

The Traditional Anglican Grammar School

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in any thing,
To do it as for thee:

George Herbert *The Elixir*

The Anglican Grammar School is a well known part of the Australian educational scene. The more famous “old” schools have their devoted supporters and their harsh critics inside and outside the Christian community. Whatever the rights and wrongs of those criticisms may be these schools have had an enormous influence in the nation and most schools of all types can trace aspects of their practice (school sport, uniforms, citizenship education) back to the Grammar School lineage.

It is perhaps a commonplace that parents choose our Anglican schools for different reasons than those that motivate us to establish them and keep them running. This generates a distinction between the duty and the purpose of the school. Thus in the Diocese of Sydney the School has a duty to educate and a purpose of propagation of faith. The usual parent perspective focuses on the educational offering of the School, governing bodies focus on both and the Church in general emphasises the propagation of faith. In the typical Anglican school of the 21st century the majority of the clientele are unchurched and furthermore the school may be the only authentic Christian voice in their lives. This gives both a sense of opportunity and a heavy obligation. The relationship between the school and its client parents is in the end a covenant of trust as well as a legal agreement encapsulated in the enrolment form. The parents trust the school to educate well and accept in return the school’s right to present the gospel.

Anglican Schools belong more to the Grammar School tradition than to other constructions of educational enterprise. The Grammar School arose first in the middle ages and was allied to the preparation of students to attend university (a religious experience at the time) and then to enter the Church, the Law or public service (with considerable overlap between the three).

The Reformation brought an emphasis on a more universal literacy as the emphasis was laid on the individual conscience as formed under the guidance of the word of God. Printing of devotional material, such as Calvin’s commentaries and then broader cultural influences such as essays, poetry, propaganda pamphlets rapidly led to an increase in the literate proportion of the population. Reading and writing were sacred gifts and blessings at first but soon became the desired hallmark of the gentleman and the middle class as well as being widespread in the non-conformist denominations. Wealthy Christian individuals shifted from the medieval practice of

endowment of chantries to the endowment of schools. Consequently, many English schools of the Grammar School type were founded in the 150 years or so after the English Reformation, and the grammar schools of England retained their pre-eminence as places of preparation for university and the public service for the next three hundred years. It was by no means a story of unblemished enlightenment and happiness as in the 18th and early 19th centuries they were places of considerable violence, corruption and vice, with troops called to suppress the students of leading schools on at least one occasion.¹

The mid 19th century saw a major change in the public schools and grammar schools of England, combined with a spurt of new foundations, and this was mirrored in Australia between 1840 and 1900. These schools combined: an emphasis on a moral purpose with character education through games often pilloried as “muscular Christianity”; a reformed concept of student leadership (the Prefect body) and a stronger level of academic study. The origin of this philosophy is associated traditionally with Dr Arnold at Rugby, but he was not alone in developing these ideas. In a relatively short period of time Arnold and others transformed the Public School² through these influences to create what best can be described as the cult of the British Public School. In parallel with these changes was a heightened emphasis on academic quality in the Universities where many of these schools’ old boys studied. The model spread rapidly through the English speaking world and Dr Arnold would recognise much of his influence if spending a day at an Anglican School in Australia. This Public School cult reached its climax in the last fifty years of the 19th century before the gradual spread of a more universal secondary education with a much broader curriculum. It is this tradition that delineates the profound differences between European approaches to education and those of the Commonwealth and the USA.

As the pattern spread, the demand for a modern curriculum became pressing. Many heads of the great English public schools protested vehemently against the modernisation of the curriculum with an argument that hallowed the status of the classics and mathematics against ‘modern’ subjects such as science. Different interpretations of their motives have been posited over the years but a fear that education would become merely utilitarian was undoubtedly one of them. Headmaster Edward Thring of Uppingham, who had advocated some liberalisation of the curriculum, confronted the Endowed Schools Commissioner Lord Lyttleton in the 1870s in a debate that can simplistically be characterised as character education versus purely intellectual focus. Most schools reached a compromise in practice as they saw that part of their role would be to produce men of the empire with modern skills and knowledge, but also clung to the Arnoldian ideals of the Christian gentleman formed through a rounded education.

