**ANGLICAN SCHOOLS OFFICE REPORT TO GSTHW 2020**

*For a clear overview of, and insight into, the work of the Anglican Schools’ Office in the past two years, explore our new website at* [*www.anglicanschools.nz*](http://www.anglicanschools.nz)*. We hope there are resources there which will be of help to those across our Church as well as our schools.*

One of the key questions for the chaplains and RE teachers of our schools is, “What is good news for our young people?” It is a complex question. A simpler one is, “What good news can our young people be for the church?” There, our Schools can provide some answers.

It is difficult to measure the encouraging, Christ-filled happenings in our schools: young people exploring faith, coming to faith, living out their passion for justice and service in practical ways. One piece of data provides some insight, however. In 2018 for the first time we asked schools for the number of baptisms and confirmations they had held that year. About two-thirds of the schools in Aotearoa New Zealand responded, and in these alone there had been 162 baptisms and 72 confirmations. Of those 162 baptisms, 127 were at secondary schools. Evidently, then, this has nothing to do with the tradition of baptising children in preparation for entry to a good secondary school. Nor, given the low percentage of Anglican parents at our schools, were these students coerced into it by family. In a society where Baptism and Confirmation give no societal leverage and are no longer automatic “things you do” at a certain age, 234 young people in our schools decided over the course of one year to make a public declaration of faith, and to do so within the Anglican fold. There has been much rejoicing in heaven!

Baptisms and Confirmations are good, measurable things. Other good news from our schools is better communicated, as I did in the report two years ago, with a few vignettes of school life.

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Bishop Kelvin Wright and I arrive to carry out a Special Character Review of St Mark’s, Christchurch. Five years ago the school was in crisis, bullying was rife, parents and staff were leaving. Now we enter a cheerful, peaceful school where evidence of the centrality of Christianity is everywhere. A large TV in the foyer rotates illustrated Bible verses; classrooms display lists of the books of the Bible; large crosses and Christian symbols are clearly displayed; every new student and whanau are prayed for at their first assembly by the principal. We are welcomed by a vibrant Kapa Haka group, and Father Ben begins the morning service. He chants in te Reo, and then starts the English translation. Within a line the entire school has joined him in reciting the Apostle’s Creed by memory. Parents rush to tell us how deeply they appreciate the love and support their previously-struggling children found when they came to this school. Repeatedly we are told that the secret of the transformation is that the principal and chaplain live their faith openly, daringly, and with integrity.

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A group of very different chaplains gather to talk about encouraging Christian gap year participation, and ways of connecting students to churches in different dioceses. Naturally the conversation broadens. From two evangelical-leaning chaplains we hear of middle-school boys approaching them of their own volition to ask for instruction in the Christian faith. From an Anglo-Catholic-leaning chaplain we hear of the two Year 13 girls who gave testimonies at end of year assemblies. God is at work right across our church.

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I call into Craighead to do some initial conference planning and am met by the chaplain, even though she has an RE class. “It doesn’t matter,” she said. “They’re fascinated with this topic and will work at it whether I’m there or not.”

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We learn that a second school in Fiji is in dire need of laptops. I send an email out to our schools, and within half an hour am offered 60+ Chromebooks from Southwell. The two Southwell computer teachers stay back in the first week of the holidays repairing them and preparing them to be sent over.

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St Michael’s in Christchurch used to be our smallest school. In 2018 it had 40 students, in 2019, 80, and has now reached 102. After years of struggles following the earthquakes, it has turned a corner. The Principal describes their first day, 2020: “Lots of parents dropped their kids and joined our Cuppa and a Natter - the place was positively crowded! And then quite a number stayed on for our opening chapel service. We filled the main section of the central nave - thirteen pews on each side - plus a couple of overflow pews in the side aisle too.  When I first arrived, we filled three pews…” An ERO reviewer tells me a story he’d been told by a parent. Her son, a young lad on the autism spectrum, said to his mother, “Sometimes I think that something bad might happen and you and dad might be dead. But it’s OK because St Michael’s would look after me.”

