

CHURCH SCHOOLS IN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

I had a letter a couple of weeks ago from an American lady, formerly brought up in Peterborough but now living in America with her husband and has been for a long time. She wrote and told me that she and her husband had been visiting Peterborough and come into the Cathedral and they had enjoyed it very much except that they came across a bunch of school children who were chattering, some of them laughing and clearly not behaving soberly enough for her liking. She wanted me to write to all the head teachers in the Peterborough area to remind them that children visiting the Cathedral should behave with appropriate decorum. She then went on and said, in fact on reflection children under twelve are too young to understand the aesthetic beauty of the Cathedral so probably shouldn't be allowed there at all. I spent a fortnight trying to decide how polite to be in my reply. I decided all along I was going to do a Bible quotation, which I don't normally do in a letter, and I did in the end a semi-polite reply which began with "Jesus said 'let the little children come to me, do not try to stop them, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven'" and then told her that there were a few churches in the diocese where children weren't welcome and they were the dead and dying churches; and that there were many, including the Cathedral, where children were most welcome and they were the churches I was encouraging and pleased with. I don't know what she will make of it and I haven't had her reply to my reply - I may not get it.

Children are at the heart of Christ's ministry. That is not to say he didn't minister to adults, obviously, but on that particular occasion he was talking to a group of adults when the children and their parents caused an interruption. The disciples said 'get rid of them' and Jesus said, 'no'. I paraphrase, 'children are so important that I am perfectly willing to interrupt and inconvenience the adults so that the children can be ministered to and cared for and shown God's love'. Now that ought to be the church's philosophy. Church schools are part of that, they are not the only part of it, but they are an important part of it. That is just a little

bit to reflect on. There are still people in all our churches who think that about children - that shouldn't they be there.

When I inherited the second parish I went to as incumbent on my first Sunday morning one of the wardens said to me, 'a child came, but I did what we always do' and I was slightly appalled and said 'what's that', fearing the worst really and he said 'I explained that we don't have children in the service because the rector's preaching is too important to be interrupted by children. There is another church a mile away where children are welcome in the service, or you can go to the Sunday School in our hall', which was a quarter of a mile away, 'but the Sunday School doesn't come into church'. We never heard of those parents again. My predecessor had emptied the church of a whole age group by saying that his sermons were too important and that children shouldn't be there to stop people listening. But there are still people in all our churches who think that children should be seen and not heard, or preferably not seen or heard in church. We need to correct that and do a lot of work to correct it. Church schools are part of the work of re-educating the church about the importance of children in God's eyes. It's not the only part of the work of church schools, but it's a slightly off the wall one that you may not have heard as part of what church schools are for.

You will have heard the phrase that church schools are at the centre or the heart of the church's mission - a big catch phrase of a few years ago. Is that true? Yes and no. We've got about a hundred church schools in the diocese. We've got three hundred and fifty parishes. So it is very obvious that not every parish has a church school. In a parish where there isn't a church school to say to that in that parish the church school is at the heart of the church's mission would be a little bit ridiculous. We have to be careful how we say things. It isn't the case that a church school is at the heart of the churches mission when there isn't a church school there. Again in one parish where I was incumbent there were no church schools in the deanery, so we couldn't say that church schools were at the heart

of the church's mission. Those of us working in the deanery as clergy had to work very hard to make sure we had very good links with the local community schools of different kinds, and I became a Governor of several and was involved in others and offering to do assemblies and even heavily involved in RE in a secondary school in our parish, but none of them were church schools. The clergy need to work harder to get the introductions to the non-church schools but should still be working in them. But where there is a church school in a parish, or where there is a church secondary school whose catchment area includes the parish, then the clergy and the rest of the church must pay very careful attention to getting those relationships right and that involvement right.

