

# ISAAC ARMITAGE LECTURE

## SHORE SCHOOL, NORTH SYDNEY

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### **‘What is the measure of success for a Christian school?’**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Firstly, a disclaimer: this lecture is very much a work in progress, and I’m not sure that I agree with all I’ve stated here, so I offer my apologies in advance for any offense caused. Yet, the topic is valuable and important, and it is worth taking the time to challenge and question our assumptions and practice.

I’ve been asked to determine what measure or measures of success we have for Christian schools. To set the scene, I must tell you a little bit about what I do and who I am. I am a school principal of a K-12 school. I have been a principal for five years now, and before this, I was in education as a teacher, and then in various senior roles at different schools. I have taught in a boys’ school, a co-ed school, girls’ schools, and depending on your definition, Church schools and/or Christian schools.

I don’t claim to be a great academic, and I’m certainly not a theologian. I am good at surrounding myself with gifted educators, ministers and professionals from other disciplines. I am a teacher. I have always been in environments where I’ve led change, environments requiring leadership and responsibility, of standing up and of hard work. I love creating culture, developing communities, and attempting to turn what is not working, into something that is; creating a space where people want to belong, want to participate, and want to be challenged. I lead in environments where colleagues are called to contribute to something or someone bigger than themselves. To do this, and by necessity, I, and I would think most educators, have always been involved in healing and strengthening relationships between individuals and in building communities... the only sure fire ways I have at my disposal, to facilitate change in people’s lives.

I love schools and education, and I have a particular focus and love of the adolescent years. At that time in a child’s life where most people go screaming and running for the hills, I love walking alongside young people, or standing just a little out of view, watching out for them, often without them knowing, because like all of us, I want young people grow up safely, wisely and well. I am committed to them and to this journey. It is one thing to desire young people to grow up to be strong, faith filled, wonderfully functional adults, and another entirely to assist in making this happen, day in, day out.

In Augustine's words:

For it is one thing to see the land of peace from a wooded ridge... and another to tread the road that leads to it.<sup>1</sup>

As an educator, my role is to engage with people who are in these communities. If I'm good, I listen to them, and help work out where they're at, so I can help guide and equip them for their next step. I need to understand and hear their story.

To be any good at this role, you have to be passionate, qualified, experienced and constantly learning. You have to love people and take the time to know them. And you have to be committed to this learning relationship, because it is a journey that takes more than one conversation, with more than one person, over years and lifetimes, not minutes and days.

It is an honour and enormous privilege to have deep and immediate access to the most private core of family lives. Most educators, indeed like most ministers, do not take this for granted, and we do not view it lightly. We are cautious and gentle with what has been entrusted to us. In the words and sentiment of Yeats, our families place their dreams, their greatest loves under our feet, and we must tread softly because we tread on their dreams.

You also have to know your limits in this role. Although I may be good educator, and love what I do, I can't use this confidence to tell people how to live their lives. Nor can I expect them to behave a certain way just because of what I think. Where they go with their lives, what decisions of faith they make, are intensely personal. It is between them and their God. At best, I see a partial and blurred image. They're on a journey. I don't know their destination. I just listen and think, talk and mull, suggest, prod and challenge.

I know enough now to know that people's lives are complex, that things are rarely what they seem, and that if you want to influence people in an adult and mature way, you don't pull rank and issue edicts about what they should and shouldn't do. And you don't judge. As Paul says, "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church?" (1 Corinthians 5 vs 12). The world is full of judgement enough and people are tired and hurt by it. In learning relationships you proffer friendship, kindness, love and support, and you recognise there are limits to what you can and cannot do. And within Christian educational communities, we recognise the need for grace and compassion and acceptance and kindness if our families are to soften enough, both corporately and individually, to laugh, relax and hear the heartbeat of Christ.

Having said this, all communities that are growing, and particularly school communities, need rules of engagement and a shared understanding about the conduct needed for community living. They need vision and a direction; they need to know that arrival at a destination is possible. And they need to know if what they're setting out to do is actually happening. We need measures of success in Christian education.