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***Schools: Our mission fields in the secular world.***

As these stories show, our schools are mission fields that reach beyond students to touch staff and wider families as well. They also bear the challenges and strengths of missions to the unchurched. Anglican schools are, essentially, educational institutions which conform to the rules of our secular society, and the majority of their clientele come with no commitment to Christianity. These parents and students expect the Christian element to be like butter on a loaf of bread, while we work towards it being the living yeast that permeates and shapes it.

This secular base is not, however, a bad thing. If our schools were like parishes, attended only by those who are already interested in or committed to Christianity, we would be duplicating the parish work of supporting and educating the faithful, rather than continually speaking into lives who would otherwise have never heard the Gospel. We do not “call the shots” in our schools, but that ensures we listen to and respect the foreign culture we are entering, and allow it to challenge our own language and priorities. Much of the most recent work of the Anglican Schools’ Office has grown in response to challenges from the secular world of our students that we cannot ignore.

***The Challenges.***

“What does it mean to be an Anglican School – or college or institution *or church*? Why do we bother having them?” Those are familiar questions for schools, and increasingly so for churches. Is there a genuine point of difference? Do they (schools, colleges, churches) offer something that can’t be found elsewhere? Within our schools, many traditional answers to these questions are being blown apart. Secular imitations of religion are strong and growing. Practices which were once the province of Faith are now the province of Psychology. Values and virtues are taught seriously at secular schools. Young people with no religious faith know the importance of forgiveness, gratitude, justice, servant leadership and caring for creation, and practice them. Christians talk of prayer “changing ourselves” – well, many believe that can be achieved through Mindfulness. Christians talk of “fulness of life” and the world seeks it, and apparently finds it, through wellbeing programmes.

Much of this is good: we as Christians surely strive for a society where Christian values of compassion and justice thrive; we should rejoice at the social conscience of our young people. But it is disconcerting to discover aspects of life we had associated so clearly with God, purportedly doing OK without apparent divine assistance. Perhaps this is our generation’s version of the impact of Darwinism 200 years ago. Is God still needed in the creation stories of our own lives?

This is forcing us to look more deeply at the heart of what we teach our students. We can no longer blithely talk of “Christian Values”: we must instead be clear as to the difference the gifts and demands of Christ make to common values. When schools adopt Restorative Practices, we must encourage them to re-plant these practices in the soil of divine grace and forgiveness from which they first grew, and in which they are proven to grow best. We can take the effective but inward-looking techniques of mindfulness and offer the richness of a Being to whom one can open one’s mind and heart. We can transform techniques of individualised wellbeing into relational wellbeing: with each other, with creation, with God. If offered “holistic” wellbeing, we can suggest the Orthodox understanding of the work of Christ, which addressed our Being, our Wellbeing, and our Eternal Being. There is nothing in the secular world to compare.

Christianity has been called sandpaper to an ego-centered society, but that society (particularly in its energised youthful form) is also sandpaper to the Christianity we teach, scraping us down to our genuine point of difference. For we can adjust our approach to values, wellbeing and all the above, but our essential difference is even deeper. To find it, we are forced back to the question with which we started this report: What *is* the “Good News” we proclaim? This is another challenge.

Within the Church we use the phrase repeatedly, and even if we rarely unpack exactly what we mean by it, we generally agree it is Good. But when you talk about Good News in a secular environment, surrounded by young questioning people, you are forced to examine whether what you are saying *is good news* *to them.* If it isn’t, no amount of skilled strategic planning (of curriculum, board or vestry) will make it so. We may say that God has saved us from sin; that Christ has paid the price of our forgiveness. For us, that is good news. For young people who think what the church means by “sin” is the sort of sexual behaviour that they’re convinced is totally fine, there’s nothing good about being saved from it.

Our senior primary students, in their new curriculum, learn that “Jesus is Good News for a Broken World.” That is still true. The need is as real as ever – but we must ensure the Good News we preach matches that brokenness. We are learning that that the good news young people desperately need to hear means understanding “sin” in a way that incorporates shame, inadequacy, failure, and collective responsibility for the plight of the world. Our young people are no strangers to shame and failure – do we have good news for that? Climate change is the worst news many of our young people are bearing – do we have good news for that? Do we have good news for young people for whom being “lost” isn’t only separation from God, but separation from themselves? For those who are confused about their very identity, and who desperately want to be accepted just as they are?

