

A brief history of ACT — part 3

From Richard to Rupert

In August 2002 Rupert Kaye succeeded Richard Wilkins as General Secretary/Chief Executive of the Association of Christian Teachers. In this article Rupert and Richard interview one another about ACT's life and times in the period 1997 to 2007. Rupert starts the questioning.

RUPERT: Richard, you helped to develop the first ACT website. Tell us about that.

RICHARD: ACT's first website went live in 1998. Back in 1995 I circulated to ACT's Board of Directors a paper about the electronic future. This gave such extraordinary examples as the elders of a small church who communicated by email and only met face-to-face when such a meeting served a purpose. There was plenty of visionary hype throughout the '90s. These were the early days of *Wired* magazine and the rise of the dot-com bubble. Stapleford House's website was the first to present ACT membership and publications. I knew the web had a great future, but back in the late 90s we couldn't expect that our site would pay for itself. After all, Amazon.com wasn't making a profit, so why should ACT? The Association's second website was launched in 2000. It was described as 'fun' by one reviewer. It was a kind of joked-up *ACT Now*, and at that time combined the features of prayer news, Private Eye and the prophet Amos. By then we knew that connectedness was higher amongst teachers than the general population. The site was hanging in the air awaiting upgrading when I retired. Website developments in your time, have far outgrown our



ACT Board of Directors (1999)

Hallowe'en put ACT on the front page of *The Independent*

poster-on-the wall origins. Congratulations on adding '.uk' to the address; we used to get a lot of inquiries about Christian schools in the USA from teachers and parents who assumed we were there.

RUPERT: When you look back at your 25 years with ACT, what do you remember as the Association's biggest successes?

RICHARD: Probably that 2,000–2,500 Christian teachers during that time thought that we were sufficiently what they wanted to remain or become members, and to donate voluntarily with amazing generosity. We had some excellent conferences. I remember especially our last Easter Conference, *Pictures in the Mind*, at Winchester in 1980, when our programme tried to unify young people's emotional and spiritual experiences with teachers' curriculum delivery, which was novel stuff in those days. Our annual ACT Days were great events – with memorable input from Julie Fleetwood, Jill Pauling, David Day and others. Annual headteachers' conferences were excellent combinations of professional seriousness and charismatic worship.

The launch and continuance of *ACT Now* from 1983 was very satisfying. With income from advertising, the external production cost of each edition was 60p from each member's subscription. Seventeen years later it was still costing that, despite inflation and more colour in the magazine.

Publicity was always welcome. The publicity we got was what the media chose to give us, and it tended to be about Transcendental Meditation, Hallowe'en, sex education and collective worship (frequently). Hallowe'en put ACT on the front page of *The Independent*.

But from 1990 onwards we concentrated on educational topics that were big public concerns, such as literacy, teaching quality, parental choice and exclusions. I took as an intended compliment to ACT the remark of a civil servant who said that my questions in letters to the DfES were among the hardest they had to answer.

The biggest successes were not ACT's but those of its members. I remember visiting a prayer group of teachers from a school in Surrey which had, for many years, provided a pastoral lifeline for



Ken Shorey
and Rob Baker

teachers, and had been a prudent agent for the Good News. This was Christian spirituality where the rubber hit the road. Teachers were good enough to say that ACT spoke for them when they hadn't the voice to speak for themselves. But a group like this reminded me that Christian teachers were the heart of what we were doing.

RUPERT: When you look back at your 25 years with ACT, what are your greatest regrets?

RICHARD: I never really mastered the two horses I had to ride: the mindset and language of education and the explicit statement of Christian truth. Determined as I was to speak education's language, I missed some opportunities of speaking clearly for Christ in the heated debates of those years.

I am sorry that the membership did not rise. It was 2,444 in 1977, and 2,443 in 2000. Between times it had been as high as 3,000 and as low as 1,700.

The closest I came to terminal despair was during the formation of our *Christian Manifesto for Education* in preparation for the 1996 Silver Jubilee. We produced a Biblical preamble, which was published in *ACT Now*. Throughout 1995 we put out successive appeals for Christian views of the phases of education and the specialist subjects in which our members worked. We sent out 'Aunt Sally' drafts to specialists for amendment. We gathered some very good pieces, mostly by personal invitation/pestering. Even so, I ended up writing seven reviews of the then twelve National Curriculum subjects, plus FE. It seemed, in the language of our requests, that ACT members could not say why God wanted them to do what they were paid to do for other people's children. God's almost audible laughter saved me: reviewers commended the sections on Geography and PE which I had written but never taught.



