

The Gospel challenge

to education in a post-Christian world



Dr Arthur Jones is Development Manager and Senior Tutor at the West Yorkshire School of Christian Studies (WYSOCS). He is the author of *Science in Faith: a Christian Perspective on Teaching Science* (1998) and *No Home + Alone: a School Programme on Homelessness* (1999). Arthur is also an ACT Director.

Introduction

This article was sparked by the stories about job stress that occur regularly in Christian magazines and books. In the references I include two articles about school teachers that have appeared in *ACT Now* (Kleissner, 2002; Todd, 2005) These stories could be matched in almost any profession or workplace today (eg Bird, 2002). Certainly in education I have known of many heads and deputy heads in such situations. In the case study below I outline one of the stories about a Christian school leader in crisis. I found this story quite upsetting; not just because of all the trauma and stress that this individual had to endure, but because of the total lack of any kind of meaningful Christian response.

Sadly, similar stories could be provided by many other Christians working in education and for many other professions. Within the field of educa-

we need a whole-Bible grasp of the Christian story

tion there are, no doubt, many Christian teaching assistants, classroom teachers, school governors, bursars, lunchtime supervisors, caretakers, secretaries, librarians and technicians with similar stories to tell.

The two *ACT Now* articles cited earlier focus on issues of personal discipleship in order to encourage others who may find themselves in similar situations. The authors would know that there are other issues involved which they had chosen not to address. However, there is one particular issue that tends not to be addressed at all, even though it is arguably central to our Christian witness in a post-Christian society. Our first and foremost Scriptural calling – which provides the context for everything else in our lives – is our calling to rule and develop God's creation (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15). An escape strategy and a better job may be the only feasible immediate response, but we must also deal Christianly with the structures that produce such stress and burnout.

A Case Study

A teacher had been in the profession for 27 years when she became deputy head of an inner city primary school. The problems were immense. The headteacher was not coping and an uncooperative teaching staff was actively working against the management. There were many difficult children and horrendous family situations. At the beginning of the deputy's second year in the school the head suddenly left and never returned. Overnight, the deputy became the acting head. Immediately before Christmas she was notified that the school would face a full Ofsted inspection the following February. She was already working 60–70 hours a week; she was physically exhausted; and she was spending most of her holidays ill or sleeping. Eventually her body gave up. After a period of total rest she got a much better, part-time, teaching job in an independent school.

A Biblical Worldview

In order to develop a constructive Christian approach to what is wrong, we need a whole-Bible grasp of the Christian story. Many times we appear to read the Bible as if it begins with the Fall and ends with Redemption – with the life of Christ. Yet it actually begins with Creation and ends with the New Creation (see: Gay, 1998; Sire, 1997; Walsh &

Middleton, 1984; Wolters, 1985). God created everything (Genesis 1:1). Although everything was affected by human sin and rebellion (Genesis 3; Romans 8:20-22), all things are reconciled in Christ (Colossians 1:20). Our original task was one of responsibility for a creation God had committed to our care, a responsibility to steward its resources – human and material – for the loving service of our neighbour and to the glory of God. The Fall hindered and subverted that task, but it will still be fulfilled – though now, only in Christ (Matthew 28:18-20).

The Old Testament Law was given by God to create in Israel a society characterised by justice and shalom, by mercy and generosity. Israel would then fulfil its mission to be a witness to the nations, drawing them to God (Genesis 18:19; Deuteronomy 4:5-8; cf. the testimony of the Queen of Sheba in 1 Kings 10:6-9). The New Testament affirms the Law (Matthew 5:17-20; Romans 7: 7,12), but it also penetrates beyond the Fall to the Law's deepest creational meaning: to the way things were meant to be 'in the beginning' (Matthew 19:8). The New Testament explains that although the Law was holy, righteous and good, sinful humans without Christ's Spirit and faith could not keep it (Romans 7: 14; 8:3-4 and Galatians 3:22-25 with Romans 3:31). There are many good books on the Law (see: Lalleman, 2004 & Wright, 2004.)

