

# Called?

## TO TEACH ●

*Transforming Lives* and *ACT Now* magazine jointly invite Christians working in education to share their professional testimony. When and how did God call you to teach? How has God guided and taught you, and how has He used you to bless others? What have been the high points and low points of your career? What does your vocation mean to you? What does it mean to serve Christ in an educational setting?

Testimonies should be 500 to 1,000 words in length and sent to:  
The Editor, *ACT Now*, 94a London Road,  
St Albans, Herts, AL1 1NX  
E: [act@christian-teachers.org.uk](mailto:act@christian-teachers.org.uk)  
W: [www.christian-teachers.org.uk](http://www.christian-teachers.org.uk)

### Vocation

At the beginning of this year the *Times Educational Supplement* published the results of a survey which revealed that 71% of teachers entered the profession because they felt they had a 'vocation to teach'. I wonder if you had such a clear sense of a calling into teaching.

For me there was never anything else on the cards; I just always knew that I was going to be a teacher. At secondary level my whole life was school. I was there from 8am in the morning until 6pm at night (usually six days a week as we had Saturday morning school followed by sports activities); spent a couple of hours travelling backwards and forwards each day; treated the Christian Union as my church since Sunday was spent catching up on homework; and spent my holidays on camps and other activities with my school friends. On the way I collected my O levels, AS levels, A levels and S levels, rather like other people collected cigarette



The most dynamic company  
you'll ever work in.

0845 6000 991  
[www.teach.gov.uk](http://www.teach.gov.uk)

Use your head. Teach.

cards. School for me could perhaps have been called a total institution. I couldn't imagine being anywhere else. So after four years at university, I was straight back and began teaching at Banbury Comprehensive. The rest is history.

Looking back now, I sometimes reflect on why I ended up teaching. Was it because my life perspective was so narrow that I could not conceive of life without school? Or was it because I had a clear gifting from God that was so apparent that there really was nothing else to think about? Or maybe I had been created with this vocation in my DNA? Or is the truth that I never really grew up and wanted to stay at school in perpetuity?

*Some Christian ex-teachers feel bitter; others feel bewildered. Some feel they have failed in their one true calling in life; others feel permanently outside the will of God*

### Guidance and calling

I have spent a lot of time in the last few years thinking about guidance, calling and vocation. In January 2003 I left The Stapleford Centre to begin a new career as a university lecturer. We moved home from Nottingham to Cheltenham. However, this new career didn't work out and I found myself looking for another job. I was delighted to be offered two part time positions working as the Secondary Adviser to the Diocese of Gloucester and as the Course Leader for The Stapleford Centre's distance learning programme. These were great jobs; fulfilling, worthwhile and in areas of work that made me buzz. Then came a further disruption: The Stapleford Centre advertised the new post of Director of the *Transforming Lives* project. This post looked so appropriate for my skills and experience that I felt I simply couldn't not apply. So I now find myself, three years after having moved from Nottingham to Cheltenham to work in a university, living in Cheltenham and back working in Nottingham at the place where I was previously employed. How do I make sense of that as part of God's master plan?

The answer is that a lot depends on how I view the concept of vocation. What exactly is going on when God calls someone into education, as I certainly felt called? I now think that in my earlier years I had a somewhat fatalistic view of vocation. I think I assumed that God had a fixed blueprint for

my life stored in my heavenly file. David Lankshear, from the University of Wales Bangor, has been conducting some interesting research amongst Christian teachers about their understanding of their vocation. He has discovered that many of them didn't feel a particularly strong calling in advance of entering the profession. Rather, they discovered their vocation *after* they became a teacher.

### Transforming Lives

The *Transforming Lives* project has one core task, to promote teaching as a Christian vocation. So I have been doing some reading in the area. The Spring 2005 edition of the *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* carried a particularly illuminating article by Sharon Hartnett and Frank Kline entitled 'Preventing the Fall from the "Call to Teach": Rethinking Vocation' (pp9-20). The authors point out that there is a real problem for Christians who enter teaching with a clear sense of calling and vocation, but subsequently leave because, for one reason or another, it doesn't work out.

This situation has the potential to leave Christians feeling distressed and disorientated, as they wrestle with feelings of guilt and failure. If God called them to teach, then why were they unable to stick at it? Why did they struggle? Why did they not feel equipped and protected by God? On the other hand, had they simply got the wrong end of the stick in the first place? Did they mishear or misunderstand God's calling? Or... was it part of 'God's master plan' all along to call them into a situation where they would be broken and humbled for a higher purpose?

