

# A brief history of ACT — part I

Richard Wilkins was for 25 years General Secretary and Development Officer of the Association of Christian Teachers. In this, the 35th anniversary year of ACT's formation, he sketches its origins and more recent history.



## Tracing the family tree

### Across a crowded room

Imagine you are at a Christian holiday conference, and you discover that several other members of the party are, like you, schoolteachers. You swap tales and agree that teaching is demanding but also vitally important work. You exchange addresses and agree to keep in touch.

You say you will remember to pray for each other. Amongst yourselves and beyond, there are teachers known and unknown who may be listening for God's call to particular work; it would be right to pray for them. In fact, in these stressful times, the whole teaching profession surely needs prayer. Someone says how good it would be if Christian teachers had their own holiday get-together, like the one you're all attending now, only just for teachers. You resolve to do something about it.

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All this happened to 38 year-old Tom Dyer in 1926, at Slavanka Christian Conference Centre, Bournemouth. The mailing network that grew from this gathering became, in time, the Teachers' Prayer Bond. Prayer was the basis of the relationship between the members, and the enhancement of teachers' prayer lives was the sole purpose of the Bond's activities. From 1930 onwards, the high point of every year was the annual Easter Conference, usually held at a seaside conference centre (Aberystwyth became a favourite), but also sometimes at an inland teacher training college. Attendances of 100 were common, and in the



1949 – Slavanka, Bournemouth

years following World War II the numbers sometimes reached 150.

Organising this alone was an enormous task for the TPB's Committee, who were all full-time teachers. Additionally, there was the publication of TPB's magazine *Intercessor*, mailed each term to 1,100 members. There were, moreover, 27 TPB local groups of teachers who met regularly for prayer.

From one of the original impulses that formed the Bond, there grew a strong mission interest. Those referred to above as 'teachers known and unknown who had been listening for God's call to particular work' tended to hear it, and many of them went overseas. They usually served as teachers, but sometimes God called them again into other work on the mission field. One consequence of this was that after ACT's formation, its members were interceding regularly for people in many lands who

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were evangelists, church leaders, relief and development workers and mission administrators, as well as the many whose calling was always to education in some structured way.

**Christian minds**

The Evangelical revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries expressed themselves amongst university students through the formation of what would later be called Christian Unions. These were fellowships devoted to prayer, Bible study and evangelism. Discord arose from the 1890s onwards, as to how much Christians should conform to the new thought-patterns in biblical interpretation, science, and social action. An unhappy formal division occurred between the ascendant 'liberals' and the more frowned-upon 'conservative evangelicals' in 1919. The latter believed that historic understandings of biblical authority and of theological funda-



1957  
Folkstone

mentals were still viable, indeed essential, in the modern world. World War I's explosion of original sin gave strength to this conviction.

Evangelicals formed the Inter-Varsity Fellowship of Evangelical Unions, a fairly informal network of doctrinally agreeing groups of students in universities and other centres of higher education. Evangelical convictions, approaches to life in secular professions and personal relationships, all of which had been fostered in student life, persisted after graduation. In due course, the beliefs, values and personal 'convertedness' nurtured on the campus found corporate expression in local groups and national conferences of the Graduates' Fellowship.



1959  
Swansea

Within GF, evangelicals in particular vocations began to emerge as special interest groups. The first grouping to focus practically on Christians' interface with their profession's leaders and school policies were educationists. From 1933 onwards, the School Teachers' Prayer Circle was set up. A name change occurred in 1937 which, in retrospect, seems surprisingly gender-specific: the Schoolmasters and Schoolmistresses Prayer Fellowship. Later still, perhaps as evangelicals acquired training and administrative posts, the name was changed again to the Christian Education Fellowship.

CEF's growth occurred at a time of national educational reform. Schools were undergoing profound changes as a result of popular legislation. A series of government committee reports, Hadow (1926), Spens (1938) and Norwood (1943) nourished a movement towards fulfilment of a political slogan 'secondary education for all', which was finalised in



1955  
Llandudno

## *The question was raised at Christian Education Fellowship conferences whether comprehensive schools were biblical*

the 1944 Education Act. This meant in principle, and increasingly in practice, that no children above the age of 11 were to be taught in all-age elementary schools. Even more revolutionary was unlimited 'selection by ability', and the abolition of all fee-charging by state schools. It was this exclusive effect of the 11-plus exam that shook concerned parents and many headteachers. Henceforth, a grammar school could *only* be entered by passing the 11-plus.

Another issue was the legal establishment of Religious Instruction, and its local definition in Agreed Syllabuses. Many evangelical teachers became committed RI/RE specialists, and their



1966  
Aberystwyth

personal faith perspective sometimes created friction with overtly exasperated headteachers and county officials whose views were more 'liberal'.

Profound issues affecting all schools arose from these reforms and their implementation. The School Masters and School Mistresses Prayer Fellowship, and later the CEF, held summer schools and made submissions on the theory and practice of Christian education. These continued into that decade of equally controversial reform, the 1960s, when – according to some veterans – the question was raised at Christian Education Fellowship conferences whether comprehensive schools were biblical. This speaks to us of a time when:

- it mattered enormously that a change in secular education should be specifically approved by Scripture;
- there was perhaps more confidence than now that Scripture's voice on such matters could be clearly understood.

