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# Precious Cargo

## The Value of Religious Education in the Formation of Students in Anglican Schools

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Why is the Anglican Church committed to owning, auspicing and supporting schools throughout Australia and the world? Without a doubt the reason flows from the church's participation in the mission of God in the world. Schools because of their role in educating and nurturing young people are a natural and obvious place for this mission to occur. The 2001 Dearing Review into Church of England Schools captured the essence of this in the simple yet profound statement that: "Church schools are places where a particular vision of humanity is offered". That vision of humanity is the one given in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, as found within the Bible. This vision helps us to understand our relationship with God, with others and with our world. It is a vision that hopes to create individuals who are deeply compassionate, morally and ethically brave, community focused and who see the world as a place needing care, restoration and service.

In seeking to expose young people to this vision Anglican schools adopt a range of strategies. These include helping young people to gain knowledge of the Christian faith, providing them with an experience of Christian community and offering opportunities for them to serve others in the wider community. While the adoption of the Christian faith by individuals in schools would be a desirable outcome for the church, Anglican schools are committed to the principle, of non-coercion. The particular vision of humanity offered to young people in Anglican schools should be one of the features that sets it apart from other schools in the Independent School sector in Australia. Anglican schools are different from most of the religiously based schools in Australia because of the very large number of students within them who have little or no exposure to the Christian faith. We have an opportunity to offer something valuable, unique and life changing and yet anecdotal evidence suggests that in the area of religious education we may be failing to meet the mark.

## Burning the Cargo

A hundred years ago, so the story goes, two paddle steamers left Memphis about the same time, traveling down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. As they travelled side by side, sailors from one vessel made a few remarks about the snail's pace of the other. Words were exchanged, challenges were made and the race began. Competition became vicious as the two boats roared through the Deep South.

One boat began falling behind - not enough fuel. There had been plenty of coal for the trip, but not enough for a race. As the boat dropped back, an enterprising young sailor took some of the ship's cargo and tossed it into the ovens. When the sailors saw that the supplies burned as well as the coal, they fuelled their boat with the material they had been assigned to transport. They ended up winning the race, but burned their cargo.

The big point of difference between an Anglican or Christian school and any other is the importance it places on the spiritual side of life, its "particular vision of humanity". This precious cargo sometimes seems to be forgotten or burned in order to fuel the fire to win the competition for the prestige that comes with sporting, academics and other ways of ranking the school.

Another story is told about a lighthouse along a bleak coast which was tended by a keeper who was given enough oil for one month and told to keep the light burning every night. One day a woman asked for oil so that her children could stay warm. Then a farmer came. His son needed oil for a lamp so he could read. Still another needed some for an engine. The keeper saw each as a worthy request and measured out just enough oil to satisfy all. Near the end of the month, the tank in the lighthouse ran dry. That night the beacon was dark and three ships crashed on the rocks. More than 100 lives were lost.

When a government official investigated, the man explained what he had done and why. "You were given one task alone," insisted the official. "It was to keep the light burning. Everything else was secondary. There is no defence."

Are Anglican schools burning the cargo they have been given? Is the fuel required for quality Religious Education being given to other areas of school life?

Anglican schools find themselves in a challenging and competitive environment in which they must make decisions about how time, money and resources are allocated. It is rarely a choice being made between good and bad, important and frivolous but inevitably between two good things that are important. Anglican schools place a large priority on providing a 'quality'

education, but if this comes at the cost of failing to fulfil another primary duty, to educate and nurture the spiritual side of students, it fails at both. While the observations outlined below do not apply to all schools, they have been reported frequently enough to indicate that they are not uncommon features in Anglican schools.

### **The Non Provision of Dedicated Specialist Religious Educators**

Religious Education is a unique and challenging subject to teach. Religious and Christian knowledge is not a publically agreed truth in Australian society, nor is it something with which many adults are familiar. In Anglican schools the Christian faith should not be taught in a neutral or purely academic way, but as something that is positive and beneficial for the life of students. Anglican Religious Education should be impassioned, but not coercive. This specific approach requires not only significant content knowledge, but skillful and sensitive pedagogy. Religious Education is taught with the most rigour and authenticity when it is taught by trained specialist teachers who are themselves faithful and active Christians.

Some Anglican schools in Australia have taken the approach of using classroom teachers not equipped for the task of teaching Religious Education. This has been the case in some places because Religious Education is taught across the junior, middle or senior school simultaneously, a situation preventing specialists from taking multiple classes. This approach has been defended by the assertion that it gives Religious Education a special status within the school because it is not taught by a 'God person', but by all. Anecdotal evidence, however, indicates that this approach actually undermines the status of Religious Education as a subject. This is primarily because it ends up being taught by teachers who are not passionate about the subject, do not wish to teach it or have little or no subject mastery. Schools using this approach run the significant risk of undermining the task of helping students explore and understand the Christian faith due to poor pedagogy and low levels of passion. It is also difficult for a Head of Religious Education to assist, in-service and meet with the large number of staff teaching in this scenario.

