

## The Development of Thematic Christian Schools in Australia

### Introduction

It is my thesis that a new generation of Christian schools has developed in Australia since WW2 that adds another element to the educational equation in Australia. It is my overall aim to critically examine the history and philosophy of these schools providing a context for understanding and dialogue.

Whilst it could be said that these schools are just another set of private schools, this is not their self understanding. This set of schools began as a countersign to the government and non-governmental schools that already existed at the time and the trends that were developing in them.

The development of these schools is primarily due to three factors:

1. The development of a broad, pluralistic, secularist attitude in education policy in the late 1960s the 1970s and early 1980s.
2. The extension of government funding to alternate educational models.
3. Conservative evangelical and fundamentalist reactionism to social and cultural trends in the same time period.

### Methodology

I recognise that moving from social structures to collective attitude, ideology, policy and story is an onerous task. Yet this is the task of the history of mentalities.

The history of mentalities is:

the study of the meditations and dialectical relationship between the objective conditions of the life of men and the way they perceive them.

June Philipp describes such an approach as new history.... a dialogue between theory and narrative....a mutual interrogation of concept and evidence. It is this new approach to History that escapes the culture of positivism that has dominated research in the modern era. Such a new approach allows the historian to connect more of the action of something to its sense allowing a greater integration between History, Narrative and Sociology. A quantitative analysis of historical material provides a common empirical base for many diverse interpretations and is

open to a variety of paradigms.

### Themelic Christian Schools

The name for these schools is based upon their own usage of the term 'Christ-Centred' to describe their uniqueness in contrast with other Christian schools which are either Catholic, Protestant denominational or ecumenical.

The fundamentalist characteristics of some of these schools forms the prime basis for this history of dismissiveness and indifference which is characteristic of the attitude of many educationalists and academics towards these schools. It seems that the moment educators come in contact with elements of fundamentalism, and fail to understand it, they presume that it is transitory and insignificant. These responses distort and

exaggerate the character of these new schools and this further inhibits productive dialogue.

The term 'themelic' avoids the pejorative connotations of fundamentalism and captures the common ethos of these schools. Themelic Christian schools are characterised by the following rhetoric or claims to be:

1. A self designated Christian school.
2. Christ-centred, particularly in ethos and curriculum.
3. Biblically based in pedagogy.
4. Confessors to the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible.
5. Interested and consciously confessing an evangelical or reformed Christian world view with relationship to schooling, which is perceptible in a common piety.
6. Schools that are God's schools.

The term 'themelios' ( $\theta\epsilon\mu\lambda\iota\omicron\varsigma$ ), meaning Christ-centred, is used in the New Testament (Rom 15:20, 1 Cor 3:11, Eph 2:20,21 and 2 Tim 2:19) in reference to elementary foundations or teachings 'in Christ'. The use of the word understands a deep Christological and ecclesiological content, i.e. in the NT Christ and the church are always the logical subject to which 'themelios' refers. What is true of 'themelios' is also true of the verb 'themelion' e.g. Hebrews 1:10 uses the term literally: 'to provide with a foundation'.

### The Shibboleth of the Bible and Christ Centredness

The rhetoric of 'Christ centredness' serves as a shibboleth for themelic Christian schools and often simply means 'being like Jesus'. This rhetoric is interpolated according to the various

protestant theological traditions that exist in themelic Christian schools and is conditioned by protestant middle class piety. The strong patriarchal theology that undergirds evangelical and reformed protestantism in general is apparent in themelic Christian schools at all levels, from classroom practice to systemic management.

Perhaps the most sensitive issue for themelic Christian schools is the issue of the Bible. Both evangelical and reformed traditions within themelic schools are preoccupied by the centrality of the Bible and its relationship to all decision making. However, its revolutionary message is highly domesticated. Even considering the heavy influences of fundamentalist literalism within the movement there is a convenient spiritualising of many of its claims regarding politics, social relevance, poverty and management.

The common ideology of these schools is their priority on educating 'Christianly', or educating for 'Christlikeness'. The concern to establish a foundation 'in Christ' is predicated by an understanding that Jesus Christ is 'The Word' and that the Bible is also 'the Word'. Themelic Christian schools constantly reiterate the centrality of 'the Word' for all of life and education. Education without the centrality of 'the Word' is deemed to be not fully Christian. If either notions of 'the Word' are not central to the life of a Christian school then it is thought that somehow the foundation has slipped or has been misplaced. This is how themelic schools tend to view other Christian schools. The perception of a slip in foundation culminated with the shift in theology in the 50's, 60's and 70's to a more 'liberal' approach to the Bible and the parallel movement in society to a more 'liberal' attitude to morality.

