

The Anglican School: A Community of Faith? by Frank Sheehan

Mrs Liz Brown is the Principal of Holy Spirit Grammar School, a co-educational Anglican School. She is an Anglican who attends her parish church once, sometimes twice, a month. Mrs Brown has called together her executive, as well as the chaplain and a couple of other senior teachers to consider a question the synod has asked of Anglican Schools within the diocese: "Is your school a faith community?"

Surprised at the Question Mrs Brown addresses the meeting. "I'm a little surprised that Synod has felt the need to ask us this question. We built a beautiful new chapel only three years ago. We have baptisms, confirmations, weddings and even funerals at the school. In fact, I have been struck by the way in which people turn to the school community for support at times of loss and sadness. Often enough, the Chaplain is the only priest they know. I think schools may have a special sort of ministry in this area. The school's religious connection seems to offer a reassurance and a comfort to people who have no obvious link with faith. Of course, they celebrate their more joyful events here too. In regard to more 'everyday matters', we have an assembly for both the primary and senior schools and we always begin them with a hymn, a bible reading and a prayer. The chaplain then gives a homily. We often have visiting speakers who talk about some aspect of religion. Students from Year 1 to Year 10 have an RE class once a week. On top of all this, every student attends three House Chapels a year. "Founder's Day, Synod, Christmas and Easter".

Mrs Brown is only warming up. "As well as that, we have an optional chapel service for each year group and their families in the senior school. We have the Founder's Day Service, an Advent Service. We hold a Communion Service on Easter Sunday and on Christmas Eve. Once a year we take the entire senior school into the cathedral for Holy Communion during school hours. The Chairman of Council and I always attend synod. Our school collects money for Anglicare, the Australian Board of Missions, Parkerville Children's Home. There's a Bible Study group that meets once a week. The community service program involves us at Anglican Homes. We send 25 students to the annual Anglicare Service in the cathedral, our choir and orchestra make a major contribution to this service. 30 primary school students go to the combined ecumenical service every year. We sing and play at the concert which brings together all the Anglican schools. We always perform something religious at that. Last year, the Senior Art Competition was based on the theme of 'The Good Samaritan'. The chaplain showed the entire school a slide of Van Gogh's painting of this parable and explained why the story meant so much to the artist. We seem to do a lot of religious things. Doesn't that make us some sort of community of faith?"

The Deputy Head Dr Ken White is the Deputy Head. “Yes. We do many churchy things. More than the average parish I’d say. We expose the students to a variety of religious experiences. I don’t feel we can do much more than that. It’s really up to their parents. If kids don’t have encouragement, support and even a bit of a push from home, then the school isn’t in the race. And then there’s the question of students being free to have room away from religious things if that’s their choice. I think we have to be careful of synod’s question or we’ll just be setting ourselves up to fail.” Mr Peter Gray, Head of Drama, is a Pastoral Assistant at the cathedral and Head of Drama at Holy Spirit. “Actually, I think that’s a bit of a cop out if you don’t mind my saying so. It is precisely because so many parents opt out of their spiritual responsibilities that we, as an Anglican school, need to be attentive to our duties in these matters. That’s just one reason why we take plays into the cathedral and stage them there. It is an excellent way of making lots of our students feel at home in that sacred space. I mean, when we put on ‘Murder in the Cathedral’ it worked on all sorts of levels. I am always looking for plays with a profound religious message; plays by Anglicans or about Anglicanism. ‘Racing Demons’, that marvelous drama about priests in the Church of England, is a good example of the latter. And we arrange it so that Drama students serve for the Synod Eucharist or for ordinations. We have to take them by the hand, lead them into these ‘strange’ places, reassure them and involve them; make them feel part of it all.”

Father John Black is the school chaplain. “You know, there’s part of me that agrees with so much of what has been said in this conversation. Naturally, I’m all for the approach taken by Peter Gray. He seems to have a bit of passion. I also feel we could be much more up-front and even a bit more assertive about the fact that this school began as an Anglican foundation. It only began because a priest had a dream about providing excellent education. He had the vision and the energy. I wonder really whether we are being true to that vision and whether we are being true to the church and even, in more broad terms, to the Christian faith.”

