secular perspectives

- 3.33** We are aware that during the course of our work opposition has been expressed to the concept of religious schools. In their evidence both the British Humanist Association (BHA) and the National Secular Society (NSS) have claimed that such schools are ‘divisive’ and exclusive and that they reduce parental choice. According to the National Secular Society, ‘the more religious schools there are, the more divided society will become’. They see our proposals as ‘a last ditch attempt [by the Church] to regain influence and support’. Both the BHA and NSS oppose the public funding of Church schools. It should be noted that primary legislation would be needed to abolish Church schools.
- 3.34** Our view is that Church schools are a legitimate expression of diversity within the educational system. We question the assumption that religion is by its nature inescapably divisive, and the philosophical corollary of this assumption that only a ‘secular’ understanding of the world can be truly

inclusive. We have noted on our visits that Church schools often have a widespread appeal to all sections of society, and that parents of other faiths often choose Church schools because they take faith seriously. Church schools are to be found in remote villages and in the heart of the inner cities. They represent the Church of England's visible commitment to the nation's education and service to many different types of community. Our position is that a Christian understanding of the world calls us to celebrate the individuality and equal value of all humanity. We therefore want to celebrate the diversity of our schools and the great range of children and young people they educate from all sections of society.

- 3.35** A Christian understanding of life perceives God's creative, redemptive and transforming purpose in the whole of human activity. Church schools therefore have an important role in helping people – children and parents alike – to understand their part in working towards the common good as understood in a Christian society. In its educational role, the Church is working to serve that common good, and to develop greater mutual understanding, and is not aiming to promote a sectarian endeavour.
- 3.36** This understanding leads us to conclude that the notions of distinctiveness and inclusiveness are not mutually exclusive. A distinctive approach to education needs to be matched by openness to all elements of society if introversion is to be avoided. That is the strength of the community of Church schools: Christ calls us to serve **all** people as an expression of our calling. We note that the British Humanist Association is 'in favour of integrated and inclusive schools, which can instil sound moral principles based on shared human experience'. Our own vision of inclusiveness is based on Christ's commandment to love all people, and his own sharing fully in the life of humanity: in his birth, in his own ministry of healing and teaching, and in his suffering, death and resurrection. Church schools are part of the body of Christ, and a visible recognition of the divine within human experience.

Parental choice and educational standards

- 3.37** Today the Church schools stand well in the regard of many parents of all faiths and no faith. The most powerful consideration with very many parents in choosing a school is its educational performance and that the distinctive needs of each child are understood. Many Church schools have earned a good reputation for these qualities. Even within Church schools that have not earned such a reputation, parents are often influenced by the security they feel from sending children to a school which they know has a well-grounded basis for its values and moral standards recognized even by those who are not practising Christians.
- 3.38** In making this report on our findings, we are conscious that there are very many Community schools that have clear moral purposes and in which parents rightly have every confidence. We simply comment that we have found that the distinctive character of Church schools is attractive to many parents because it is inherent in their claim and practice to serve Christ.
- 3.39** On educational performance, as we say above, many Church schools have earned a good reputation for educational results. Our recommendation for a

substantial increase in Church secondary provision is not based on an argument that all do well in academic results. While visits brought home to us how excellent these schools can be, two of them in areas of great social disadvantage were in special measures, although we were glad to learn that one of them is now out of them. Church schools face the same difficulties as Community schools and in this report we stress the importance of the Church ensuring that in considering proposals for expanding its provision, it has the necessary high quality school leaders (see Chapter 5).

- 3.40** Until recently there has been little analysis of the results of Church schools, and there is need for more. With the focus in our recommendations about provision of Church of England secondary schools, we have looked into their GCSE results. We find that the average point score is 12 per cent higher than in Community schools, a difference confirmed by independent research sent to us by Civitas. Another measure, the percentage getting A*–C passes, points in the same direction. Further information is given briefly in Appendix 3. The percentage receiving free school meals in Church secondary schools was 15 per cent as compared with 17 per cent in Community secondary schools.
- 3.41** The concern of the Church, however, like that of parents is with individual children rather than with national averages and it must be the purpose of the Church to strive continually to achieve more for its pupils as individuals, in terms of results as conventionally assessed, and in their development as human beings. The Church should not be deterred from seeking especially to serve areas of social and economic deprivation by any adverse effect on the aggregate results of its schools.
- 3.42** Our distinctive purpose and contribution in education is to offer Christ: to embrace the development of the spiritual life and awareness of young people. Our commitment is to developing the potential of each child as an individual, made in the image of God. This commitment means that we endorse the importance of raising standards of educational achievement in schools so that our children are equipped to live life fully and contribute to the lives of others. It also means that Church schools should react positively and decisively to any indication, following inspection, of scope for improvement or need to remedy any inadequate performance. The interests of the children require that in these circumstances action should be timely and effective.
- 3.43** In so far as it lies within them, we want our children – every one of them – ‘to do well’, and the levels of school attainment, whether through teacher assessment, Standard Assessment Tests, the GCSE and so on, to be a source of real satisfaction to parents.

Notes

1 *Dover Beach* (1867), lines 26–7.

2 *The Fourth R*, SPCK, 1970, was the Report of the Commission chaired by the then Bishop of Durham to enquire into Religious Education.

3 Quoted in *The Fourth R*.

4 ‘The Importance of Church schools’, from *A Christian Voice in Education: Distinctiveness in Church Schools*, The National Society, 1988, pp. 9–10.

5 ‘A Christian Vision in Education’, *A Christian Voice in Education*, pp. 13–14.