So this is the framework. Within this context, we now ask, what it is that we're seeking to do. It is a good to ask how we measure success, and what those measures of success might be. From my perspective, having thought about this for some time, while it is a good question, it is also a largely impossible one to answer. I can tell you what it is to be successful, but there are no instruments I own that can determine or measure that success. I can tell you when we are failing but I can't always tell you when we're succeeding. More broadly, I can tell you what the measures are for success in education, and I can tell you what it means to run a Christian school, but I can't tell you how I know, for a fact, if I'm genuinely successful in running a Christian school.

In practice though, the established church and external religious bodies often set themselves up as the arbiter of whether a school is successful from a Christian education perspective or not. The challenge here is that churches often don't know, and they have their own measures of success.

## **HISTORICAL ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN EDUCATION**

There is nothing new here. The role of the church in schools has been questioned and hotly debated for over 200 years in Australia but its presence has been clearly evident. Indeed, our entire colonised history is founded on the role of the church in education. The children of convicts were hardly a civilised bunch, and it was apparent very early on that if the government didn't want a completely dysfunctional society, they would have to intervene and educate the masses in both religion and academia.

Lord Castlereagh's advice to Captain Bligh back in 1805 was to note that:

'In a settlement, where the irregular and immoral habits of the parents are likely to leave their children in a state peculiarly exposed to suffer from similar vices, you will feel the peculiar necessity that the Government should interfere on behalf of the rising generation and by the exertion of authority, as well as of encouragement, endeavour to educate them in religious as well as industrious habits'.<sup>ii</sup>

The government of the day funded the Church of England to educate the penal colony's children and by default, the Anglican Church, although technically not the state church, initially dominated the political, cultural and educational scene in Sydney.

Over time, some of the more radical and non-conformist Protestants (namely the Methodists), began to object to the Church of England's desire to be the established church of the colony and protested against their monopoly of the school system.

Not to be outdone, the Irish Catholics, tired of domination in their own country fought hard to establish a Roman Catholic education system that would not bow to the forces of a protestant Colonial Government. As these challenges grew, Governor Macquarie tried to resolve the issue of denominational dissent, with that tried and

true human response; stacking the numbers. He requested that any teaching staff being sent over from England be strongly of the Anglican faith.

Thus from the founding days, Australia's education system has been marked by denominational sectarianism, where there was a dual purpose of education - to meet an educational need and to further the presence and influence of the established church. In practice, this meant that for the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Church of England refused to be associated with other Protestant groups, and the Roman Catholic Church refused to allow the teaching of non-Catholic views on the teaching of the Bible in school.

The result was that schools were established, funded by the government, not only to meet educational need but also to ensure that a particular denomination was represented in a town, regardless of numbers or sustainability. With no church prepared to back down, this was never going to end happily, and indeed, this stalemate would not allow the acceptance of a more economically viable and educationally consistent national system until 1847. When Governor Sir George Gipps arrived in February 1838, he found the colony under enormous financial pressure, and operating at a fiscal deficit, largely because of the government's inability to fund and maintain four competing denominational educational systems.

By 1844, a government report, one could argue the 'Gonski Report Round 1', found:

The very essence of a denominational system is to leave the majority uneducated, in order thoroughly to imbue the minority with peculiar tenets... Wherever one school is founded, two or three others will arise not because they themselves are wanted, but because it is feared that proselytes will be made.<sup>iii</sup>

In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, while colonial society was becoming more tolerant of different religious denominations, the Church of England remained noteworthy for its refusal to be associated with other Protestant groups, and the Roman Catholic Church likewise for its refusal to allow Protestant teaching on the interpretation of the Bible. With impressive rhetorical flair, Archbishop Vaughan and three other Catholic bishops issued a series of pastoral letters in 1879 stating:

... let parents send their children, when of fit age, exclusively to Catholic schools... let all Catholic parents know that they cannot, without serious guilt, place their children in proximate danger of perversion... no Confessor can absolve such parents as are willing to expose their children's souls to the blighting influence of an alien creed or a secularist system... let those who are so unhappy as to be sending their children at the present moment to Public schools, withdraw them as soon as possible.<sup>iv</sup>

Why does this history matter? It matters because of Santayana's oft-cited refrain: those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it.