Richard Wilkins

Annual headteachers' conferences were excellent combinations of professional seriousness and charismatic worship



ACT UK Seminar
(Bedford, 2004)

RUPERT: You represented ACT at various conferences in the UK and overseas. Which was your favourite?

RICHARD: ACT's own conferences were always thrilling, enabling me to meet Christian teachers of whom, like the heroes of Hebrews 11, 'the world was not worthy'. Spring Harvest education seminars, combined with display-stand staffing, were hard work but very valuable. But my favourite has to be India's *Evangelical Teachers' Fellowship Conference* which Janet and I attended in 1997. India is a magical place anyway, and these teachers and their leaders were so prayerful, faithful and resolute in the face of hardship, that we'll never forget them.

The biggest successes were not ACT's but those of its members

RUPERT: Who was your favourite Secretary of State for Education, and why?

RICHARD: Gillian Shepherd was the nicest. The last Conservative Secretary of State, she was appointed to be nice to teachers after some very abrasive treatment they'd had previously. Just prior to Mrs Shepherd, Baroness (Emily) Blatch had acted for John Paton during his illness in office. Lady Blatch had a severe reputation, but her Christian strength, integrity and fairness were respected by teachers' unions, and made most of us wish she'd been in charge for longer.

The only Education Secretary I met was Kenneth Baker. As imposer of the National Curriculum in 1988, he was highly controversial and popular with the media as a teacher-basher. However, we can now see that he was a formidable politician who, amid some unscrupulous grandstanding rhetoric, centralised education beyond living memory, while making the '88 reforms much better than they easily might have been. Estelle Morris was immensely hardworking and highly respected by



Carol Horne

teachers. She, of course, knew what it felt like to be a classroom teacher. No wonder she found it hard to be Secretary of State.

RUPERT: What would you like to see ACT do over the next decade?

RICHARD: What you're doing now, especially the things I failed to do. Keep in touch with how teachers are feeling, and recognise their astounding capacity to deliver reforms that they've said were impossible. Encourage and equip, as your Saturday retreats and courses are doing. Have the aim that we stated around 1980, 'to help Christian teachers to be confident, competent and well equipped as Jesus' disciples at the service of the nation's children'. Speak truth to power. Remind the UK government and the 'great British public' in one way or another that for our treatment of children 'we must all stand before the judgement seat of Christ' (2 Corinthians 5:10). Christians teach with eternity in view.

RICHARD: Rupert, now let me ask you the same question. What would you like to see ACT do over the next ten years?

RUPERT: On the 'About ACT' section of the ACT website the question 'Why does ACT exist?' is answered in two ways. The short answer is: *to serve God*. The longer answer is: *ACT exists so that God can take the gifts, talents, experience and resources of its members and multiply them (like the fishes and loaves blessed by Christ at the feeding of the five thousand) for the benefit of all Christians working in education.*

Over the next ten years I would like to see ACT remain faithful to its calling to

serve God by serving, inspiring and equipping Christians working in education.

Of course, I dream about ACT having more resources – grant funding would be nice! – and many, many more members. If ACT had an annual income of £500,000 and a membership of 10,000+ it could do so much more than it is able to do right now. Who wouldn't want ACT to have more members; more ACT Local Contacts and ACT Local Groups; more ACT Saturday training days and weekend courses; and a greater turnout at our annual members' ACT Day conference?! But I am conscious that there should be more to a Christian organisation than the sum of its visible, measur-

My philosophy is simple: if ACT can help, it will help; if ACT can be generous, it will be generous

able parts. To echo your earlier answer: *Christian organisations should operate with eternity in view.*

RICHARD: Tell me more about your vision of God ‘multiplying’ the gifts, talents, experience and resources of ACT members for the benefit of all Christians working in education. How might that work?

RUPERT: For me, the picture of Jesus accepting and blessing a child’s packed lunch and asking the disciples to use this food to feed a multitude – and then to gather up twelve baskets of crumbs! – is a powerful reminder of God’s power and super-abundant provision (John 6:5-15). God does not just meet their needs, he exceeds them. But he does so by taking what was already there and working a miracle to multiply it.

Similarly, the Gospel promise is that Jesus Christ is eager and able to take what we, as individual believers, have to offer in terms of our own gifts, talents, experience and resources and multiply them to spectacular effect in order to bring glory to God and meet the needs of those around us.

In organisational terms, I believe ACT should model itself on Jesus. ACT should take the ‘five small barley loaves and two small fish’ that its members have to offer, give thanks to God for them and distribute them for the benefit of everyone.



Simon Marsh
and Anthea
Tulloch-Bisgrove

When one ACT member offers to start a Local ACT Group and put on one evening meeting each term, many more are blessed and encouraged. Not just those who are able to attend a local event, but those who cannot be there but are encouraged that such an event is taking place anyway.

