

An oasis in winter

Richard Parrish reports on the Annual Theory of Education Conference held on 7-9 January 2005. The event is sponsored by The Stapleford Centre and The Whitefield Institute and is always well attended by ACT members.

An oasis

'Grace grows best in winter' was a quotation from Samuel Rutherford which John Shortt shared with those of us who gathered at Swanwick on the first Friday evening in 2005 for this year's Annual Theory of Education Conference. Although Rutherford was referring to the winter of suffering in a person's life, the quotation seemed apt in another sense, too: the first weekend in January does not immediately suggest itself as a good one for travel to a remote part of Derbyshire for discussion of the connections between Christian faith and educational theory and practice. It's a weekend on which trains tend to go slow and storms are likely to make road travel hazardous – and it's also a time when school seems a long way away after the celebration of Christmas and the New Year. But Swanwick is welcoming, the company is very good, the organisation second to none, and, most importantly, again and again, we find that this is a weekend when God meets with us and opens up our thinking. For me over the years this conference has been an oasis in my life as a Christian and as a teacher.

A transforming influence

This year our focus was on 'The Formation of the Christian Teacher'. It proved a good springboard into discussions about many different aspects of educational thinking and activity. John Shortt started us off with a remarkable 'telling' of part of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, reminding us that we are 'a letter from Christ' to those with whom we work. His theme was actually more about 'transformation' than about 'formation'. John reminded us all that God can accomplish change in us and through us.

Also on the opening Friday evening we heard from Alison Farnell about the ongoing work of The Stapleford Centre to be a Christian transforming

influence in education in the UK and around the world.

Detached engagement

On the Saturday morning our sights were lifted first by John Sullivan, Professor of Christian Education at Liverpool Hope University College. His talk on 'Hearing and Embracing the Call to Teach' took us from thinking about what education is – and he rooted this in our understanding of who God is – through some reflection on the nature of vocation to a careful analysis of the purpose and process of teaching. It was a talk rich in material and resonant with references to the work of other thinkers and practitioners. Professor Sullivan called for 'detached engagement', emphasising the need for Christian teachers to be 'fired by ideals' whilst at the same time 'avoiding burnout'.

Futures thinking

On the Saturday afternoon we heard from Gloria Goris Stronks, formerly Professor of Education at Calvin College in Grand Rapids and now Scholar in Residence at Whitworth College in Spokane. Gloria is the author and editor of a number of significant books and now a frequent traveller and lecturer in many different countries. She intrigued us with her reading of the work of futurists in the United States, weaving into her analysis of current future trends some powerful personal anecdotes. Then she challenged us to better prepare teachers of the next generation of students by:

- teaching about justice for the poor
- understanding that the decisions people make are based on their personal beliefs
- teaching people how to confront injustice
- taking the questions of our students seriously.



Richard Parrish is currently Head of Sixth Form and Assistant Headteacher at The Holy Trinity Church of England School in Crawley. Before that he was Head of Modern Languages at Sheldon School in Chippenham. Last year he married Anna (Hudnott), who teaches Chemistry and is now Head of Chemistry at The Weald School in Billingshurst.

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We were invited to think about the present 'bubble-wrap' generation of students whose parents are scared to let them take risks. We considered, as Christians and as educators, what our response should be to this phenomenon.

Theological curiosity

On the Sunday morning Trevor Cooling presented a paper on 'Curiosity'. He asked whether curiosity was a vice or a virtue for the Christian teacher. It was a timely treatment of learning and our attitude and approach to scripture, with some interesting cross-referencing between the distinct fields of education and cross-cultural mission.

Trevor prefaced his paper by explaining that his ideas were still 'in development' and elicited a good response from his audience. I was particularly struck by the phrase 'the academy is not neutral', with which he began his analysis. It is not a new concept. Indeed, in many ways this phrase expresses in a nutshell one of the most important themes which has surfaced at the Annual Theory of Education Conference over the years, namely that academic study is not value-free. Education can never be conducted in total isolation from our underlying beliefs.

This paper made the connection between the way in which we study and teach theology in the context of training people for Christian ministry and the way in which we study and teach other subjects as Christians in schools and colleges. Trevor Cooling concluded that theological curiosity was seen as vital to our work in both spheres.

Sixteen seminars

For the rest of the conference we divided up into groups to take part in seminars on an impressive range of educational topics. Sixteen seminars – from Hegel to Shakespeare, from conflict resolution to the assessment of spiritual growth, from why non-Christian parents choose Christian schools to a degree-based UK-Australian partnership for equipping classroom teachers – were spread over four one-hour sessions, which were interspersed between the main talks. On the Saturday evening an additional session involved a



Margaret Kakongoro (L)
and Felicity Gunn (R)

Trevor Cooling (L) and
Andrew Palfreyman (R)



John Sullivan (L)
and Mark Pike (R)

panel of educators from at least three continents, comparing notes on global educational issues.

A unique event

The Annual Theory of Education Conference remains a unique event. It is an extraordinary privilege for an ordinary teacher working in a state school in England to be part of such a vibrant international group of educators, researchers and fellow teachers for a couple of days. It is inspiring to see how people develop from one year or one decade to the next, as they change their focus or take on a new challenge and grow in their faith in Christ.

It is also encouraging to be part of a group which sings so powerfully (and includes a chorus with so many male voices too!) and thinks so clearly from a Christian perspective. So don't miss out – come and join us next year! And if you cannot wait until then, why not take out a subscription to the Journal of Education and Christian Belief in the meantime?

■ Richard Parrish

Book now for 2006

To book your place on next year's Annual Theory of Education Conference (6–8 January 2006) or to subscribe to the Journal of Education and Christian Belief (which is jointly sponsored by the Association of Christian Teachers, The Kuyers Institute and The Stapleford Centre) please contact:

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