In the articles of association for the Australian Association of

Christian Schools (AACS), Christian Community Schools Ltd (CCS), Christian Parent Controlled Schools Ltd (CPCS) and Christian Schools Association of Queensland (CSAQ) their stated beliefs affirm a conservative, evangelical and reformed position. It is important to note that in each of these groups statements of faith the first and foundational affirmation concerns the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible. It is from this assumption that many miseducative and poor pedagogical choices are made. Many scholars locate the key to fundamentalism in these two concepts alone.

Despite inerrancy and infallibility being held as paramount to the themelic Christian school other criteria commonly accepted as defining something as fundamentalist is noticeably absent,

particularly the rejection of the term fundamentalist itself. Most thematic school leaders reject the word as an accurate description of the ethos of their schools.

Despite the plethora of hermeneutical positions that abound in the movement there is a naive belief in its objective veracity and neutrality. It is within a separatist self understanding and reactionary development of this new generation of Christian schools that much of their educational problems reside.

## Seven Patterns of Thematic Christian Schooling

### Christian Parent Controlled Schools

On the 25th July, 1954 a group of Dutch immigrants met in the Kingston Youth Hall to establish a 'Christian Parent-Controlled Schools Association'. The meeting was attended by 50 people all either Dutch or of Dutch descent. Even though the roots of Christian Parent Controlled Schools lay in the Dutch Reformed Church these schools right from the start were constituted and designed to be owned and operated by Christian parents from a range of denominational backgrounds. Calvin Christian School (Kingston, Tas) was officially opened on January 20th, 1962 beginning the thematic Christian school tradition in Australia.

Christian school associations were set up in 1954 at Mt Evelyn (Vic) and Wollongong (N.S.W.). In 1957 associations were set up in Blacktown (N.S.W.), Brisbane (Qld), Perth (W.A.) and Dandenong (Vic) in 1959. In the first yearbook of the Reformed Church of Australia (RCA) in 1956, most of the 20 churches listed had a representative for the local Christian school 'association'. The foundation of the Christian Parent Controlled model of schooling is the local association. The local association of parent members govern the school through its elected representatives and an annual general meeting. CPCS Ltd is a registered company ( N.S.W.) and acts as a national association for the local associations. The first stage of setting up a school in this system is to form an association.

So it was that the Reformed Church of Australia (in the tradition of Kuyperian Calvinism) were the initial body involved with initiating and promoting thematic Christian schools in Australia.

In 1967 there were 3 CPCS schools in Australia with 221 students. By 1980 there were 20 CPCS Associations, 6 schools with 1101 students. In 1993 there were 66 CPCS schools with 16082 students.

### Early Non-Reformed Interest in Thematic Christian Schools

There were signs as early as 1955 from others outside the Reformed tradition in starting a themelic Christian school. A

group called the Christian Educational Fellowship (CEF) was formed by Dr J Upsdell, Rev E.T. Brailey and Murray Hogben in order to establish interdenominational Christian schools in Australia and a protestant missionary teaching order, based upon the Roman Catholic model.

Dr J. Upsdell, a doctor with the Bush Church Aid Society and the Flying Medical Service at Wudinna, S.A (1951-1955) was the driving energy behind the concept. This group produced a small booklet, 'A Call to Christian People : For a New Approach to Christian Education'. Armed with the booklet and tracts Dr Upsdell travelled extensively around the country endeavouring to promote and draw an awareness to this cause (seeking to establish fellowships/representatives in each state of Australia). In this process he attracted the attention of the Dutch Reformed schools through their National Union of Christian Schools and the National Association of Christian Schools in the U.S.A. neither of which he had known. Due to the 'Parent-Controlled' concept, which Dr Upsdell considered to put 'the teacher too much at the mercy of the parents prejudiced by their own children in disciplinary and other matters', their 'rigid theological position' and their preoccupation with creationism, he sought no further close association.

Dr Upsdell did manage to enlist some support in Victoria in the persons of Mr and Mrs Gilbert Bell. Land was purchased in 1962 with donations from Adelaide and Sunshine (Vic) but the school was not started. In 1982 the land purchased was sold enabling the beginning of two schools associated with the initial vision of Dr Jack Upsdell at Sunshine and Belgrave Heights. The FCE never gained sufficient support in itself and continues now only as a financial body to assist the starting of new Christian schools.