A Faith Community? Father Black has been thinking about these things and he feels deeply about the issues. “Why, for example, do we allow so many students from other faiths to come to this school? Shouldn’t we be giving higher priority to students from Anglican families or, at least, from some sort of Christian background? It restricts what we can do in class and at House services. If I have the Eucharist I really can’t include the Muslims, the Buddhists, the Catholics and the non-believers in any meaningful way. We limit ourselves by being too open. I think there’s an integrity issue here. And certain members of staff are not supportive. I said to one of the English teachers the other day that we need to put the ‘Holy Spirit’ back into Holy Spirit Grammar and he said ‘I think we should put the Grammar back into Holy Spirit Grammar. Have you seen some of their essays?’ I mean, if teachers have such flippant attitudes, how can we begin to build a community of faith?”

Being Open About Faith. Mr Green is the Senior Master. “John, this sort of talk worries me. I reckon the church needs to open itself up to the world and have a wonderful mix within its schools. I remember Prince Charles saying that he wanted to be ‘Defender of Faith’ not ‘Defender of the Faith’. And I wonder whether Canon Foresight, who founded our school almost a hundred years ago, might have been very open to a religious mix had he been alive today? And that mix doesn’t just apply to students. I think we should have some teachers who are Anglicans, some from other faiths, some who are agnostics and even the odd atheist. Students will meet that mix in the wider world. And, anyway, we live in a different age. Do you know that on Fridays we have 18 senior students who stop everything and go off to a big prayer meeting in the city? I’m talking about the Islamic boys who go into the mosque together. Don’t you think they provide an interesting and even a good example for both students and staff?”

Difficult Questions! Mrs Brown can sense that she and her staff members are beginning to grapple with some difficult questions. “I wonder, Ms Blue, whether, as Dean of Studies, you might like to comment at this stage?”

The Responsibilities of Schools. Alice Blue has heard this sort of discussion before. “I remember when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister of England. She complained about her Cabinet and said that they seemed to be able to understand everyone else’s point of view but had no point of view of their own. I feel a bit like one of them. I guess there are probably various ways of being a ‘community of faith’. But I sometimes wonder whether that is our responsibility. Over the years, I’ve heard people make all manner of demands as to what a school should provide. ‘Community of Faith’ comes up now and then. But, after all, isn’t that what parishes are meant to be? Our school’s population is changing all the time. It is one ‘community’ one year and quite a different one the next. We can’t have continuity and we shouldn’t.

Each year we lose our Year 12 leaders. They move on and, quite frankly, I am happy that they leave and stay away. They are sick of school and they should be off exploring new worlds. We rely on there being lively parishes for them to find a spiritual home.” *Those Who Model Faith* Ms Blue continues: “I think we can tell them a few things about faith, the church and religion. We can have some speakers who provide models of being ‘in the faith’. The bishop is always lively. That young woman from the Anglican Youth Department makes them think. That very radical man from the Social Responsibilities Commission offers an alternative viewpoint from the one their rather conservative parents hold. But I agree with Dr White. If the home life doesn’t connect them with a genuine faith community then we can’t carry the whole thing, and we shouldn’t be expected to.

Let me stress again, too many people want schools to do too many things. Now synod is on our back. I remember the year I had to represent Mrs Brown at synod. As a group they seemed pretty removed from our world within a school.” The Task at Hand Alice Blue returns to her central point. “As Dean of Studies, I say let’s help our students get a decent TEE, the best they can achieve. Let’s teach them about resilience and self-esteem. Let’s try to make school both fun and interesting. Let’s allow them to enjoy sport, cadets, chess, debating and so on. How much time is there for the delicate and difficult task of building up and nurturing a faith community? If we are really interested in such things, let’s support the local parish with our music and other resources. I know Canon Gold in my own parish would be grateful for any help like that.”