My fear is that we are again in an era where the battle for denominational presence in our educational system is shaping approaches to new schools and the treatment of long-established and successful ones, and that in so doing, churches are setting their own criteria for what it means to be successful in Christian education.

In the last fifteen years or so, with the abolition of the 'New Schools Policy', new non-government schools have been established, with minimal government criteria but receiving significant funding. The new schools have been established in city areas and along growth corridors to meet population growth demands and to spread the influence of the church. The policy abolition benefited schools organised as part of a system, rather than as independent non-government schools. Growth and investment in education, in new schools, on behalf of churches has raised questions about other church assets: those long-established, seemingly prosperous independent schools.

As this school we sit in testifies, some of the educational institutions established by the churches in the century before last, have endured and flourished under the leadership of men and women of faith. They have invested in educational assets that have left a remarkable legacy of facilities for those who attend today. Academic results are generally outstanding. Generations of leaders: in the professions, in politics, in the community and in the church have been raised up. And so many who have attended have come to places of faith and spiritual maturity – leaders who have been able to show others the way.

In spite of their obvious success, these schools appear to have attracted two groups of critics. Those who resent them receiving any level of government funding given the fees they charge and the assets they have. The argument that their existence actually saves the taxpayers incurring the higher cost of funding the full education cost at a government school is lost amidst clamorous arguments by unions and photos of the Kings School entrance. Included in this group are Christians who would argue the money in these schools could be better spent on smaller, low fee paying Christian schools elsewhere.

And it appears there are new critics as well, from within the churches that founded them. There appears to be a perception that church based schools produced lukewarm, cultural based Christianity, with enough religion to comfortably inoculate young people from an active 'born-again' brand. These long established and highly successful schools aren't Christian enough – or perhaps more accurately – don't appear to be strong enough advocates for the denominationalism that underpinned their founding.

Now there is an increasingly strong pressure to produce 'Christian schools', either by funding the establishment of new schools, where the operations and governance are strictly controlled by the Church, or by transforming existing Church schools by exerting pressure on governance structures. Along with this desire to revamp Christianity in education is an implicit understanding that this responsibility cannot be left to educators but must be driven by the Church. Why this is so, is difficult to determine... While not perfect, by nearly any criteria, church based schools are overwhelmingly successful. For every child who has decided not to pursue a faith based life, at least it was an active and informed decision; and there are a great many who have been made richer by the relationship formed with teachers who have talked about their faith while working in Church schools. Including, of course, many of those who hold senior positions of influence in denominational churches today.

## **WHAT ARE THE INDICATORS OF SUCCESS FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION?**

Success is defined as something that can be achieved that has a positive and desirable tenor. We all want to be successful. No one wants to fail. We accept that what is successful to you may not be successful to me – it is a fluid concept that must be determined and agreed upon before being able to measure. But ultimately, the outcome is favourable to me, and something that I want to have happen; it's the attainment of a desired outcome.

In Psalm 118, David asks God to grant him success, and in Proverbs 2 we're told that God holds success in store for the upright. It doesn't appear that God has a problem with success as such, although we must note however that nowhere does God define success.

He is consistent however in describing what we must do, and how we must act for success to take place. In 2 Chronicles 31 vs 20-21, Hezekiah carried out his work, he sought his God and he was successful. We are told: 'This is what Hezekiah did throughout Judah, doing what was good and right and faithful before the LORD his God.<sup>21</sup>In everything that he undertook in the service of God's temple and in obedience to the law and the commands, he sought his God and worked wholeheartedly. And so he prospered. In Ecclesiastes 10 vs 10, we're told: 'If the axe is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed, but skill will bring success'.

God consistently appears to judge success by our actions, not our outcome; and where success is held out in front as a reward, the emphasis is on what happened to get to this point. So what does God need for us to do? In Micah 6:8 we're told: 'And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God'.

So God appears to give us an expectation, not of a defined outcome but a defined process. To act justly, love mercy, walk humbly. And if you're more inclined towards the New Testament, Luke 10 vs 27: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

It is not unreasonable to think this is God's expectation of us all, regardless of where we've been called to work, and regardless of who we've been called to be.