### Christian Community Schools

In 1974 the Christian Community School movement (Primarily Baptist in foundation) began with the 'vision' of two trainee Baptist pastors in Sydney (N.S.W.). Peter Hester and Robert Frisken. With the encouragement of David Magill ( church secretary) they began to discuss the adverse influences of what was happening in state schools. Hester, a trained Mathematics teacher and Frisken, a trained Geography teacher, spoke together about a 'truly Christ-centred school founded on Biblical principles where Christ would be Lord.' The school would be a part of the ministry of the local church in partnership with the

home in training the children.

During 1975 Robert Frisken worked through many of the theoretical and theological foundations for this school. The system devised as the basis for the school was known as GIFT (Grouped, Individualised, Focused, Teaching). This strategy for ensuring a Christ-centred curriculum was based upon the principles for Christian growth as written in the New Testament book of Ephesians. These principles are:

1. The primacy of the Bible.
  2. The rejection of a secularist/humanist world view.
  3. The central authority of the local church.
  4. Parental responsibility administered through the church.
  5. The school viewed as a church ministry.
  6. Teachers are gifted charismatically for the equipping ministry of the church.
  7. The church, parents and teachers form a three-way partnership in community.
  8. Growth into maturity and personhood is growth into Christ.
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9. Protection from evil.
  10. Preparation for life.

The teachers and students were directed in their teaching and learning in this system by measures, (modules that explain how to teach a concept, subject or unit of work from a Christian perspective). These measures ensured that the curriculum was taught in a biblical and Christ-centred way.

In 1976 Regents Park Christian Community High School started with fourteen students in year 7. A similar school was started at St Mary's in 1978. By 1980 there were four CCS schools with 300 students and in 1981 six CCS schools with 500 students. In 1993 there were 76 CCS schools with 16152 students.

#### Accelerated Christian Education

In late 1976 Accelerated Christian Schools (ACE) started in Australia and began with considerable energy. As many as 100 schools were formed over the next five years with ACE material, many of these schools were quite small. ACE came from the U.S.A. and was able to supply ready made curriculum documents and a system of schooling that was available without all the cost and facilities as required by CCS and CPCS schools. Under the ACE system students are placed in cubicles for most of their learning each day and progressed through paces (booklets on each unit of work). These schools did not necessarily need teachers but could operate with supervisors and monitors. The first ACE school was

Mountains Christian Academy in Blackheath (N.S.W.) and was started as a High School.

In 1993 there were 45 schools that used the ACE system or a modified ACE system in Australia. ACE also runs the largest base for Christian home schooling in Australia. The ACE Christian Academy supplies more than 2000 students in home schools with curriculum materials, resources and guidance.

It has been the ACE system that has attracted most concern and derision from government educational bodies and there is some confusion by people unfamiliar with thematic Christian schools about the differences between the various models adopted in achieving a 'Christ-centred education'.

#### Independent Thematic Schools

In addition to the CPCS Ltd schools, CCS Ltd schools and ACE schools there are numerous independent thematic Christian schools that seek no formal affiliation with other Christian schools. The measurement of the development of these schools is difficult with government records considering all protestant schools in one group and thematic systems keeping records of their own. Some of these schools refuse funding and registration and a few have a history of fighting education departments in the courts, in most cases winning their appeals.

#### Light Educational Ministries

In the early seventies the founder, Peter Froggley was a teacher at Ridsden High School when he began to realise that students could be taught in a school where God could be the central factor. Like so many of the other movements to Christian schools he reacted to the 'secular humanism' that was coming to dominate the state school system. He, like the other pioneers of the movement towards Christian schools was aware of church denominational schools but believed them to be only Christian in foundation and not significantly Christian at a philosophical

base. The perception from many Christians at this time like Peter Froggley (particularly in reaction to the social developments of the 60s and 70s) was that society was going the way of the Devil.

The prominence of this movement became public when Fountain Centre Christian School contested the legality of registration in the Supreme Court of South Australia. Light Educational Ministries advocated a separatist policy of not seeking state funding and of refusing to be registered by the State Education

Department.

So it was in 1990 after a protracted legal battle that the court ruled in favour of the Fountain Centre Christian School. A similar story can be told for the Croydon Baptist Academy in Victoria. Light Educational Ministries moved to Canberra and runs a school and home schooling resource centre at the site of Youth With A Mission (YWAM) at Watson, A.C.T.