A letter, email, prayer, story, book review or article published in *ACT Now* can be a blessing to others. Items posted on the ACT website can also provide a word of clarification and encouragement.



George Oliver

RICHARD: When you look back at your first four-and-a-half years as ACT’s Chief Executive, what do you consider to be the Association’s biggest success?

RUPERT: I think some of the biggest successes have been the ones carried out behind the scenes. One such example concerns the process of updating ACT’s constitution – its *Articles and Memorandum of Association*.

Constitutional change was necessary because of ACT’s changed relationship

with other organisations (eg The Stapleford Centre), the requirements of charity law, advances in technology (enabling the ACT Board to ‘meet’ and make decisions electronically, thus saving time and money) and a desire to reduce the Association’s ‘ecological footprint’ (by reducing travel, energy consumption and waste).

In terms of other recent successes, I would talk about ACT’s burgeoning calendar of Saturday training days, our high-quality website, recent developments to *ACT Now* and the *ACT Prayer Diary*, and the fact that ACT has now sold or given away almost 1,000 ACT mugs.

RICHARD: What have been your greatest regrets so far?

RUPERT: I regret that I have not managed to secure large sums of ongoing grant funding for the Association from charitable trusts. A number of small bids have been successful. But when it comes to securing grants worth many tens of thousands of pounds, my bids have received nods and winks of encouragement – but, thus far, no cash.

Other things have not always gone to plan. But I do not regret having tried to do old things in new ways, or attempting brand new things for the first time. I thank God that ACT is not a risk averse organisation.

RICHARD: In 2005 ACT had a special appeal in support of the Overseas Fund. Why do you see this as such an important part of ACT’s ministry?

RUPERT: For all I have just said about money, I am well aware that, in global terms, England is a rich country and ACT is a wealthy organisation. £1,000 – or its equivalent – may not go far in Western Europe or North America, but you can be sure it goes a long way in many parts of Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and South America.

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John Shortt
and
David Smith

The ACT Overseas Fund is a constant reminder to us all that our Association has a moral duty to give prayerful and financial support to its sister organisations around the world. In 2 Corinthians 9:11 it says: 'You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.' In 1 Timothy 6:17-19 it says: 'Command those who are rich... to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.' In James 2:15-6 it says: 'Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?'

My philosophy is simple: if ACT can help, it will help; if ACT can be generous, it will be generous. But at the back of my mind is always the thought that circumstances change over time; at the moment ACT is a donor organisation, but maybe one day our Association will be sustained by generous gifts from some of the very organisations we presently support.

RICHARD: As of 31 March 2006 ACT had 1,842 members, including 65 students and 44 NQTs. What steps are currently being taken to recruit students training to teach and Newly Qualified Teachers?

RUPERT: I should stress that all Christians working in education are welcome to join ACT. Just as it is natural for Christians to belong to a local church, I would like to see all Christians

belonging to a relevant Christian workplace association, network or fellowship.

Nevertheless, the ACT Board sees the strategic importance of recruiting more members who are in the first few years of their teaching career or are still training to teach. ACT's age profile matches that of the national teaching workforce: a disproportionate number of members are aged 50+ and all too few are in their 20s or 30s. Much more needs to be done to reach out to younger and less experienced educators, and to provide effective support systems for them.

In 2004 ACT reintroduced free membership for all students training to teach in the UK and all teachers working in the UK who are in their first three years of paid employment in the profession. The economic question is not: *Can ACT afford to offer free membership to potentially hundreds of students and NQTs in the short-term?* Rather, it is: *Over the long-term, can ACT afford not to make every effort to recruit hundreds of students and NQTs?*

ACT mails a complimentary copy of *ACT Now*, together with membership leaflets and information about ACT training events, to every Principal of every teacher training establishment in England. ACT also mails materials to every chaplaincy and every Christian Union at universities and colleges in England with an Education and/or Initial Teacher Training department. And, of course, we encourage existing ACT members to personally invite every Christian student teacher and NQT known to them to join the Association.

Our new mentoring scheme – which aims to match Christian student teachers and NQTs with experienced and recently retired Christian teachers – is one way in which ACT provides targeted professional and spiritual support to those who are new to the profession. Our inaugural annual conference for Christian student teachers and NQTs – scheduled to take place in Nottingham on Saturday 17 March 2007 – is another means of offering support.



Rupert Kaye

RICHARD: Thank you, Rupert, for all that you're doing as Chief Executive, and thanks to every ACTivist who's helping to fulfil the vision God has given you. May the Lord continue to bless you.