Children and schools are at the centre of the church's mission. That includes church schools not exclusively church schools. Church schools have a very special role and we will come to that in a moment. Part of the other problem about the idea of church schools as the centre or heart of the church's mission is the legal structures we have in a diocese, where the Diocesan Board of Education legally exists in some respects as a separate entity from the rest of the diocese. Now structurally in Peterborough that is less so than in some other dioceses, but it still is a separate body. The Board of Education exists and has its meetings and the diocesan bishop isn't at those meetings, the Bishops Council isn't directly involved in those meetings, so that the central planning and strategic body of the diocese isn't directly running the church schools. Of course the Archdeacon is one of my senior staff and a trusted colleague and her input to the life of church schools is very important on behalf of the diocese, but there is a separation and that's in legal terms. It is all to do with the various Acts of Parliament that brought church schools into being as we have them and control them. But the Board of Education isn't identical with the diocese and that does create problems, and there are tensions there. The Board of Education becomes one of a number of competing bodies within the diocese, competing for time, money, staff and energy and that's a real issue and I am aware of that. As someone who has chaired a Board of Education in a previous life I have a very

strong heart for church schools and want to make sure that the church schools we have are as central to the ministry of the diocese as it is possible for them to be, but there are issues and problems that you need to be aware of about that.

I want to think a little bit with you about the mission of the church and what it is for church schools to be part of the mission of the church. The mission of the church, if you want it in two words is, making disciples. The great commission, end of Matthew's Gospel, that's the mission of the church, to make disciples. How would I define disciples? You can find lots of definitions, try this one; *'disciples are people who keep on learning and put that learning into practice'* and in a specifically Christian context *'disciples are people for whom every day brings new experiences of God's love and new opportunities to serve'*. Every day new experiences of God's love and new opportunities to serve - that's what a disciple is. Someone who understands the meaning of 'new every morning is the love'. Someone who every day has a relationship with God which is living. Who has met God in the morning in prayer, in the scripture, in meditation in one way or another and whose life through the day is controlled, governed, helped, supported, energised, enabled by that meeting with God and by that relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, through the Bible, through the church, through the sacraments - all the rest. But a disciple is someone who every day is freshly aware of God's love for them and every day seeks opportunities to serve God and his people and the world and his kingdom, as an expression of the love that they have received from God. That's my view of the disciple. It's quite a big and wide vision. But it's saying something about church schools. Church schools are there to make disciples of children and young people, and of course through them to affect their families and their communities.

I make no bones about this, church schools are there to evangelise in a specific and fairly broad sense. Church schools are there to show children and young people what the Christian life is like, how it is lived out. That's the importance of the great things we have been hearing this morning of values in schools. That's

one way of putting that across; the importance of forgiveness, the importance of kindness and so on. But those are things that we learn as we reflect on them a bit more deeply from the Gospel and from our relationship with Jesus. Church schools are there to do that, not just to give the best secular education, but give a different sort of education. The National Curriculum or whatever the government insists on must be there of course, but in the light of living in a community of God's love where people are encouraged and helped and enabled to be disciples. Then they will take that discipleship to their families and the wider community and where the school itself, of course, will also serve the wider community.

So let me give some simple examples of how the church school might go about making disciples and being part of the mission of the church. These are examples - they are not the only thing that could be said, and you may choose to disagree with some of them and that's fine as long as you have your reasons and you come up with something better instead.

Church schools will make disciples by having a daily Christian assembly so that children are taught and modelled a short Bible reading and a prayer and some worship. Knowing the presence of God at the beginning of the day to guide us through the day. Knowing the love of Christ, afresh each morning. Because we want to model and disciple and train those children so that when they leave school and go to normally a less Christian secondary school and eventually leave school, they have that pattern of turning to God each morning, opening the Scriptures, praying, being thankful, praising. The daily assembly is absolutely key to inculcating the habit of daily turning to the Lord for his blessing and his forgiveness - the fresh reality of his love each day.