In Christ we are brought back into line with God's creational purposes, into renewed conformity to His plan for His creation. Certainly, the church is a paradox. On the one hand, we don't belong. We exist on the margins of the modern world, 'outside the camp' (Hebrews 13:13-14). We are an alien and pilgrim community (Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 11:13; 1 Peter 1:17, 2:11), awaiting the revelation of the fulfilment of the creation task. But, on the other hand, in the meantime (or in the between-time) we

whereas unbelieving parents are nearly 100% successful today in passing their unbelief on to their children, believing parents are barely 50% successful at the task

are also the new humanity, the first fruits of the new creation appearing in the midst of the old (1 Corinthians 15:47-49; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15; Colossians 1:15). Spirit-empowered churches are called to be communities scattered throughout the nations of the world, who are true witnesses to God's abundant-life righteousness in every area, drawing people to Christ (1 Peter 2:9-12 etc – especially follow up all the New Testament references to our calling to do *good works*, Ephesians 2:10; Titus 2:14 et al). Scripture and Gospel therefore cannot be restricted to certain marked off areas of God's creation (such as our private or church life), but are relevant, directly and immediately, to all of it. The Gospel message must resound as much in arts, business, education, journalism, music, politics, science... as in church programmes (see: Hardy, 1990; Stevens, 1999). It is in such rich expression that the Gospel bears its most abundant fruit.

In that whole-Bible light, we need to look again at the challenge that faces Christians who are actively engaged in, or concerned about, education.

Things that are very wrong in education today

The stress factors outlined above are only one part of the picture. There are also issues of indoctrination and loss of Christian faith...

Any curriculum is a worldview intervention in the lives of children (see: Clouser 2005; Copley, 2005; Fraser, 1999; Glenn, 1988; Thiessen, 2001; Vryhof, 2004). Each is a worldview choice and those worldviews should be openly declared. Any school, for example, that leaves out of its 'secular' curriculum all reference to God and faith, is not being neutral. (Ask yourself what an atheist or agnostic should leave out to be similarly neutral.) If the curriculum assumes – proceeds *as if* – there is no God; no Purpose; no Way; that everything just is – *and the children (and their parents) are never told of these assumptions* – then the assumptions will be absorbed as conclusions. That is indoctrination. And, reinforced by the mass media, it is very effective: whereas unbelieving parents are nearly 100% successful today in passing their unbelief on to their children, believing parents are barely 50% successful at the task (Voas, 2005). Churchgoing and active Christian commitment are plummeting in the UK (Brierley, 2005).



How many Christian teachers feel uneasy about the goals and methods of education in their schools? How many feel stressed, or very stressed, or even oppressed in their work situations?

How many Christian teachers feel uneasy about the goals and methods of education in their schools? Does helping a certain percentage of students to achieve A*-C grades take priority over behaving ethically, or over serving the whole local community? How many feel stressed, or very stressed, or even oppressed in their work situations? The stories of job stress with which we began should certainly rouse our compassion for the victims; they should also shock and shame us with regard to the inadequacies of our responses.

If we had been / are being indoctrinated, would we know? If structures depend on values and values are grounded in worldviews, and if today almost all of our societal structures are shaped by non-Christian worldviews, then shouldn't we feel the truth of Scripture much more keenly – that we are aliens in the world? (Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 11:13; 1 Peter 1:17; 2:11)

This is just school education! What about all the other work situations where Christians are found? Is the absence of persecution linked to our failure to challenge the powers? (cf: 2 Timothy 3:12). Humanly speaking, John the Baptist and Jesus would have been largely ignored by the powers of their day if they had not also applied the challenge of the Gospel to those powers (Matthew 14:1-12; John 2:13-25; Matthew 21:12-16; 23:1-36). Challenging the powers that be is guaranteed to move us out of our comfort zones!

How should Christian teacher associations respond?

The four ACTs in the UK (ACT, ACT Scotland, ACTW and NIACT) should strive to provide opportunities for serious reflection on the issues – perhaps by building up vibrant networks of Local Groups; offering Christian education conferences, training days, lectures and retreats; offering online networks and discussion groups; offering web-based resources and briefing papers, and live online counselling and advice.

Thankfully, some of this much-needed provision is already in place. (Please see the NIACT, ACT Scotland and ACT websites for details, or visit the www.christian-teachers.net site run jointly by ACT and The Stapleford Centre to see what is already

available. Contact details for all four UK-based Associations of Christian Teachers are available on the *ACT local groups and contacts* section of this issue of *ACT Now*, pp34–35.) But, it goes without saying, there is still much, much more that could and should be done to serve, inspire and equip Christians working in education.

Let us consider again the stories of job stress with which we began. Seen only as tales of personal discipleship, the stories tell us that Christians should look to God to rescue them out of these oppressive jobs into better ones. (Incidentally, we mustn't ignore the influence of non-Christian worldviews on this perspective – eg Platonism and liberal individualism.) But, what if we also read them in the light of our creation task? We are witnesses in our society and culture today to God's creation purposes for His world. That calls, on the one hand, for public exposure and condemnation of the evil of systems of unrighteousness that place people under such intolerable stress and witnessing against those who create and maintain them, and, on the other hand, providing appropriate support. Doesn't obedience to the gospel of Christ demand this? If we leave our response at the level of personal discipleship, then the systems remain unchallenged and unreformed and someone else – maybe another Christian – will face the same situation from which we have been released. Having known the truth, do we not bear responsibility if we do nothing? (cf: Ezekiel 3:16-21; 33:1-9).