## **HOW DO WE JUDGE SUCCESS IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION? ATTEMPT 1**

Schools are not mentioned in the Bible. So automatically, we're in interesting territory as to the function of schools in generating Christ like behaviour or Christian following in our students, and the manner in which we do this. The Bible appears to leave such matters and the responsibility of raising children to the family and to the church.

But I am one of those people who believe that culture and current reality can inform our interpretation of the Bible although I know that will make me seem a little unsound in the eyes of some. So let's pretend that God is happy to have our children go to school and to be taught about the Christian faith by schoolteachers.

We have two challenges. Our first challenge is to agree on our measures of success, but, as we've already discovered, there is no clear Biblical mandate. Our second is to determine how we go about achieving success...of which we are given clear instruction and examples in the Bible, albeit not directly related to schooling. It's not difficult to determine where we need to spend most of our time. The Bible seems to suggest we need to focus on the 'how' we're reaching our goals, and the manner with which we go about our business, rather than on the 'what' of our goals to determine if we're successful.

Either way, I am cautious about defining success on behalf of God, and I'm doubly cautious of others who believe they speak on behalf of God about what I, as a Head, should be doing in my school to determine whether I am successful or not.

Don't get me wrong – Heads drive their staff half mad by asking for evidence of success. I believe passionately in benchmarking, in performance indicators, in data and in evidence based change. And as measures of educational success, these are good parameters to have in place, and recognised by all educators to be of great value.

For more qualitative aspects such as perceptions of safety, pastoral care, friendships and so forth, I can run surveys and measures of staff, student and parent satisfaction. I can ask staff about their faith and check to see if students attend church. I am happy to rely on my sense of 'mood' but I'll also have good wise people around me whose judgement and insight I value.

From a Christian schools perspective, I'm happy to put Bibles on the booklist and run chapel every week. I'll measure the numbers attending Christian youth groups and ensure my staff sign declarations of faith, run staff prayer meetings, and send an outreach team to rural communities. I run my schools on data and on objective, measurable evidence. And from a Christian perspective, these are probably the measures that are the most accessible in terms of generating observable, comparable evidence.

These measures, of course, can tell me everything - and nothing. We ask for benchmarks to measure success of schools, as if these benchmarks are the school. Most people can inherently recognise the weakness of such data, in and of itself. We intrinsically know that schools are far more than buildings, or uniforms, or traditions, or HSC results. They're more than Bibles and chapel services and outreaches. We can measure all those things and still not measure the success or failure of a school.

And in particular, I can capture all of this information and be none the wiser about the Christian nature of the school in practice. So, in an attempt to ensure that the Christian nature of the school is being preserved, and recognising these qualities don't really measure a Christian environment, those outside of schools begin to move into trying to control the people who run the school, the teachers who attend, the 'type' of families who commit. How often does our Head go to church, what's our

ratio of Christian to non-Christian families, are our teachers behaving the way we think Christians should behave on the weekend?

And it's about now our theology starts to get quite wobbly.

Apart from anything else, success has never been measured on these terms in the Bible. And if we're going to start measuring and trying to control the faith of people, it is also worth remembering that humans are notoriously poor at judging each other and assessing each other's capacity to do God's work. The Bible warns us time and time again – stick to your own knitting. Don't judge.

So above and beyond these criteria, which mean so little in real life, and have very little theological foundation, what further evidence is there of success in Christian schools? We already know that God does not define success in specific terms. While King David was considered successful because, 'he has killed his tens of thousands', my outcome of success is, thankfully, going to be quite different.

King David was judged by God however, on how he went about doing what he was asked to do. It was the journey, not the destination that mattered. God judged him on the quality of his relationships, particularly on his relationship with God.

Here is our dilemma: to presume to measure the success of anything related to God is difficult, but mix in God working in the lives of young people, who change on a daily basis? And I'm being asked to measure it? I am not seeking to avoid the question by hiding behind vague, fluffy, 'feel good' statements but frankly, to find evidence of success in Christian schools presumes to measure aspects of God and how he works in the lives of others in a way that I can barely fathom and would not presume to begin.

