

A brief history of ACT — part 2

Richard Wilkins surveys ACT's first 25 years, partly from the inside.



High time they united

Richard Attenborough's 1994 film *Shadowlands* starts with CS Lewis speaking at 'the annual conference of the Association of Christian Teachers' to an audience in aggressively sensible clothes. Sadly, Lewis died eight years before ACT was founded in 1971.

The union of three fellowships, the Teachers' Prayer Fellowship (formally the Teachers' Prayer Bond), the Christian Education Fellowship (formally the Schoolmasters and Schoolmistresses Prayer Fellowship) and the teachers' work of the Inter-School Christian Fellowship was not merely a pragmatic tidying up exercise. True, it unified mailing lists and rationalised the substantial membership overlap. It also reduced an appearance of competition for teachers' names and support. Henceforth, there would be one evangelical organisation supporting Christian teachers in their professional lives.

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Beyond that, however, ACT's formation gave notice that biblical truth about education would be presented in public by an organisation whose name resembled that of a teachers' union. ACT proclaimed that Christian teachers were a distinct cohort in a national workforce whose beliefs and lifestyle should be respected.

The '70s were years of ideological struggle and cultural challenge for Christians in society. Particularly challenging was an apparent outcome of the 1944 Education Act under which, for a quarter of a century, schools should have been



forming every child with New Testament ethics and a daily experience of worship. Now there was the biggest popular revolt in England against Christianity and all religion for two hundred years. Legislation had not been enough. Christians in education needed to draw together on the resources they had in Jesus Christ.

Getting it together

Three organisations had to be bolted together, facing the new decade while maintaining the priorities of the older fellowships. Some 5,000 busy teachers were suddenly informed, it seemed to them, that TPF, CEF and ISCF (teachers) had joined to form 'the Association of Christian Teachers', forecasts of which might have escaped them. The new Association was to be based in Scripture Union's London office. David Blair, of Scripture Union's Schools Department became ACT's first Secretary. David did Herculean tasks of leadership, diplomacy and representation, the more impressive as he also bore demanding, and increasing, responsibilities in his SU work. He and John Truscott, joint Organising Secretary for ACT and SU Schools, constructed and ran ACT's founding machinery which serviced its members.

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Some two-and-a-half thousand teachers signed on to become ACT members. The remainder may have chosen not to join or, experience tells me, didn't get round to it. ACT Committees for decades to come viewed '2,500' as if it were the sterling exchange rate. The membership figure was nearly always below that, and its annual announcement triggered mild depression. In 1990, after copious national publicity, membership briefly topped 3,000. Two years later, counter-intuitively, came a financial crisis. ACT's finances were always mysterious, and subject to miraculous intervention.

Termly mailings to each member contained practically everything that the three organisations had distributed before. *Spectrum* was the heaviest item, followed by TPF's *Intercessor* which gave a prayer diary for the term and news from local groups and members overseas. ISCF news and ideas for Christian unions in schools became a voluntary insert. So, for an additional sub, was *Digest*, a



resource reviews service for RE teachers. Members who paid a yet higher 'composite' subscription received all the compulsory and voluntary contents, plus *Religious Studies Today* a termly paper from Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (formerly IVF). In 1978 a full-size newspaper, *ACT News*, replaced *Intercessor*.



Please change the record

'Oh bump!' I hear you cry, 'Bump and bureaucracy! A plague on them.' Stay with me here. The mailing was foundational to ACT membership. It was what every member saw, whatever other conferences, courses and working parties they might or might not attend. The teacher with no spare time to be more than 'just an ACT member' decided each year whether to keep being that mainly by what she or he received from ACT through the post. Websites lay in the future.

The bump, as you call it, enables us to trace one of ACT's leading-edge innovations. We caught on early to the mood for consumer choice. In 1980, the basic mailing became the ACT newspaper, reduced to four A4 pages under the title *ACT Now*, with the Prayer Diary and Secretary's letter. The membership subscription was reduced. All the other periodicals were optional for additional subscriptions. You can guess what followed. The termly mailing became increasingly complex as the permutation expanded. With, as it happened, much reduced office staff and no computer, ACT was for a time posting 16 different combinations of publications every term. Beyond slimmed-down basics, members paid only for what they chose.

The second innovation was devolution. ACT began in 1971 with a UK-wide membership, administered in England, Scotland and Wales from separate offices. In 1974, ACT of Wales was formed, and catered for a culturally aware membership of its own. There might have been some English regret about this, but by 1984, when ACT Scotland became autonomous, it did so with enthusiastic support from ACT in England. After the Welsh precedent, Scotland's separate education system made an independent ACT for Scottish teachers morally inevitable. ACT's Northern Irish members had

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always been serviced from London. When I saw Belfast on a list of English local groups I cried out, 'This is Unionism gone mad!' So when NIACT was formed in 1996 it completed ACT's decentralisation. ACT England has been privileged to work with the confident younger Associations on equal terms.



Out and about...

ACT inherited and incorporated local groups from its predecessors. Their importance was emphasised in 1976 by the appointment of George Skinner as ACT's Field Officer. George, based in Bolton, was highly energetic and creative, a dynamic speaker who travelled throughout the UK addressing local groups, inspiring local committees and designing materials to help group organisers. In his first year, the list of ACT groups increased 50 per cent.

