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Letter from CEO ABESA, Rev Roger Cameron, to Heads of Anglican Schools

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Dear Colleagues

The Soul of the School: a Christian Philosophy of Education

Easter term is now in full flight and I do pray that you will be sustained in all the busy-ness of running a successful school. In my first newsletter I wrote to you about one of the key characteristics of an Anglican school, and that was that there should be daily worship where God is acknowledged as our source of light, life and love. However that finds expression in your school, a visitor should be able to discern this Christian focus as part of your practice.

A second characteristic is found at a much deeper level, and should drive the philosophy and practice of Anglican Church schools at every level. I have been interested to see that here at St Mary's Waverley, there is currently a deliberate process to engage staff, parents and board in an energetic debate around their educational philosophy and to write it down in the form of a statement. Trying to distil what really makes a school tick – or to put it differently, what is the 'soul' of a school - is quite a challenge. It is this issue of the soul of your school that I want to address and which, if we claim to be an Anglican Church school, needs to be distinctly Christian.

Please recognize that these are my thoughts and come out my experience of a life time in education and the privilege of being head of two church schools. I am not an educational philosopher by training or expertise!

I had the privilege of participating in two services at St Mary's on Ash Wednesday at the beginning of Lent. My task was to make the sign of the cross on each of the girls' foreheads and say: "Turn away from sin and believe the good news." Almost everyone came forward to receive the mark of the cross, and I wondered what it meant to each of the girls. At St John's College I often helped with the Eucharist and the young men of the College would come forward to receive the bread and wine or a blessing. As I look at these young men and women, I always wonder what is it that they take from these services and also from our schools? It is much more than a good matric pass and an entrance to university. All our schools would say that we shape character and build moral courage. Good Anglican Church schools are primarily in the business of formation of girls and boys.

What is the philosophy of your school that shapes your boys and girls?

Marcus J. Borg in a book called "The Heart of Christianity" writes in his concluding chapter:

“Our culture bombards us with messages that shape our sense of who we are and what is worth valuing.

... the central values of our culture are the three A’s: attractiveness, achievement, and affluence. For many of us, our sense of who we are depends upon how well we measure up to these identity conferring values that operate on our psyches.”

These three A’s operate at a personal level for every child and staff member, but if we are to examine our schools’ educational philosophy I fear that that we would find that our schools are also driven by these needs. We are driven by the need to be attractive and we spend vast sums of money on marketing. We are driven by the need to achieve and every achievement is celebrated. We are driven by our desire as a school to have more and better facilities and therefore we need more money and our fees constantly increase above inflation. It is almost as if we are trapped in our own culture - and in a competitive society which demands that you are better than your neighbouring school.

From a child’s perspective this drive to be attractive is relentless: to look good, to wear the right brand of clothes, to have the right figure, physique etc. If you don’t, there is the temptation to resort to debilitating diets and the use of steroids to get results fast. Tony Humphreys, an Irish psychologist, has written extensively about the disastrous impact our drive for success/achievements has on the young psyche and the child’s sense of worth. I recommend his book *“Self Esteem: The key to your Child’s Future”*. I am convinced that the growing levels of anxiety and low self-esteem in our children, and the growing need for counselling services, are driven by social values that negate our Christian identity.

Our Christian identity is formed when we accept that we are created by God; that we are children of God; we are beloved by God; and that we are accepted by God. Therefore, because life is a gift and we are loved and worthy, we are to be generous and grateful. This is the Christian educational philosophy that should underpin all our teaching and learning, as well as all we do in the formation of character. It should be the central message of our schools and we need to be on our guard against loud social messages that undermine and devalue this calling to be grateful and generous.

I acknowledge that we live in a very competitive society and we need to give children the resilience to thrive in this world, but I would also argue that we need to enable children to be attractive, successful and rich because they know in their hearts that they belong and are beloved of God irrespective of their latest success or failure.

It is not so much about what is in your school’s written statements but more about what happens on the ground. As heads, you need to listen and watch, and constantly communicate your Christian educational philosophy. You need to challenge parents who want to win everything, and who want to protect their children from any failure or disappointment.

Being the Head of an Anglican school in this century is very challenging because your school is counter cultural and requires skillful leadership on your part. Remember that you too are created by God, a child of God, beloved by God and accepted by God.

May God bless you in this important task of holding a Christian educational philosophy in your school.

Warm regards

Roger