So too are informal classroom prayers. Looks of horror perhaps, looks of worry, concern. I am not talking about forcing people on their knees to give their life to Jesus. I'm talking about the teacher being able to say, when there is a little issue

in the classroom, let's stop and take a minute, let's just be quiet, let's remember that God's with us, let's ask Jesus to give us peace in our hearts, let's ask God to help us with this difficult issue that we as a class are facing. Modelling to children what all Christian people should be comfortable with, the idea of the arrow prayer, just binging one up to God every now and then, just taking a moment to be with him and hear him and for his peace to come back when we have lost it. Taking just a moment out of the day from time to time to say 'Jesus is here', what difference does that make to this situation we're in, this issue we have as a class at the moment. That's something that teachers aren't all comfortable with, but need to be helped with. Because church schools are to be Christian schools and we are to help children to grow up with the knowledge that Jesus is with you all the time and you can turn to Jesus at any time - and you should do.

I'm going to say something even more difficult now. Church schools ought to be offering and helping the children with theological reflection. I was so delighted Lynn that you were talking about theology earlier on and the importance of doing that. Now theological reflection is a bit of a catch phrase and curates hate it when we make them do it as part of their in-service training. What theological reflection means is just stopping for a moment to reflect on what's happened or what you've done, or the situation you're in, in the light of your knowledge of God and your knowledge of the Bible. Of course for children this knowledge is more rudimentary than for adults, but reflecting on the situation in the light of your knowledge of God. So for a class to be able to stop when there is a bit of crisis and for the teacher to be able to say now what wisdom might we get from the Bible? How can we think about this situation? How can we think about this child who isn't here today because they are seriously ill? How can we think about this situation where someone's mummy has just died? How can we deal with this as a class? Or how can we think about this situation where a child has gone a bit berserk and is losing it in the class? What can we do as a group together? How do we think about this? What might the Bible tell us is the right way to respond?

And try and encourage the children to come out with those answers, to think about modifying your thinking and your behaviour in the light of your knowledge of God and his word and his truth.

That's something I want to encourage all Christians to do every day - because that's part of being a disciple - how should my thinking and my behaviour be modified today in the light of my knowledge of God. That means stopping and looking what is my thinking and behaviour, how am I thinking about this issue, how am I behaving in the light of that provocation? How should my understanding of Jesus and his love for me modify my thinking and my behaviour? I am talking to you as adults. Teachers in church schools, and those who help and support the teachers, need to be getting that across to children in children's ways. Helping the children to realise that Jesus is interested in our behaviour, our thinking, our responding to situations and our dealing with provocations. That he is there for us all the time and that there needs to be a continual cycle of reflection on how we live in the light of all of the world's pressures and in the light of God's love. A church school will be successful if the great bulk of children when they leave it know how to bring together the reality of Jesus and the realities of the world, and how to live their lives in the light of God's love.

There is some quite difficult stuff there, but it is deliberately put before you as a challenge. I am not talking about moralising in church schools, please, please, don't think at all that I am saying or wanting anyone to say to children, if you're good enough God will love you. Perish the thought; let's drive that a million miles away. Not moralising, but sanctifying. That is saying God loves you, Jesus loves you, he cares for you very, very much, he forgives you all your sins. Now how are you going to live in the light of that? That's very different from be good and your parents will love you, be good and teacher will be happy with you, be good and God will love you, lets have none of that. Lets have God loves you, Jesus loves you. He wants you to be his friend. How are you going to live in the light of it?

I want to talk very briefly about the vision of the church for its schools. Now this is me, the new bishop in the diocese, I am coming with a lot of my own ideas, but I have also been visiting a number of church schools and gladly so and wanting to see what goes on. Part of my vision of the church for its schools is increase the number and availability of both primary and secondary church schools. What we want to have is every parent in the diocese able to send their child to a church school if they want to. That's been the churches national policy, it still is, its mine, we can't offer that at the moment, we should be able to. I want to see more church schools - primary and secondary. I am quite robust about that and I am not ashamed of it. There will be quite difficult ways of doing that, sometimes it will mean new schools and when there are new housing areas and so on we need to work very, very hard to try and get church schools into them. Sometimes it will mean adopting currently existing schools into the church system. I hope we'll do that and will be open to it by whatever means it can be done. Sometimes Trust Schools, sometimes Academies, there are different ways of getting this done. But I hope that clergy in the parishes where there aren't church schools will be building such good relations with the community schools that those schools begin to ask 'could we become a church school?'. I have seen that happen in my past life and I hope to see it happen here. More church schools, we need more of them.