George's final report on local groups in 1980 was a discerning assessment of their nature. Groups, he found, were not uniform; each concentrated on what worked locally. Moreover, many were not so much groups as series of meetings arranged by a few local activists. Attendances varied according to topic. Most teachers at local meetings were not ACT members, and most ACT members seldom attended local groups. The upheaval in the lives of teachers following the 1988 Education Reform Act made local meetings very difficult to sustain for several years. Their recovery since 2002 has been most welcome.

Olive Martin was ACT's Pastoral Support Adviser from 1989 to 1994. Olive listened to teachers talking about the stresses of their working and personal lives. She enabled them to view their



headteachers and managers in ways that relieved their fears. She encouraged 'share and prayer suppers' for mutual support. She worked proactively with local and regional union officials to achieve a happy outcome for a stressed and harassed teacher.

...and overnight

ACT Conferences continued at times and places inherited from pre-ACT days. A weekend autumn conference at Swanwick continued the study conferences of CEF, while longer Easter conferences prolonged the TPF prayer conference tradition. Both retained their ancestral flavours, but increasingly moved towards teachers' professional middle ground. 'Swanwick' included some practical classroom sessions, while at Easter ACT tackled some large national and political issues ('Whatever happened to the Great Debate?' 1977). Conferences withered under autumn pressures on teachers and the rise of Spring Harvest. A new learning vehicle was needed.

The Stapleford Project of 1977 onwards deserves an article of its own which, appropriately, it has had (*ACT Now*, Autumn 2005). Stapleford House/Centre was a very tangible expression of ACT's mission. In its subsequent independent development it remains a valuable partner in contributing Christianity to the education of all the nation's children.

Overseas

The story of what is now ACT's Overseas Fund has been told by Phil Mellen in the Spring 2005 edition of *ACT Now*. After 1971, support continued to be for individuals called from the UK to work overseas. Increasingly, however, grants moved towards indigenous schools and personnel, and projects by Christian teachers' fellowships in other parts of the world. Additionally, training conferences for teachers in African countries, the vision of Bob Baker and staffed by ACT members, were greatly appreciated.

Officers and...

Whatever the going subscription rate, ACT members have been amazingly generous with



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voluntary giving. The appeal for a Field Officer yielded twice as much as was needed, and in 1977 an additional Development Officer was appointed. That explains my presence in this account, rather like Luke's in the Acts of the Apostles. I became Secretary of ACT in 1978 and in 1980 'General Secretary', a title then common in trade unions and missionary societies.

The executive officers have been assisted by some extremely able and committed secretaries, whose dedication has been inspiring. The ACT office has always been understaffed, and the variety of office tasks has been extraordinarily wide.

Guardians of ACT's vision and continuance have been its trustees, a General Committee until 1986, thereafter the Board of Directors of a registered company. The Association owes much gratitude to its distinguished Chairpersons: Philip May, Brian Monks, Charles Martin, Andrew Bradley, Simon Marsh, Anthea Tulloch-Bisgrove and Andrew Marfleet.

A Christian voice

Although ACT was determined from the start not to be confined to Religious Education and school worship, it was often accused of being stuck with these matters. Successive counts of members from 1987 to 2000 found that over 80 per cent of members working in middle and secondary schools *did not* list RE amongst the subjects they taught.

However, because the media's interest in ACT related mainly to RE/worship, answers to questions on these were most often reported. A widely quoted ACT leaflet in 1975 answered a booklet demanding that RE should be 'objective, fair and balanced'. This was from the British Humanist Association, supporting a Parliamentary bill (which failed) to reduce Christianity's place in school RE.

Similarly, from 1979 onwards, ACT became identified in the public mind with statements about the

occult in schools. A free leaflet on Transcendental Meditation proved almost ruinously popular. In 1982, ACT's media relationship with Hallowe'en began. Each autumn, when we thought our leaflet had been forgotten, another newspaper would discover ACT's 'campaign' against Hallowe'en in schools. Two booklets in 1988 and 1994 giving positive teaching and party activities revived the polemical battles in radio, TV and press interviews. This activity was accompanied by strange office equipment breakdowns, printing delays and staff illnesses. Sex education was another area believed to preoccupy Christian teachers, and ACT was part of the debate on teaching about homosexuality.

However, there was always much more to ACT than 'sex, spooks and school prayers'. In 1977, a leaflet tackled the aims of the whole curriculum as a contribution to the Government's 'Great Debate on Education'. The *Christian Rejoinder* described the Government's Green Paper as economy driven – 'humanism tamed for technocracy'.

ACT made submissions at various stages in the discussion of the 1988 Education Reform Act, and on successive formations of the National Curriculum. Throughout the 1990s ACT statements defended teachers against vitriolic teacher-bashing by the media. *ACT Now* expanded into a nationally significant educational journal whose comments were widely quoted. These were on grant-maintained ('nationalised') schools, literacy, school discipline, 'falling standards', teacher recruitment and stress, learning styles, and personalised online learning more or less dissociated from schools.

Whether publicly busy or not, the ACT office received a constant stream of personal requests for advice and support. This alone, for some people, justified the Association's existence.



25 years on

ACT's Silver Jubilee was celebrated in November 1996 at Wesley's Chapel, London. Clive Calver, Director of the Evangelical Alliance, and David Day, Principal of St John's College Durham, brought messages from the Bible to challenge and commend ACT in its continuing mission. Firm in Christian identity, built on teachers' experiences, adapted to new times, seasoned by public contention, miraculously spared in financial storms, united in prayer and tenacious in love for children and their teachers, ACT was alive and well.

■ Richard Wilkins