¹ For example at Rugby in 1797: Dunning E and Sheard K, *Gentlemen Barbarians and players: A sociological study of the development of Rugby football*, p 45 Routledge 2nd Edition 2005

² Public School in the British sense does not mean government run but one that is not privately owned, as many schools once were.

In Australia the Anglican Church and other denominations adopted the fundamental building blocks of the British Public Schools and consciously established these Schools as a central part of their ministry and function. The Anglican Church in particular set about establishing these schools in each colony. A representative sample of NSW foundations appears in Table 1.

Table 1 Foundation Dates of Some NSW Independent Schools

The Kings' School	1831
St Catherine's	1856
Shore	1889
Trinity Grammar School	1913
Abbotsleigh	1885
Newington (Methodist)	1863
St Ignatius' College (Roman Catholic)	1881
Barker College	1890
The Scots College (Presbyterian)	1893

In due course the government secondary schools inherited many of the same trappings, traces of which are not hard to uncover even today. The rise of Australian government secondary schools in the late 19th and early 20th century mirrored the grammar schools in philosophy and practice and it was not until the 1970s that these traditions began to fragment.³

These Anglican Grammar schools saw themselves as the servants of the broader society and promoted themselves as such. This was not problematic in a Constantinian world (i.e. Christianity is endorsed as the official religion by political and social structures), where even unbelieving parents understood that religious practice and instruction were a given expectation and a fit and proper foundation for taking one's place in the world. At the height of the Victorian era, the muscular Christianity of these schools was one of the pillars of the imperial exercise and the phrase that "Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton" had the status not of an aphorism but an unarguable truth. As noted above the model of the Anglican Grammar school was transferred into the original ethos and structure of state schools both in the UK and the dominions and also rapidly spread into the education of girls as women gained access to tertiary education. This model had a subtle consequence when public schooling became free and universal in Australia. The Catholics maintained their schools and founded others but the Anglicans had an eighty year hiatus in founding schools-they believed the state schools were theirs anyway!

³ This is a simplified narrative and the reader can find a superb brief history of the educational beginnings in Australia of the Grammar School model in Bean, CEW *Here My Son*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1950.

This history may point to the following features of Anglican Grammar schools that exist today:

1. A strong academic tradition culminating in an expectation of University access.
2. An emphasis on cocurricular activities (games, drama, music, etc).
3. Religious observance and instruction as part of the life of the school.
4. A reputation for “quality” in the broader community.
5. An emphasis on service as an ideal with a commitment to the ideal of the worthy citizen.

Parents expect the first two, rely on the fourth, largely agree with the fifth and struggle most of all with the third. Given that the third is reflective of the primary motivations of the founders, there is an inherent tension, but one that can be creatively and productively used.

What is such an Anglican School from a Christian perspective? The Grammar School tradition has at its base a high theological view of Creation and a consciousness that this world is God’s world and that all truth is God’s truth. This leads to a confident engagement with learning, not primarily suspicious of human knowledge and academic pursuit but actively seeking what is true, beautiful and worthy in all things. This is absolutely foundational and in practice does not cause great offence. However, the theological primacy of Christ in the salvation story is of the highest value, a point that is either lost on many parents or the source of controversy. The historic challenge worldwide for the grammar school model has been the tendency over time to downplay or excise the salvation narrative and for the incarnational and creation emphases to morph into moralistic pantheism or a vague spirituality.

The Anglican School is a Christian community and not a community of Christians: the author sees it as akin to an Old Testament sense of household, with strangers within its gates. It is certainly not a church. This causes some Christian parents frustration with the liturgy and Christian programme of the school, wanting it to be a suburban church or youth group rather than what it is: a Christian School. Chapel does not have a function of the faithful gathering voluntarily together. It is an act of corporate acknowledgement, worship and teaching, more akin to the role of the established church when weekly attendance was a legal requirement.

There are other challenges in meeting aspects of parent expectation. Christian parents may take exception to aspects of literature, music, art or drama within the academic programme whereas the school sees these as legitimate areas of academic study. Parents who do not share the faith basis of the School struggle because they desire to see “religion in general”, humanism, charitable works as the emphasis and are also

somewhat suspicious of evangelism and commitment to specific doctrines. The pluralist nature of society means that the Christian School must argue for the uniqueness of Christ in an environment where any such claim is treated with suspicion.