I can tell you what I don't think are measures of success and I can tell you that whatever measures are being put in place, they should not be established by the Church, or by those who are not actively involved in education on a regular basis. I also note that it is God who sets the agenda for what is successful in our world. When He is our rock, we may or may not be successful by measurable criteria but He can do what he wants.

In Job 12: 13, from the Message Bible (for which I beg the indulgence of those who prefer other versions), we are told:

"True wisdom and real power belong to God; from him we learn how to live, and also what to live for. If he tears something down, it's down for good; if he locks people up, they're locked up for good. If he holds back the rain, there's a drought; if he lets it loose, there's a flood. **Strength and success belong to God**; both deceived and deceiver must answer to him. He strips experts of their vaunted credentials, exposes judges as witless fools. He divests kings of their royal garments, then ties a rag around their waists. He strips priests of their robes, and fires high officials from their jobs. He forces trusted sages to keep silence, deprives elders of their good sense and wisdom. He dumps contempt on famous people, disarms the strong and mighty. He shines a spotlight into caves of



darkness, hauls deepest darkness into the noonday sun. He makes nations rise and then fall, builds up some and abandons others. He robs world leaders of their reason, and sends them off into no-man's-land. They grope in the dark without a clue, lurching and staggering like drunks."

Man judges from the outside. God judges the heart. Man longs for causal links. If we do this, then God will do that. In reality, God does what he wants. Job was a success by the world's standards. He did nothing wrong but it was all taken from him. Job's friends sat on the sidelines, critical, determined to prove that Job's success and failure were causally linked. God's measure of success was how Job handled all that was thrown at him. Job was a success, not because sometimes he was rich, or sometimes he was poor, but because he had a heart for God. Something his good, godly friends struggled to understand.

## **HOW DO WE JUDGE SUCCESS IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION? ATTEMPT 2**

If we can't really agree on what success looks like, and if it really is up to God about whether we succeed, then let's look at what God is asking us to focus on.

As we can see from Job, God is interested in the 'how'. What is the path we're walking down to get to our destination? The Pharisees were God-believing men, good people, who loved God. They just treated people poorly and didn't see them properly. Their capacity to value relationship the way God valued relationships was limited. And this is why Jesus kept getting frustrated with them. They weren't connecting with the people. They followed the law rather than the spirit of the law. It's not that the law is wrong, it's just that mercy and justice are always held in tension, and if you can't or don't get this, you're in the wrong business.

Jesus was found outside the city. He was talking with the woman at the well, hanging with outcasts, spending time with the lepers. He dined with prostitutes, he spent time with those who suffer from mental illness, and he cried with those who had lost family. He was about relationships and people. He never measured or judged anyone on the basis of creed or gender or external success. He just wasn't interested. And he was criticised for this by godly men. Jesus was always about the heart and about relationships – many of which, on the surface, would not have passed the Christian test so rigorously applied to Church and Christian schools.

Nevertheless, if we're in the business of connecting others to Christ, then we must surely do as he has done. Tune out the voices of critics, Christians or otherwise, the Church or otherwise, telling us who we should connect with and what these relationships should look like from the outside, and instead focus on hearing the small, soft voice of a God who is calling all of us to love unreservedly, to love passionately, to be accepting and gracious and overwhelmingly kind to whomever comes across our path. And if no-one is crossing our path, or they are the same Christians who think the same way with the same thoughts, then we need to get out of town, and form new relationships with those with whom Christ spent time.

Schools are all about relationships and the quality of our relationships is the measure of our success. This is so for all schools, but in Christian schools, we know that relationship extends beyond human to human, as we seek to introduce those we love, to a God who loves them. Our measure of success in Christian schools is the quality of our relationships. All of them.

Recently I gave some thought to acquiring further qualifications. I studied law for a term because I thought that a law degree might help explain to me many of the issues schools face. In the end though, I decided to study psychology. I can outsource law but I can't outsource relationships. Schools are about relationships, and those young people who make decisions of faith, invariably do so because of an immeasurable but highly valuable relationship they have with a person of faith.

Malcolm Gladwell in his book titled 'Blink', identified that medical patients don't file lawsuits simply because they've been harmed by poor medical care. Gladwell argues that patients file lawsuits because while they have they been hurt by poor medical care something else has also happened to them.