In the 1960s there was significant awareness that education was unavoidably ideological, and that theory and practice called for a testing of the spirits.

## **Per ardua ad scholas – from the stars to the schools**

Wing-Commander Branse Burbridge ended World War II as the RAF's premier night-fighter ace. He returned to civilian life with a vision, shared by others, to establish Christian Unions in secondary schools. Corresponding with their counterpart in universities, the network of groups was entitled the Inter-School Christian Fellowship. Like CUs in universities, they would be member-led. Partly as a consequence, and partly perhaps as a means of reaching the nation's future leaders, CUs flowing from this vision tended to flourish where pupil-leadership was expected, in grammar schools.

Very probably such groups for prayer and Bible study existed in schools before ISCF was founded. ISCF's leadership training, however, greatly improved the quality and durability of groups, and the post-War growth of Christianity owed an enormous debt to that training. Groups could start and function effectively, whether or not there were sympathetic teachers on site. Committed praying, Bible study with good support material, pastoral care of members, diplomatic relations with senior staff, and courteous communications with outside speakers, were all exercises that helped young leaders to grow.

Committed teachers, however, while not essential, were highly valued as background mentors, as staff advocates, and as guarantors of continuity when senior leaders left school. Teachers were also very often providers of leadership training, and they were helped in this role at local meetings of CU leaders. Such teachers often related to ISCF national staff by being appointed Honorary Area Reps.



1969  
Aberystwyth

ISCF's initial ethos most resembled the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (IVF as it was then harmlessly called), and the two organisations were in close liaison. But various considerations led to ISCF being overseen and administered by Scripture Union, whose many years of work with children, and its contacts with teacher volunteers who staffed its missions and camps, made it seem the right home. Amongst other beneficial effects, the SU connection helped ISCF to relate not only upwards to the education-

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ally successful, but outwards to the 65–75 percent of secondary pupils who did not attend grammar schools, and later downwards in age to primary children.

While training pupil leaders was ISCF's core business, direct work with teachers increased in the 50s and 60s. Extension into secondary modern schools revealed an apparent need for more teacher-leadership of CUs. There was a perceived shortage of the young 'officers and gentle-men and -women' who were relied on to lead in grammar schools. As ISCF's contacts with primary teachers increased, it was clear that teacher leadership would be essential for Christian Unions or clubs.

But strictly professional issues also came within ISCF's interests. This arose in teachers' meetings and conferences ostensibly focusing on work with CUs. While they were together, teachers discussed their own concerns, particularly in relation to RE. Practical support was provided by such training college notables as Jeannie Hills-Cotterill and Peter Cousins, who also spoke and wrote in defence of Christianity-based RE. Charles Martin, later Chair of ACT, wrote on sixth form RE, particularly in the context of General Studies. But other subjects, notably English Literature, where Dr Ruth Etchells contributed, were exposed to evangelical analysis. These services were greatly helped by occurring at something of a high noon of Scripture Union general publishing.



1970  
Aberystwyth

### **Synchronise your diaries**

Christian teachers were very much blessed by the services of three separate organisations, but there were some problems. One that was strictly practical was the proliferation of meetings. Two or three of these might occur locally in the same week, or even on the same evening, inviting some of the same people. The threefold provision needed better relating to the lives of teachers.

Christian teachers on the whole could not be tidily boxed into those who prayed (TPB), those who thought (CEF) and those who ran Christian Unions (ISCF). Some did all three, and were affiliated to all three organisations.

At local level, pressure for at least co-ordination was sometimes intense. In 1968, teachers in Bristol combined to form a city-wide Association of Christian Teachers. Also in '68, a new publication appeared which was a very large straw in the wind. *Spectrum*, a termly journal for teachers, was launched by an Editorial Board representing CEF, ISCF and TPB (which had recently changed its title to Teachers' Prayer Fellowship). At that time, distinct groupings within a wider population were often identified by a journal which represented their views (the Tribune Group of Labour MPs is an example). At a time of highly creative contention in national education, the establishment of *Spectrum* as a high-quality Christian professional

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journal stuck a very big flag in the ground. It aimed to address every possible topic that impacted on teachers in all phases and sectors of the education service, while operating under an evangelical doctrinal agreement.

*Spectrum* was the catalyst for a unification of organisations. Subscribers to *Spectrum* were sought by combining the mailing lists of all three organisations. Allowing for duplication, there were probably around 5,000 individual teachers who heard at least once of *Spectrum's* existence. Its equally representative Editorial Board, and its all-inclusive manifesto of causes and concerns, was a tipping point. The pressure of demand on teachers' time and energies had already created a popular wish for rationalisation. John Mortimer, Activities Secretary of ISCF, suggested to an Editorial Board anxious for the journal to succeed, that administration would be easier if there were one organisation rather than three.

■ Richard Wilkins

*In the Autumn 2006 edition of ACT Now, Richard Wilkins will describe the union that was finalised in 1971, and ACT's early life.*