How should churches respond?

Churches should regularly and routinely:

- add a module to leadership training courses which deals specifically with these work issues. A key responsibility of Christian leaders (Ephesians 4:12) is that of equipping and supporting God's people to tackle crucial issues of workaday life.
- include in the church teaching programme sessions about the need for godly structures (eg Christian schools, Christian medical practices, Christian businesses) not just godly behaviour within ungodly structures (eg secular organisations and institutions). The latter, while very necessary, must avoid the danger of leaving structures and procedures unchallenged and unreformed – and Christians uneasy, troubled and stressed. Appropriate teaching would also be relevant in home groups and children's programmes.
- include testimonies in church services and meetings from people who are seeking to tackle these issues.

We are witnesses in our society and culture today to God's creation purposes for His world

■ appoint a group to reflect on the issue and feed back to the rest of the church. In particular are there areas in which church members ought to be proactive, eg in setting up a Christian institution, organisation or agency? Or are there already such things in existence (eg credit unions, welfare organisations, schools, medical practice, counselling services, professional groups) within our church community that need more exposure and support, and that represent an untapped resource? What should quickly become clear, is that there are issues here that concern the whole church, and that individual responses are often inappropriate and inadequate; structural iniquity requires a communal witness and response. This may well provoke persecution. Tackling some issues may put people's jobs on the line. Are we prepared, as a Christian community, to pledge – and deliver – the necessary support, if that should be necessary? These things can also be expected to be tremendous (and effective) evangelistic opportunities.

As followers of Christ in a post-Christian world we are still called to rule and develop God's creation. That calling may now create lives significantly less comfortable and more troubled than we have known for a long time. Our situation is dire, but the promises given to faith and obedience remain.

■ Arthur Jones



Hoping...

to be in a relationship?

Seeking...

someone who shares your faith?

Finding...

it difficult to meet the right person?

Then **Friends First** could be the answer – a proven way to meet Christian friends and potential partners.

Friends First offers a discreet service which puts you in control.



PO Box 8377
Birmingham
B17 9TE
info@friends1st.co.uk www.friends1st.co.uk 0121 427 1286

References and Bibliography

Matt Bird (2002) *Exploring your Vocation: Stop Working and Start Living*, Spring Harvest. (see: pp73–76 for the testimony of an army doctor)

Peter Brierley (2005) Report from *Christian Research*. See Jonathan Petre, 'Churches on road to doom if trends continue', *Daily Telegraph*, 3 September 2005. (Available online at: <http://news.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/09/03/nchurch03.xml>)

Roy Clouse (2nd edition) (2005) *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*. University of Notre Dame Press.

Terence Copley (2005) *Indoctrination, Education and God*. SPCK.

James Fraser (1999) *Between Church and State*. St Martin's Griffin.

Craig Gay (1998) *The Way of the (Modern) World*. Eerdmans.

Charles Glenn (1988) *The Myth of the Common School*. University of Massachusetts Press.

Lee Hardy (1990) *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice and the Design of Human Work*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Moira Kleissner (2002) 'It nearly broke me, but I can't give up', *ACT Now*, 58, Autumn 2002, pp18–20. (A school teacher's testimony.)

Hetty Lalleman (2004) *Celebrating the Law? Rethinking Old Testament Ethics*. Paternoster.

James Sire (3rd edition) (1997) *The Universe Next Door*. IVP.

Paul Stevens (1999) *The Abolition of the Laity*. Paternoster.

Elmer Thiessen (2001) *In Defence of Religious Schools and Colleges*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Barbara Todd (2005) 'All things do work together', *ACT Now*, 67, Autumn 2005, pp6–8. (A school teacher's testimony.)

David Voas (2005) Research reported by the ESRC in *The Edge*, Issue 19, June 2005. (Available online at: www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/about/CI/CP/the_edge/issue19/churches.aspx)

(Also available online in a press release dated 16 August 2005 at: http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/PO/releases/2005/august/families_at_prayer.aspx)

Brian Walsh & Richard Middleton (1984) *The Transforming Vision*. IVP.

Steven Vryhof (2004) *Between Memory and Vision*. Eerdmans.

Al Wolters (1986) *Creation Regained: A Transforming View of the World*. IVP. (Also available as a 1985 Eerdmans publication, and as a 1996 Paternoster publication.)

Christopher Wright (2004) *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. IVP.