### **Minimum Time Allocation for Religious Education**

It might be reasonably assumed that the quantity of time allocated to a subject reflects the importance attached to it within a school community. Most Anglican schools offer only one lesson a week throughout the school. In considering time allocation it may be noted that both Catholic and Lutheran School Systems in Queensland offer significantly more time than this. There are considerable problems with both time allocation and particularly the single lesson provided to Religious Educators. When a single lesson is provided in a week, and particularly if it occurs simultaneously across a campus, there is an increased risk that the lesson for the

week will be missed because of sports days, public holidays and other school related interferences. When this occurs, unlike other subjects that have multiple lessons a week, the teacher will not see their class for a two week period. This interferes with the flow and development of student learning and thoughtfulness about the subject.

Anecdotally, Religious Educators report that their subject is frequently targeted by other leaders within the school seeking to achieve particular tasks in their own areas. These include the provision of pastoral care lessons, sports and other meetings, national competitions and photos, among other things. Apart from communicating a clear lack of respect or priority given to Religious Education, it also further reduces the time allocated to it. In some Anglican schools there is less time given to Religious Education than in the local state school. This is a travesty. It should also be noted that time allocated to worship, while being part of student faith formation, should not be part of the time allocated to Religious Education.

### **Poor Quality Material and Pedagogy**

When Religious Education is taught by non-specialists with little time or motivation it is not surprising that the material used, particularly in the junior school area, often lacks the depth and quality that might be expected in a school professing the Christian faith at the core of its ethos. Many Anglican schools use one of two 'off the shelf' materials developed within Australia. While there are positive features to this material, by itself it is insufficient to meet the task of educating students in Anglican schools. When this material, which is in the form of workbooks, is placed in the hands of those with little knowledge or passion, the lesson has the potential to devolve into a 'fill out this page' approach to pedagogy. In addition to this the material tends to cover a limited range of topics inadequate to the well rounded Religious Education that might be expected in an Anglican schools.

### **Burning the Opportunity**

Most schools today claim that education should be holistic. The Melbourne Declaration *on Educational Goals for Young Australians* declares that: "Schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation's ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion." Anglican schools should be leading the way in the area of spirituality. Quality Religious Education resourced with specialist teachers, given adequate time and resources, can provide students with a unique experience. We have a precious cargo that needs to be preserved and delivered to those who will make a difference to the future of Australia.

## **Why Religious Education is Important and Relevant for students in Anglican Schools in Australia**

### **Answering questions of meaning**

Religious thought provides the metaphysics to enable people to make sense of the physical world. It is one of the few subjects that has a focus on reflecting on the meaning of life and on asking questions around purpose. Science might provide us with information on how things work, but it does not ask the 'why' questions of life? While it is true that people ultimately decide their own meaning in life, quality Religious Education helps them to think about the questions and explore the answers.

### **The big issues confronting the world are religious issues, now and in the future.**

Religion pervades innumerable aspects of daily life, from Tony Abbott giving his thoughts about Jesus and Asylum Seekers, through to discussions on gay marriage, through to the meat we buy in Coles being halal, so many of the global issues confronting us need to be understood from a religious perspective. Any viewing of the evening news reveals the political, social and cultural necessity to appreciate the religious perspective.

### **Deeper understanding of the origins, development and history of Western civilization**

It is difficult to truly understand the development of Western civilisation without an appreciation of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Perceptions of historical underpinnings of the Bible, and the development of ethics and doctrine found in these texts, are intrinsic to the way in which Western society has developed over millennia. Therefore, it is imperative that we have at least a familiarity with Biblical texts or, at best, a faith-based understanding to make sense of our Western world experience.

### **Enables a heightened ability to discern religious themes in popular culture**

Spiritual themes and Christian themes and images repeatedly occur in films and music and books. Examples include *Avatar* and the *Matrix*, *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars*. A much deeper understanding of these will be had by understanding religion. Religious Education helps students to evaluate the veracity and worth of the conglomeration of visuals and underlying messages positive and negative that are the hallmark of popular culture.

### **Enable person to be a better citizen in a pluralistic multicultural society**

The best way we can cultivate tolerance and respect is by having a deeper understanding of the people around us. The communities we live in are diverse and if we want to navigate those worlds we need to understand them. I wonder how many people in our community think a Sikh wearing a turban is a Muslim? Do our students even know what Buddhists believe? Religious

Education facilitates respect for self, but also respect for others' rights and responsibilities through the educative process. At a time when communities are becoming more diverse, there is increasing need for a more religiously literate society and a religiously literate society promotes a society of understanding and, ideally, diminishing the occurrence of religious friction and intolerance and social unrest.

### **Development of the spiritual aspect of people – understanding of self**

In 2008 the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians was released and in it were statements referring to students; spiritual wellbeing. "Schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians." "The curriculum will enable students to develop knowledge in the disciplines of english, mathematics, science, languages, humanities and the arts; to understand the spiritual, moral and aesthetic dimensions of life." It is notable that the Declaration, whilst secular, recognises the role of the spiritual dimension as a means of our young people understanding themselves

### **Develops ethical and moral thinking**

University degrees can provide great intellectual rigor, but do not necessarily consider issues of right and wrong from a spiritual perspective. Religious Education provides a forum for students to investigate and discuss ethics and morality with the benefit of the spiritual dimension. Additionally, given the inclusion of World Religions within the Religious Education curriculum, there is a sensitivity to the morality and ethical perspectives of other religious traditions.