And that something else came down to how they were treated, on a personal level, by their doctor. What comes up again and again in malpractice cases is that patients say they were not listened to or they were rushed or ignored or treated poorly. Basically, 'nobody sues a doctor they like'. People-based professions require a level of expertise, to be sure, but they also rely very heavily on the quality of the relationships formed. And you can't outsource relationships. You can't legislate relationships. And you can't quantify or measure the value or meaning or depth of relationships. We can try but ultimately, it is intangible. Success within Christian schools will stem from the quality of our relationships.

In the last five years, I have walked with families who have gone through issues relating to a wide range of situations that occur in life. I have sat with a child, holding her while breaking the news that mum had committed suicide, holding her body racked with sobs. I have managed families going through separation and divorce, alcoholism and drug abuse, self-harm, mental illness, suicide of children and parents, disease, accidental death, death by illness, and even murder. This is above and beyond the normal joys and sorrows of raising any child through the teenage years, each with their different personalities, experiences and reactions to life, let alone thousands of them.

Educators walk alongside children but they walk alongside families too. You cannot have one without the other. Life is very complex on this scale and every year I learn more and more about areas in which I could not presume to have expertise from the outside looking in.

Have I been successful? I can't tell you. I hope so. In John 3, we're told that it's not possible for a person to have eternal success, without heaven's help. So with heaven's help, I hope I've made the journey easier for those in my care. I hope I've been able to play a part in softening hearts, and moving people closer to God, not further away. I hope that in the midst of tragedy I've been able to keep people from falling, just a little. I hope that as I hold them, they can hear my heart beat. I hope that as they hear my heart beat, that they can begin to hear the heart beat of God... it is stronger and more faithful and more able to help them than mine. I hope that they have been strengthened by knowing I'm standing by them and that while things

may never be the same, in time a new normal will come. It is intensely personal and individual and real.

Have I been judged successful by others? Likewise, I can't tell you. I hope so.

## **WHO GETS TO MEASURE THE SUCCESS OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION?**

I can tell you that my harshest critics, by a country mile, are Christians. Heads and schools are easily dismissed as not Christian enough, not denominational enough, their faith is not pure or deep enough, their schools aren't sending the message out clearly enough, they're not overt or evangelical enough. Chapel was only timetabled once a fortnight, not once a week, the Science teacher taught evolution without a Christian disclaimer, and there was no evidence of 'christianly' teaching in Year 11 maths.

Such church-based politics and judgements bear so little resemblance to how Christ plays out in our schools, that it is difficult at times to even have a shared conversation or engage in dialogue about the matter. This problem is not new. While I'm not making a direct comparison, the Pharisees were full of opinions and judgements about Jesus and his disciples, and what they should or shouldn't be doing to further the work of God. From outside schools looking in, I understand why it might seem straightforward. But Eugene Petersen's book on how Christ plays out in our communities talks of the messy world that is Christ in action. Of mistakes made, of atonement sought, of judgement set aside, of grace abounding. He states:

In this world, sin was not a word defined in a lexicon. Salvation was not a reference traced down in a concordance. Every act of sin and every event of salvation involved a personal name in a grammar of imperatives and promises in a messy community of friends and neighbours, parents and grandparents, none of whom fit a stereotype.<sup>v</sup>

To those on the outside looking in, proffering advice about what should be happening, what could be happening, and criticising what they believe isn't happening, it may seem a jumbled mess, and I understand this. I get that to be a Christian, and to work in a Christian school, makes one an open book to the criticisms, observations and judgements of fellow Christians. But it isn't helping. Our world is messy and complex and rarely black and white but it is where Christ walks.

Since being a principal, I have heard endless criticisms of Church based schools compared to Christian schools, with the distinction difficult to determine but seemingly based around the perceived faith of the Head. It bewilders me, as I've watched Heads of these schools pray for families, console colleagues who go through tough times, and stand alone, strong in the knowledge that they've been called to this role. We don't do the role perfectly and our faith is deeply flawed, but we're walking the walk as best we know how. I've watched good Christian men and women be removed from school boards – of both Christian and Church school varieties, whatever the distinction, because they're not deemed 'pure' or evangelical or denominational enough. The judgement is palpable, and the hurt it causes is real.