We also need to secure our currently existing church schools, because you may not fully appreciate it, but some of them are under threat as Government policies change, as funding streams change or dry up. The smaller and more rural schools will come under threat increasingly and we have to make sure that we are able to secure them and keep them as church schools and keep them as viable schools. Now partly that means they have to be the best school in an area, so they are less likely to be threatened if numbers are a problem, but partly that means they have got to have some of the strengths that normally only bigger schools have. That is done through different means of collaborating together, working together. Now I know there is discussion about this, I know there are

different packages on offer, might be on offer, the pictures changing so rapidly that we don't yet fully understand how much the cut to the non-schools element of the education budget is going to hit or in what ways it's going to hit. There will be cuts to the schools budget too; whatever we hear elsewhere, but there will certainly be severe cuts to the non-school part. This means that support offered by local education authorities will be decreased and if schools are going to continue to be viable and strong they are going to need to work together, the smaller ones in particular, to make sure they are offering the best sort of resourcing, the best sports facilities, the best after school facilities, all the peripherals, and sometimes the best teaching, even for core subjects.

We need to look at various models of partnership, but it is going to be unrealistic for a rural school or a small school to say we can do on our own, or we can do it simply with the support we get from the local education authority. There is going to be a need for the diocese to either provide more of the support that the LEA used to provide or for the diocese to show schools how to buy that support in or create it for themselves in the collaboration with others, or whatever. We simply need to be realistic about that. I don't know what the future will be for the local education authorities that cover the area of the diocese, but I suspect that in five or ten years time each of them will be able to offer less to the schools than they are offering now. That's a strong suspicion, and we need to be ready for that and protect our schools against the withdrawal of services. Local education authorities aren't going to want to withdraw services, but they are going to have less money to provide those services and we need to think very hard. Schools, heads and governors need to be working on that proactively and saying what can we do to secure our schools? And that may mean, almost certainly will mean, working in collaboration with others.

So if my vision for church schools and for the church and its schools includes increasing numbers of schools and securing our presently existing ones, how do we do that? Well, with a pragmatic approach. We can't be too doctrinaire. There's no time to stop and think whether we approve in principle of academies

or trust status or anything of the kind. What we need to do is to be pragmatic and to take every opportunity to help community schools come into the church school family if they would like to. Show them that church schools are better for children and for families and for communities, because we all know that they are. We have got to demonstrate that and show that our doors are open, we are not a closed shop, we want more in. But also very pragmatically looking at whatever means are best to secure funding and to secure stability and strength and a future for our church schools. That may mean setting up, for example, this is just kite flying, it's not policy, it may mean setting up a dozen or twenty academy trusts across the diocese and asking all our primary schools to be part of one of those academy trusts and running things that way to secure more funding, secure better facilities, better support for schools. I don't know what it'll mean. It means thinking the unthinkable and rethinking and being able to be pragmatic so that we can get the funding and we can get the smaller schools in particular having enough resource and support so that they can be genuinely viable and keep going and keep offering the great things they do offer.

My final part of the vision for the church for its schools is simply this. To ask you to pray and to do all you can to achieve calling Christian people into teaching, into an openness to headship and leadership in schools and into governorship. This diocese is very like my previous one in very few respects, but in this respect it certainly is. We haven't got enough committed able Christians willing to be governors. We haven't got enough committed able Christians wanting to be teachers, and we certainly haven't got enough committed specially able Christians to be heads. Just as I am asking people to pray that the Lord of the harvest will raise up more clergy, I want you to pray in particular that the Lord will raise up more Christian teachers and heads and governors. Because we are not going backwards we are going forwards, we are not going to shrink what we do we are going to grow what we do. Because ministry to children and their families and their communities is of the utmost importance to the church's life and church schools are at the heart of that ministry.