These tensions pull most centrally at the role of chaplains and chaplaincy in the modern school. In a previous era many students brought to the school a sound biblical knowledge, family church membership of some form and experience of such things as Sunday school or a church service. It was, perhaps, less stressful for one person to fulfil the expectations of Divinity classes, Chapel and the occasional wedding or baptism. Claims about the uniqueness of Christ, the reality of sin and a need for repentance were less likely to be greeted with concern by the school community. People turned to the local church at critical times-birth, death and marriage for example. In traditional schools these matters have become part of the expectation- a cradle to grave connection. It is, in the author's view, impossible to achieve these expectations without a multi-faceted team. At Shore the senior chaplain is responsible for the overall team, the chapel programme and major liturgical events, there is a lay theologian trained head of Christian Studies, a community chaplain who ministers to Old Boys, parents and staff, assistants with responsibility for discipling and all are part of the formal Christian Studies team assisted by other trained staff. The "Christian" experience of the student in such a school is to be biblical, liturgical and relational as they are presented with what Christians believe and how they should act. In particular the approach to Christian Studies must be academically rigorous and defensible and is best presented by formally trained staff.

The School also has a duty to deliver a high quality academic and cocurricular education at least the equal of but preferably superior to that available in the public sector. To do otherwise would be to betray the trust of parents and to compromise the gospel. This has been the historic weakness of sections of the Christian Schools movement where academic success has been trivialised as worldly (a position that ultimately fails the Biblical test that God is Creator of this world, fully entered into it as a human being, is the redeemer of each of us in physical resurrection and is the recreator of a new heaven and a new earth). All parents rely upon the Anglican intellectual engagement with this world and I believe that the Anglican stance can be a fruitful meeting point of the Biblical story and the 21st century. Some of the work done by McGrath in his recent natural theology works (*The Open Secret* and *A Fine Tuned Universe*) may give fertile apologetic ground for a renewed emphasis on the academic credibility of the Christian faith as expressed in Anglicanism.

"I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else". These words of C S Lewis speak of the binary intellectual virtue of the Christian faith: the conviction that it makes sense in itself, and that it makes sense of everything else. ⁴

⁴ McGrath, Alister *A Fine-Tuned Universe* p 21 Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville 2009

Similar thinking has been the province of work by John Lennox and Colin Gunton. These ideas as well as those of Dorothy Sayers (*The Mind of the Maker*) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (*Aids to Reflection*) give a thoroughly Christian perspective on the so called Platonic triad of Beauty, Truth and Goodness and therefore a rich sense of the worthiness of literature, science, mathematics, art and music. An Anglican School will seek at the very least to lead students who reflect upon the world to echo the words of Genesis that this created order is “good”. This may not necessarily lead to Christian faith as such, but an effective school can enable its students to view the world from a Godward perspective and find resonance and affirmation of Christian truth in the world they observe.

Consequently Anglican schooling, particularly in the high fee schools, is expected to have an aesthetic as well as an academic dimension. Hence the emphasis placed on music, the visual and performing arts in so many Anglican schools. Games or sporting programmes may be highly organised such as in the Saturday sport schools or at a less intense level but the Australian parent in general wishes their child to receive a sporting education as well as a Physical one. Similarly the drama and music co-curricular programmes are essential for the satisfaction of students and for their all round development. For many students these co-curricular activities are the most engaging elements of their education and from a Christian perspective foster a sense of belonging and community identity. They are a rejection of neo-Platonic spirituality and an expression of the orthodox biblical view of the created world and material existence as being part of God’s good plan.

In addition, all parents expect the school to give a sense of a moral order. Parents do expect that their children receive a values based education, a moral orientation, from their schooling, even if the parents do not share all of those values. Evangelical Christians struggle with these expectations because of the doctrine of salvation by faith alone, but a Biblical world view argues that God desires that what he endorses as “the good” be promoted. Therefore it is not a matter of indifference whether a boy or girl leaves our care as liar or a truth teller, or any other moral dichotomy we choose. As a father I wish my sons to be faithful husbands whether or not they are Christian. As a Headmaster I desire the same for the boys in my care.