The criticism is real but is it valid? Just because I don't understand it doesn't mean it's wrong. So I look at the source thinking I could understand it if it came from other faiths, or from those who don't believe in any God. Ironically, I get no such criticism from non-Christians, at least not on this scale, but instead a sense of thankfulness for kindness proffered, grace extended. They accept my motivation for what it is – a desire to support them in raising their children. But as I say, I find it is the Christians who are the harshest critics, and often with the least amount of expertise or reason to be so, other than being a fellow Christian.

And it is this lack of expertise and understanding which I find the most confusing. My confidence and expertise as a Christian professional working in education doesn't allow me walk into a Christian doctor's surgery and tell her how to operate. I don't walk into a law firm of Christian lawyers, look around, and tell them how to try their case. And I don't walk into the Church and tell them how to restructure the hierarchy, and what hymns to sing on Sunday. I respect other professionals to know how to do their job, and I support and back them in prayer, and friendship, and advice when asked. But I don't presume to tell them how to run their workplaces or do their job. While I might have an opinion, I don't get to set the benchmarks or parameters of success. They're professionals. I trust them to be good at their job and to do it well.

Yet in education, the Church often presumes that Christian or church schools are their domain, that they have the right to influence syllabus and curriculum development with the imposition of 'Christian world views', dictating the need for chapel or Christian studies, questioning the faith of teachers, making staff sign statements of faith, and challenging how faith and tenets play out in the classroom. More often than not, this is done with no educational background, little understanding of developmentally appropriate pedagogy, or from a very narrow philosophical framework developed by like minded souls in the backroom of an office block. Knowledge that has taken educators decades to acquire, and hard earned experiences over many years, amount to little compared to the apparent wisdom and authority of the Church when it comes to education.

I am a Christian but I don't believe in Christian schools the way they are currently being promoted. Too often, Christian education appears to be denominationalism masked by a Christian veneer, much as it was in the 1840s. The harsh interpretation may be that schools become a tool to increase Church market share, at a time when the market is declining. The kinder version is that the Church, desperate to advance the influence of Christ, use whatever denominational power they have to achieve that end. Either way, it is not the role of schools to provide people for the church, nor the role of the church to view schools as recruitment grounds.

Church leaders are open in recognising that schools are a 'captive audience' and they are a 'mission field ripe for harvest'. As an educator, this is not my agenda and it brings schools and churches into conflict around the purpose of schools. We have a different agenda, and to be true to our calling, we must educate our charges to be informed, thoughtful, engaged, critical thinkers, who are encouraged to develop themselves physically, emotionally, intellectually and yes, spiritually but in their own right, and in their own way. Our measure of success is in the quality of the relationships that our young people form, with each other and with God.

The emphasis and direction are different.

## **COMPLEMENTARY ROLES OF SCHOOLS AND CHURCH**

Obviously, I do believe that Christians should run schools, and teach in schools, and express their faith, without fear or favour, in any manner with which they feel called, bearing in mind that they are the face and heart of God to a generation who know little, if anything, about Him, and who are unlikely to ever step foot inside a church. There is a huge responsibility here. And I don't believe we can do it alone.

I believe that local churches, in the words of Bill Hybels, are the hope of the world. Schools cannot and should not be fulfilling the role of the church, any more than churches should be taking over the role of the school. The church can support and love families in context, in a community, in relationships, in a way that schools rarely have the licence or the capacity to do. Churches are God's gift to us and we are not seeking to undermine or take that away. But the church's role is not our role, even though we serve the same God.

## **CONCLUSION**

I don't believe that churches should be so actively involved in setting the educational agenda for Christian schools. Their agenda is not necessarily sympathetic with the roles and the purposes of schools. Nor are they able to necessarily understand the complexity of decisions. Indeed, I have sat in meetings where the decision to purchase land for a new school was decided on the basis of 'well, if we don't buy it, the Muslims will'. Not dissimilar to the unsustainable establishment of denominational schools in the 1840s. And I find it particularly challenging that many denominations are quite overt in viewing schools as their 'captive audience', or as 'mission communities' to proselytise.