Some Christian ex-teachers feel bitter; others feel bewildered. Some feel they have failed in their one true calling in life; others feel permanently outside the will of God. It happens to missionaries; it happens to teachers; and, statistically speaking, it is likely to happen to a significant minority of *ACT Now* readers.

*There is a real problem for Christians who enter teaching with a clear sense of calling and vocation but subsequently leave because, for one reason or another, it doesn't work out*



## Primary and secondary

Sharon Hartnett and Frank Kline suggest that the problem lies with our thinking of vocation in the mode of God's predetermined career plan.

Drawing on the writings of Os Guinness, they suggest that we distinguish between the primary sense of calling or vocation and the secondary sense.

## *I have come to the conclusion that the most important element in discovering where I fit and achieving fulfilment relates to my love of learning*

As Christians, our primary calling is to be in communion with God; our secondary callings include specific areas of life – including paid and unpaid work – in which we are called to be obedient by remaining faithful to our primary calling. Actually this is not a new concept. The Archbishop of Canterbury expounded similar ideas in the Dearing Report on Church Schools published by the Church of England in 2001.

My three recent changes of job were not the result of my disobedience or failure to listen carefully, nor did they reflect badly on God who, to put it crudely, was mucking me about. No, they were actually different arenas where God was calling me to be faithful to my primary vocation of being in communion with Him.

What then constitutes a calling to teach? What is it to have the secondary vocation of teaching? Years ago when I was at theological college, we had a Quiet Day. At that time I was seriously considering ordained ministry and I decided to go and talk to the visiting speaker about this. He asked me a very simple question: 'What was it that really got you excited?' I then had as clear a sense of vocation as I have ever had; I knew that teaching excited me! As someone else has said to me, a true vocation is what makes your heart sing. This happens when you find the fit between the personality God has given you and the work you do. Discovering this fit is, perhaps, one of the most rewarding experiences in life. Honest discernment about what sort of

*To quote the late Professor Ted Wragg, 'there is no higher calling'*



Dr Trevor Cooling is Director of *Transforming Lives*. He is a longstanding ACT member and was a keynote speaker at the Association's day-conference in Birmingham in November 2005.

*Transforming Lives* is an ongoing project of the Jerusalem Trust and is based at The Stapleford Centre in Nottingham. Its first phase focussed on a major consultation, hosted by The Lord Bishop of Exeter, the Right Reverend Michael Langrish, that took place in London on 1-2 February 2004. The second phase began on 1 January 2006 and will actively promote the vocation of being a Christian teacher.

*Transforming Lives*  
The Stapleford Centre  
The Old Lace Mill  
Frederick Road  
Stapleford  
Nottingham  
NG9 8FN

E: [tcooling@stapleford-centre.org](mailto:tcooling@stapleford-centre.org)  
W: [www.transforminglives.org.uk](http://www.transforminglives.org.uk)

person you are really is important in discovering – and then making the most of – this fit.

## The love of learning

In thinking about the vocation to teach, I have come to the conclusion that the most important element in discovering where I fit and achieving fulfilment relates to my love of learning. After all, promoting learning is surely the core task that we undertake as teachers. The UK government's recent poster campaign promoting teaching as a career recognises that it is this that inspires teachers in its visual depiction of pupils' faces as they experience a 'eureka' moment.

One of the most under-emphasised aspects of Jesus' ministry is that he was essentially interested in helping people to learn. To be a disciple is literally to be a learner. Right from the start of his ministry, Jesus gathered around himself a group of key people and, for three years, laboured at the task of helping them to learn about God's Kingdom. By the time of the Ascension, Jesus had prepared them to disciple others. Perhaps one of Jesus' main goals was to leave a network of 'Kingdom learners'. The privilege of the calling to teach is to be a part of a worldwide movement made up of Christians who are discipling their pupils in the lifelong task of learning.

## *One of the most under-emphasised aspects of Jesus' ministry is that he was essentially interested in helping people to learn*

The *Transforming Lives* project is all about promoting teaching as a significant Christian ministry. We will be encouraging Christians who are already teachers to re-discover the thrill of learning. We will be looking for Christians who are not yet teachers, but whose DNA is created by God in such a way that teaching is a vocation for them. We will be encouraging the Church to celebrate and promote the transforming ministry that Christian teachers exercise. But, above all, we shall be exhorting everyone to explore the different ways in which Christian teachers can offer a distinctive contribution that transforms learning. To quote the late Professor Ted Wragg, 'there is no higher calling'.

■ Trevor Cooling