Concern for the Chaplain Ms Blue looks at Father Black. “I suppose I feel a bit concerned for the chaplain. It isn’t easy being a chaplain these days. Being all things to all people within a school and various other things for synod and the diocese must be tiring. I know that the Head of Boarding worries when I say that I’m drawn towards the Dalai Lama who wrote ‘My religion is kindness’. But, honestly, as far as us being a ‘community of faith’ I think kindness combined with a bit of discipline of mind and body is where we need to start and probably finish.”

Bishop John Shelby Spong. The Head of Boarding is Tony Orange. Tony is an active member of a parish where being ‘Spirit-filled’ is both possible and necessary. As this conversation has gone on, he has become a man with a sorrowful countenance. “Alice, sometimes I think you see the RE aspect of this school as not much more than “Let’s Smile About Religion and hope they’ll guess”. And of course I worry when a Buddhist celebrity seems to be quoted as much as Jesus Christ. And I worry when you tell me that you enjoyed hearing John Shelby Spong talking about the resurrection in the chapel at an Anglican school down the road . I know it was well attended but there’s not much left of the resurrection after he’s finished with it. He seems to spend a lot of time suggesting that the Anglican community of faith hardly exists or isn’t worth preserving. But, I wonder, when you speak of having diversity with the teaching body, whether you’d make room for a couple of teachers who are, for want of a better description, ‘Bible-based Christians’? Would you see them as having a place within our faith community here at Holy Spirit? Would you tolerate that?”

Mrs Whitelaw, Head of English. Mrs Brown is beginning to look tired. She asks Mrs Jean Whitelaw for a final word. Mrs Whitelaw is Head of English. “I sometimes feel that we do as much RE teaching as those in the RE Department. After all, try reading Shakespeare or Blake or Bruce Dawe without a good deal of biblical literacy. Personally, I am a traditionalist and, thank God, Canon Greenslade has a decent 1662 Service. I find the language of other services so very banal. I have a horror of modernity. I’m really an ‘Immortal, Invisible’ sort of person. Unfortunately, things have been sadly watered down in the Anglican liturgy. Those new hymns do nothing for me. It’s really a case of ‘Take your

partners for the Agnus Dei' these days. We are doing young people a disservice by embracing novelties and mindless, repetitive jingles. All that clapping and waving is strange and embarrassing. I believe the Americans call it 'Dumbing Down'. Religion is too important for that."

Literature and Religious Education Mrs Brown asks Mrs Whitelaw to go back to the connection between literature and Religious Education. "Yes. Indeed. Well, although a traditionalist, I think we need to make the students think. We are studying *The Power and the Glory* and I was telling my Year 12 Literature class the other day that Graham Greene said he'd lost just about all of his beliefs but still retained his faith. Fascinating stuff. I know it's not enough if you are serious about being a member of the church and I know that Tony Orange thinks we shouldn't even study such books. But they are stimulating nonetheless. We are also thinking of having the Year 10s read a novel by a gay Christian who...."

Mrs Brown suddenly holds up her hand and points to her watch. "Yes. Thank you Mrs Whitelaw. But I'm afraid I have to go off to another meeting." The Conference at St Mary's. Mrs Brown glances at both Father Black, who seems unwell, and Tony Orange who is shaking his head. "Ah. So there we have it.

Anyway we are all going to that Anglican conference at St Mary's. No doubt, things will be much clearer for everyone after that." We have 25 minutes for group discussion. Please break up into groups of between 6 and 8 people for this discussion. Why don't you see if you can meet up with people from outside your school and form a group with them? Following our group discussion, we will all come together so that people might approach the microphone to add comments. Here are some suggested questions for your group. If you come up with other questions, please discuss them as well. What is your individual response to this scenario? What does it make you think about? How does it make you feel? Have these people begun to engage with the question posed by synod: "Is your school a faith community?" Would you like to have had another character saying important things? What are the urgent issues that have been raised by these members of Holy Spirit Grammar School? Is there anything you'd like to say to any of these staff members? What could your school learn from Holy Spirit Grammar School? What could Holy Spirit Grammar School learn from your school?