I don't believe churches should be setting the educational agenda, as if educators, Christian educators, cannot quite be trusted with the word and life of God in that context. Questions relating to education are not for the church, they are for schools. Questions are not for ministers, they are for educationalists. We may, and hopefully will, seek advice and wisdom but ultimately we need to make the call within our workplace. As I've stated, Christian doctors do not let ministers decide the measure of success of their medical practice, and Christian lawyers do not rely on the church to set criteria for legal practices. Yet in education, the church, or administrative arms of the church, often attempt to set the agenda, taking on the role of leadership in the school setting, and even micromanaging the organisation of school life.

So how do we measure success in Christian education? We look to Christ. He walked with those who were in the world. He formed relationships with every shape and type and kind of person, recognising their great hunger for kindness, for mercy, for grace. He knew God's laws and yet chose to focus on relationships not rules.

Education is all about transforming lives, one relationship at time. It is a slow, painstaking process, conducted over many years and lifetimes. It is immeasurable by human standards and success in an outcome cannot be defined. In schools,

relationships matter and the quality of these relationships determine the success of any school but particularly Christian schools. Relationships are the oil that make the educational cogs turn and help give meaning to our lives. Without them, life is dry and unpalatable and going nowhere.

In preparing this talk, I ran the idea of what I was thinking, past a few other Heads of Independent schools. I'm not claiming that my perspective reflects the views of other Heads, and indeed they are such a diverse group, reflecting widely disparate schools and people, that consensus on any topic is unlikely! But it is good to think things through from a different perspective. While not a huge sample, one Head was cautious of my thesis and the offence it might cause, another didn't understand what I was getting at, and the other three made comments along the lines of: 'go for it – lob the grenade and run!'

These are all good, strong Christian men and women, and I don't believe any of us want anything other than strong Christian schools, supported by strong Christian churches. I also ran this past a Minister, desperate to check I was not offending. I'm not sure I've done such a good job here, and if this is the case, I ask you to look past the words, and focus on the spirit of the message. The church needs to know that we love it, that we are supportive of it, that we will do the right thing by our God and bring His Spirit to all that we do and say, as best we can. But we are not in education as an undercover business for the church. It is not our job to proselytise nor win our children over to one brand of Christianity.

Indeed this is the antithesis of what we do. If we do our job well, we arm our young people with knowledge and teach them how to think and explore critically. If we do our job well, young people will seek out the Church, having been encouraged to investigate and explore their faith. If we do our job well, young people will be familiar with the sacred space of the Church, and the powerful role the church plays in building community. God is a big God – we are not doing our job if we don't tell them of His exploits, who He is and what He is asking of them. We are not doing our job well if we don't encourage them to explore their spirituality and to make wise choices. But what they do with that knowledge is ultimately up to them.

There is a lot that is working very well in Christian education. There are great Christian teachers, wonderful relationships and plenty of evidence that young people are being encouraged to explore their faith. It is our role to do all we can to ensure our young people make fully informed and wise decisions about who they are, who they want to be and what they want to do with their lives. We ask the church to support us in this role. To pray for Christian Heads, to encourage and build up friendships, to assume goodwill, and to support us in partnership as we go about building relationships, doing what we've been called to do. By all means, hold us to account one-on-one, person-to-person, as a normal member of the body of Christ. But schools cannot and should not be accountable to church determined criteria because ultimately, we serve different purposes. The church must fulfil its role but for us, the measure of success in Christian education is about the quality of its relationships: between people, within schools, between the Church and the school, and between all of us as individuals and our God. This would be my measure of success for Christian education.

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<sup>i</sup> Augustine's Confessions VIII, XXI

<sup>ii</sup> Lord Castlereagh's advice to Governor Bligh, HRA, Series 1, Vol.VI. Additional Instructions to Governor Bligh, 20.11.1805, cited in Cleverley, 1971; pp.18-19.)

<sup>iii</sup> Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative council, 21<sup>st</sup> June, 1844; cited in Griffiths, 1957; p.74

<sup>iv</sup> Sydney Morning Herald, 25<sup>th</sup> July, 1879

<sup>v</sup> Eugene Peterson