### **Provides critical and reflective thinking of a type not present in many other subjects**

Religious Education is multidisciplinary by nature. Because it is a rigorous and demanding academic discipline in its own right, it engenders critical thinking in the search for clarification and truth in sometimes uncertain fields. It encourages philosophical thought, decision making skills, collaboration and independent working skills and the search for compromise and conflict resolutions that work. It creates opportunities for young people to develop their skills of dialogue, interpretation and analysis in a coherent context. All these are vital skills in a modern workforce where communication, collaboration and cooperation are core skills. Because Religious Education has a multidisciplinary nature, involving textual study, philosophical thinking, ethics, social understanding and the skills of analysis and reasoning developing core skills of literacy.

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# Religious and Christian Education in Anglican Schools

## Recommendations for Excellence

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The Vision Statement for Anglican Schools in the Diocese of Brisbane states:

***“As learning communities of excellence, Anglican Schools in the Diocese of Brisbane are called to share the mission of the church to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God through: Faith, Vocation and Service.”***

The provision of a Religious Education Program is given as an example of actions which contribute to the vision becoming a reality in Anglican Schools. The following features are encouraged by the Vision Statement.

A Religious Education program that:

- Is compulsory for all students
- Is grounded in the Christian faith
- Makes clear the beliefs and practice of the Anglican way of Christianity
- While grounded in the Christian foundations recognizes diversity and is affirming and inclusive in form and content
- Encourages and developed the notion of vocation as living in response to God's call;
- Is taught by committed Christian (preferably Anglican) teachers trained in Religious Education who are encouraged and facilitated to continue professional development.
- Is integral to the school and seen to be valued by the school
- Encourages the development of moral values and reasoning and nurtures the notions and practices of the gospel values of compassion and forgiveness
- Is relevant to the students beliefs and experiences
- Encourages students to think reflectively and critically about faith and the 'big' questions of human life.
- Is well resourced

\* Throughout this document the term Religious Education applies to programs named: Christian Education, Christian Living, Faith and Life, Religious and Values Education.

Religious Education is a learning area that belongs to the formal curricular program of an Anglican School. It should therefore be accorded the same recognition as other learning areas, including appropriate timetabling, budget, staffing and resourcing.

The Anglican Church Southern Queensland identifies the following as indicators of excellence in Religious Education and encourages all its schools to move towards these ideals.

## Time Allocation

**Recommendation: Primary:** *Either a minimum of two periods/week (based on the normal length of the schools lesson periods) or a minimum of 40 hours/year.*

**Secondary:** *Either a minimum of two periods/week (based on the normal length of the schools lesson periods) or a minimum of 60 hours/year.*

*These recommended minimum do not include time given to worships, services, ceremonies or religious messages in assemblies.*

The allocation of time given to a subject reflects the importance attached to it within the school. Recognising the significant pressures and requirements placed on schools to meet minimum hours for National Curriculum subjects, a realistic time allocation has been recommended. It might be noted that within the Catholic Education system in Queensland schools are expected to teach 2.5 hours of Religious Education a week. It might be noted that many state schools currently provide an allocation of 30+ minutes of religious education per week.

## Faculty

**Recommendation:** *Schools should have a specific Religious Education faculty overseen by a head of faculty who has expertise in the area.*

*It is recommended that the head of faculty's workload would be predominantly in the Religious Education area.*

This approach will enrich the quality of Religious Education and enable the development of school based programs that are aligned with the Anglican Schools Syllabus.



Additionally, the faculty, in line with all school faculties, would have an appropriate budget to facilitate the purchasing of resources, attendance at professional development and membership of professional associations.

## **Specialist Teachers**

**Recommendation:** *In both Primary and Secondary the subject will be taught by dedicated specialist teachers who have training in the area of Religious Education. These teachers should be Christians.*

Religious Education is a unique and challenging subject to teach. It requires not only significant content knowledge but a skillful and sensitive pedagogical approach. Religious and Christian knowledge is not a publically agreed truth in Australian society, nor is it something with which many adults are familiar. In Anglican Schools the Christian faith is not to be taught in a neutral purely academic way but as something that is positive and beneficial to a person's life. This is not something that non-Christians can do with authenticity or rigour.

## **Professional Development**

**Recommendation:** *Religious Educators should be provided with adequate time for meeting and professional development throughout the school year in line with other subject areas*

## **Course Development**

**Recommendation:** *Schools should ensure that their RE course is compatible with the structure and ethos of the RE Syllabus developed by the ASC in partnership with Anglican Schools*

By having a compatible RE course the school will have access to relevant resources and PD, as well as ensuring that their RE course is consistent with the focus and direction of the Anglican Church Southern Queensland. This will also enable schools to select units and topics that are most relevant to the specific needs of that school community.