Students can learn a great deal about the human condition through service education and, given our knowledge of the value of authentic practice in education, perhaps apprehend in a real context the meaning that only talking can never achieve. The reality is that students form a strong understanding of right and wrong from experiential learning. Service learning activities range widely from within school, to the local community and to international communities. Students engage most profoundly with those actions which involve real interaction with others rather than fundraising. Parents are supportive of these activities more than teaching about faith, seeing them as endorsing and promoting values such as compassion without the demand of personal faith commitment. Christians need to embrace these experiences as much of the modernist influence in the evangelical movement has overemphasised

the cerebral and propositional rather than the emotional or physical aspects of learning.

For their part, schools have the right to present the gospel, regularly, systematically and in various formats. It is important for the long term view to be taken, and for the edifice of understanding to be constructed in young people over the years one brick at a time. In doing so the school must be transparent and open about its stance, and accountable for the quality of what is done. Unfortunately too many schools employ well meaning but unqualified amateurs to do the Christian teaching. This can lead to a serious undermining of the gospel message. It is imperative that this area of the school is staffed purposefully with the best trained people available. There is a real training gap at present in the evangelical world and few people have access to specific formation as Christian Studies teachers. The lack of strong Biblical and theological understanding amongst many Christians is reflected in the teaching profession. Amateur attempts at Christian education can arouse strongly negative responses from both students and parents.

Our primary responsibility is not for conversion numbers but that young people leave us “able to accept or reject the gospel but not misunderstand it” to quote Sir James Darling. Many parents and students are wary of “brainwashing” and the development of strong curricular programmes with academic integrity, quality liturgical experiences and voluntary Christian activities are essential.

All of this raises the contentious questions: who should lead; who should govern and who should teach in Anglican schools? There are arguments from some quarters that only practising Christians should fill these roles and in contrast some argue these are irrelevant as the role of a school is to ready one for the secular life of this world. This author is emphatically of the view that a middle position must be adopted.

It is essential for a faith based community that it be led by a faith driven person. In the context of this book, such a person needs to be a practising Christian believer, and preferably an Anglican. They should not be a recent convert because they will assume the spiritual leadership of the school. It is a serious error for the Chaplain to be delegated this task. The Chaplain is vitally involved in the development and implementation of the vision, but it must be wholly owned by the Head. He or she is the chief pastor and teacher, the head of the household and when this role is not taken, the Christian mission and purpose will always be marginalised in some way. The role of the Head is complex, and there are strands of prophet, pastor, priest and king in the role as well as those of educational innovator and human resources manager.

The governing body must embrace the faith position of the school and each individual must be able to support it. It is not necessary that all should be Christian practitioners but a majority ought to be. The board must be able to find the right mixture of talent and experience to cover the heavy responsibility that lies in governing not for profit organisations with turnovers equal to many smaller listed companies and legal compliance expectations that are daunting. Many schools find this support most

readily in the community of their former pupils. All Board members must be committed to the entire task of the school and not just sections of it they find most appealing.

The teaching staff must be able to deliver the high quality education that the parent body has contracted to receive. The ability to do this must be the primary staff selection criterion. The common room is not a church but a professional body engaged in the multi-faceted task of teaching. A mathematician who teaches Sunday School but cannot teach algebra is not a means of propagating the faith. Neither is it acceptable for a staff member to oppose the Christian mission of the school. The School will by preference appoint practising Christians who can do the educational task well, but quality teachers must be appointed first and foremost. In staffing these schools the following pragmatic factors have relevance: there are insufficient high quality Christian teachers to staff all schools; some of the best supporters of the head and his or her mission can be non-Christian staff who are passionate about the institution; Christians who do not do a good job or who see their work as a secular task or who are time servers profoundly damage the gospel. The School must therefore be able to appoint with wisdom staff members who will meet its objectives. A rigid staffing policy will cause practical difficulties and may sacrifice the respect of the parent body.

The Anglican Grammar School is in many ways one of the most successful models of education in the world, surviving recognisably for the past six hundred years or so. It has always existed in the creative tension between excellence and a service orientation; between worldly success and world altering impact; between a high moral ideal and the call to transform a fallen world through faith in Christ.