LEM supplies and counsels 200 families that home school their children around the ACT region.

### Themelic Home Schools

There are also many themelic home schools throughout Australia (using a selection of American curriculum material) but these are difficult to document or analyse because of the loose nature of support groups and networks at such a grassroots level. Themelic home schools exist because of a negative perception of all schooling in general. Themelic home schoolers are often critical of institutional themelic schools.

Home schools are more often directed by fundamentalist sentiments. The influence of fundamentalism is clearly pronounced in the home schooling perspective. Harris states:

Education is always a battleground.....there is a war going on. The enemy army has already made its intentions clear. One of its more articulate writers revealed those intentions in The Humanist magazine.

Public schools and Christian schools are religious rivals. The Children's Crusade in the Middle Ages was a disaster. Children were slaughtered or sold into slavery. A similar slaughter is taking place today as Christian children march into public schools to take them for Christ.

Despite this perspective the children of themelic home schools gain the benefits of the deschooling philosophy indirectly. In addition to this it seems clear that this is not disadvantaging these students (perhaps because of the openness and flexibility of state institutions or sympathizers within) when it comes to tertiary entrance or employment.

By way of developmental summary; there were five themelic Christian schools operating in four states with a total enrollement of 738 students in 1973. In 1985 the number of students in the seven models of themelic Christian Schools was well over 11000 in more than 100 schools. In 1993 the number of themelic Christian schools number 287 with an estimated 55000 students.



It is interesting to note that approximately 51% of these schools commenced in the period 1979-1983, the five years after the MACOS and SEMP controversy in Queensland. I would suggest that this controversy, whilst primarily a political phenomenon peculiar to Queensland, nonetheless affirmed many of the suspicions about

state schooling in the minds of conservative evangelical and reformed Christians. The time period and the case in question acts as a watershed for the movement of thematic Christian schools.

#### The Australian Association for Christian Schools

The meeting of the two largest Christian school systems (CCS and CPCS) occurred in March 1985 for the purpose of coordinating conferences. At this meeting a National Association was formally discussed. In April 1985 formal consultations took place and a concept of membership was accepted and a steering committee set up. A statement of affirmation was agreed to in September, 1986. The Association began to give assistance to member schools regarding accountability with the Commonwealth Government. In August, 1989 AACS appointed a part-time executive officer and set up a national office in Canberra. In 1990 the Executive officer, Peter Crimmins began to lobby for the AACS around the offices of DEET and relevant government departments, meeting politicians and department heads.

In the first newsletter of the Association, Tidings AACS offers member schools the following services:

- Superannuation fund
- School sickness and accident plan
- An insurance scheme
- Government and liaison services

By 1991 the superannuation scheme had 1800 members and \$9.1m under management. AACS had also developed close associations with the National Council of Independent Schools Association (NCISA) the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC), Jewish Day Schools, Lutheran Schools and Seventh Day Adventist schools to further strengthen their position with government agencies e.g. the Program Evaluation Advisory Committee (PEAC) and the Non-Government Schools Funding Review Committee (NGSFRC). By 1991 AACS had formed a Christian Schools Consultative Group with Lutheran and Seventh Day Adventist Schools in order to present a united front to government.

The centralised services of a national office and executive

officer to negotiate and lobby in the capital city have proven to be a valuable development in the growth of the thematic school movement giving greater credibility and access to government departments. Whilst most thematic Christian schools are fundamentalist in theology and rhetoric, their cooperation, openness, flexibility and pragmatism in financial and political spheres does not reflect such a historical foundation.

In the first year of AACS there were 139 member schools, and 166 by 1993. (This excludes some ACE schools, CCC schools, the Queensland Association of Christian schools, numerous independent Christian schools and home schools).

With the perceived shift in the decision making process from DEET to the Australian Educational Council (AEC) during the Dawkins era AACS endeavoured to make stronger links to the AEC for which it does not have ready access.

Initially AACS continued to seek ways to formalise its relationship with the Commonwealth minister Mr Dawkins and his department but with little success. In 1992 AACS was received formally by the minister of Education Mr Kim Beasley in two separate meetings.

#### Christian Schools Association of Queensland

The CSAQ began on February 1989 and had 49 associated member schools with 10500 students in 1992. It has a similar function to the AACS but tailored regionally to the needs of Queensland..