These are the sorts of questions which our daily interactions with young “secular” people in our schools make starkly clear. It is vital we continue to be challenged and shaped in this way, as it is only when we know that our Good News *is* Good News that we can be the sort of shamelessly Christian presence in our schools and society which can bring about transformation.

***The Anglican Schools’ Office.***

Those of us in the Anglican Schools’ Office are not the people on the ground making such transformation happen: that is the work of our chaplains, principals and RE teachers whose dedication continues to amaze and inspire me. The Office’s role is to support, encourage, connect and resource them. This work has grown to such an extent that our new website had to be created to begin to hold it all. There you will find the work that Carol Trotter and her team of teachers did on a new Primary School Curriculum; all the resources for the discussion-based Middle School Theology curriculum (now also being used by schools in Australia and South Africa); RE resources for senior students; our growing response to the challenges of values, Restorative Practices, Mindfulness and Wellbeing discussed above; the Five Marks of Mission; and chapel ideas and liturgies for all ages. Our latest “Christian contemplation” project are sets of “prayer cards” with ideas for 5-10 minute prayer times that classroom teachers can use regardless of their own familiarity with Christianity.

Around the network, our team ran 10 Special Character Reviews and Anglican Audits in the past two years, and 17 Professional Development seminars for staff. We visited most of our schools, some multiple times, and had a joyous conference with a great turn-out from the wider church. We hosted chaplain gatherings for mutual support, resource-sharing, and specific resource development. We have begun to encourage principals to take on Spiritual Direction, with the wonderful assistance of Dean David Rowe. We have also worked closely with principals, Boards, the Archbishops and their legal team in preparation for the Royal Commission.

One of the many great things to grow from our Special Funding was three years of Chaplaincy Internship. A recent St John’s graduate, Toby Behan, and someone at the start of her ordination journey, Blythe Cody, each gave chaplaincy a go for a year and discovered to their surprise that they loved it – and were loved, in turn, by the schools lucky enough to have them. This opportunity to discover the reality of school chaplaincy and learn from experienced chaplains was invaluable, both for the individuals who have been a part of the programme, and even more so for our Church’s mission in our schools. Matthew Pickering has started his year well at St Peter’s in Cambridge, and looks set to continue in our network if possible. It has been a great success.

Much of the daily work of the Office involves responding to requests and questions from across the network and Province. It has been exciting to see these connections strengthen and new links spring up across the Province and globe. Given this growth, I could not have achieved this level of resource production and school support alone, so am extremely grateful for the Special Funding which has allowed me, for three years, to fund two Regional Facilitators working alongside me two days a week each. Deep thanks to Kelvin Wright and Carol Trotter, and to Sharon Ross-Ensor for term 4, 2019.

As ever, we are grateful for the support of individual dioceses and hui amorangi, of the St John’s Trust Board and William’s Trust, of provincial, diocesan and tikanga-based youth and children’s workers, of CMS and AMB, of our partnerships with the Presbyterian and Catholic churches in New Zealand and the Anglican churches in Australia, the UK and South Africa. I am personally grateful, always, for the ongoing encouragement, support and challenge of the Anglican Schools’ Trust Board and Archbishop Philip.

Somewhere in the life of our schools, in the chapels and teaching and relationships and (perhaps most of all) in the “silent curriculum” of what students absorb unconsciously, hundreds of young people are being given a glimpse of the promises of God. There is always more we can do to “proclaim the Good News” with integrity, but there are signs that God is working both through and despite us. As a Schools’ Office, standing with a foot in the schools and a foot in the wider church, we will continue to do all we can to be a conduit of ideas, resources and wisdom from schools to church, and church to schools, so that our students have every chance of grasping the gift of love, hope, purpose and *shalom* our God holds out to them.

*Rev’d Dr Anne van Gend.*