#### Graduate and Post-Graduate Developments

##### Institute for Christian Education

Fifteen years after the first CPCS school began and one year after the first CCS school commenced there were discussions taking place in some Victorian CPCS schools about post graduate study from a thematic Christian perspective. The Institute for Christian Education (ICE) was governed by the Christian Parent Controlled Schools Inc, the Association for Tertiary Education (RTC) and the Association for Christian Scholarship (interested teachers from associated schools). The first course (Graduate Diploma in Curriculum Studies) was offered in 1979 and the first graduates exited in 1982. Later a Masters in Education and some external studies courses were offered.

##### The Institute of Tertiary Christian Education

The establishment of The Institute of Tertiary Christian Education in 1985 was the result of rapid growth in CCS and CPCS schools in N.S.W. It offered a part-time Post Graduate Diploma in Christian Education. Some other undergraduate courses were offered through the Guild Centre at Sydney University. In 1992 the ICTE became the sole institute for CCS schools and the interests of CPCS schools in all states were amalgamated into one institute that would best serve the needs of CPCS schools.

### Christian Heritage College

Christian Heritage College (CHC) began in 1986 to train teachers at an undergraduate level. Founded by the Christian Outreach Centre (an independent Charismatic Christian church) this institution is the first stage of a long-term plan to establish a Christian university. CHC offers undergraduate and postgraduate accredited degrees. The B.Teach. and B.Ed have been monitored and moderated by the Queensland Teacher Education Board review panel since 1992. CHC offers courses within the framework of a thematic worldview and is specifically designed to prepare teachers for these schools.

### The National Institute for Christian Education

The National Institute for Christian Education (NICE) was conceived at a meeting of the National Council of Institutes for Christian Education (NCICE is a CPCS governing body) in July 1990. It was through this initiative that the CCS and CPCS movements parted ways over external studies and postgraduate development, and the ICE was included in the NICE. The first NICE courses (Graduate Diploma in Curriculum Studies, Bachelor of Educational Studies and Master of Educational Studies) were offered in 1993. As part of the NCICE national strategy on teacher training the NCICE began an 'Induction and Mentor' course in 1991.

ICTE continues to offer professional development for staff of the CCS system by offering a Post Graduate Diploma in Christian Education (unaccredited) and intends to offer a Graduate Diploma and a Masters of Arts (Christian Education) degree and is seeking accreditation through the Australian College of Theology. A Distance Education program was started in 1992 and a Summer School introduced. An annual conference is also a focal strategy in the professional development program of CCS schools. The closure of the Guild Centre by Sydney University meant that ICTE could not offer undergraduate courses

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## The Christian College of Tertiary Education

The Christian College of Tertiary Education (CCTE) began in 1988 as a development of the Australian Christian Correspondence School (ACCS) Yackandandah. The Australian Christian Correspondence School has a loose association with thematic schools from a free church or Brethren foundation and conducted inservice for staff associated with these schools. The initial interest in a Christian Teachers' Training College (CTTC) began in 1982. By 1993 the CCTE were still awaiting accreditation and have no intention of starting until that accreditation is awarded.

## University of the Nations (YWAM)

Youth With A Mission is a large international para church evangelical mission that has youth as its specific target. In association with the University of the Nations (YWAM) in Hawaii YWAM Australia began to offer courses in Education through this university in 1992. Even though the University of the Nations is a degree granting institution it is not accredited by any accrediting agency or association recognised by the United States Commissioner of Education.

In 1992 YWAM Australia began a campaign to establish a University of the Nations campus at their headquarters in Watson, ACT. The director of this project, Tom Hallas, began the appeal for donations towards the first stage (\$1.2 million) proposal in

1992. The first stage of the building project is a building to house the College of Education. The current YWAM (15 acre) site at Watson, which was a Sacred Heart monastery, already accommodates the Australian International Christian School and Light Education Ministries.

In June 1992, the University of the Nations offered two Master's degree courses (36 points) in Education:

So in addition to the seven models of thematic Christian schooling there are five tertiary institutions of the same thematic disposition in Australia.

In 1993 this system of schooling accounted for 7% of the non-government sector of education in Australia and as yet has not faced the scrutiny of well developed research. The emergence of these schools and their consolidation warrant significant study in the light of the failure of academics, educators and educational bureaucrats in general to take them seriously. The movement itself after thirty years still carries the hubris of

their early beginnings but are at a stage where self criticism is beginning to be taken seriously. Such situations serve as the driving energy for undertaking this work.

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