

RENEWING OUR VISION OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

1. Introduction

This new resource is intended to help parents as they make one of the most important decisions of their lives, namely, what education their children will receive.

It will cover, amongst other things...

- Why education matters
- Who can you trust to guide you as parents? And to partner with you in raising your children?
- Questions to ask about the schools that your child might attend
- Do you know your local school's values: in words and the practical reality?
- What will practically help or hinder children's holistic development?

The following sections are written in the hope that each will stand alone. For those with the time and inclination to read them through in order, they should also follow on meaningfully.

2. Education matters

I'm writing these words at a desk in the Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford, surrounded by bookshelves twelve feet tall. All about me at nearby desks are earnest and intelligent students, each paying huge tuition fees to be here. As I look around, the first book that catches my eye is entitled, *The Study of Chivalry*, nestled amongst hundreds of other history books. Over 3000 new books are received here every single day, and at my fingertips lies a wealth of digitised knowledge, including over 80,000 journals and 1350 databases.

Why is all this here?

Our local church community includes a number of academics, and I sometimes greet them by asking, "So, how far have you advanced the frontier of human knowledge this week?" The work that they do is indeed changing the world, through medical treatments, agricultural improvements, new ways to fight crime and improved cross-cultural understanding, to name just a few. This knowledge is so valuable that many millions of pounds are gladly spent acquiring it.

One of the many quirks of university life is that entry to the library requires you first to swear an oath, which includes the promise: "I hereby undertake... not to bring into the Library or kindle therein any fire or flame." This is because any fire would not just destroy many irreplaceable books, but in doing so would reduce the stock of human knowledge, and leave us with a poorer understanding of the way the world works and our place in it.

University libraries may sound very grand, but they are simply doing on a larger scale what every one of us does every single day. We all receive knowledge and understanding from what people tell us, and then we pass it onto others. This constant sharing of information, about all things great and small, is fundamental to every human society. Put another way, we are all educators and we are all learners, and it is through this that we grow and we make the world a better place.

An Education in God

This habit of everyday education is not just the way of the world, but something that God has chosen as his means of fulfilling his own purposes in the world. His original (and ultimate) intention is to fill the world with people who know him and who follow him, and who thereby bring about his will in the world, which we can call 'heaven on earth.'

According to Genesis, God determined not to create a million-strong clone army, but to start with just two people whose offspring would achieve the grand purpose only over many generations, with each generation receiving from their forbears an inheritance of the knowledge of God, which would thus accumulate through the centuries. And so, in this way, Christ's kingdom is being extended to all nations, and "of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end" (Isaiah 9:7).

This is why the Bible instructs parents to teach their children about God's actions in human history (Exodus 10:1-2, Joel 1:2-3) and about God's word (Deut 11:18-19, Psalm 78:6-7, also Eph 6:4), and why young people are instructed to learn not only from their parents (Prov 1:8, Col 3:20) but to respect their elders in general (Lev 19:32). Indeed, it is seen as a curse to be ruled by the young (Isaiah 3:4 – and the story of Rehoboam's folly in 1 Kings 12), whilst knowledge of God's deeds in previous times is seen as essential fuel for the life of faith.

We see this, for example, in Psalm 77, where Asaph was distressed beyond comfort until:

I thought, 'To this I will appeal:
the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.
I will remember the deeds of the Lord;
yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.
I will consider all your works
and meditate on all your mighty deeds.' (Psalm 77:10-12, NIV)

Just think how much our own hopes and vision for British society are shaped and enlarged by the stories of Wesley and Wilberforce, whose individual preaching and campaigning respectively, altered the course of British history. Imagine how impoverished we would be without knowledge of what God did in their lives, and how utterly destitute we would be without the very gospel stories that tell us about Jesus Christ.

Whilst God does speak afresh to his children in each generation, the overwhelming majority of our knowledge of God is given to us through those who teach us. Without this, individuals trying to make sense of their own life experience would have a massively impoverished view of God. In particular, as Paul explained to the church in Rome, our own life experience can tell us that God exists (Rom 1:20), but we need someone to tell us about Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Saviour (Rom 10:14-15). We would never reason our way to the divine and cosmic realities that were revealed through his self-giving death on a cross.

So, according to the Bible, all Christians have a sacred duty to pass on the revelation of God, in order that successive generations may know him and his ways. Paul wrote to Timothy that, "Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim 5:8). Given how precious is the knowledge of God, which is far more worth than mere food and clothing, parents will want to ensure that they provide excellent training for their children, such that the coming generation is not left with less spiritual treasure than we have enjoyed.

Reasons why we don't do it

In my experience as a pastor, I find that almost all Christians agree in principle with what I've just written. They would agree that God has a long term plan for this world, which is being worked out through many generations. They would further agree that the church is not only called to mission, but is always the product of mission, and that every Christian is called to play a part in this cosmic plan.

However, in practice, there are some powerful factors that can prevent us from sharing the knowledge of God with others, and especially with children.

- **Concern about coercion / fear of conflict:**
Some Christians avoid trying to persuade others of God-given truths because they don't want to risk being over-bearing or to provoke a negative response from others who feel put upon (or who feel the need to defend others from 'indoctrination'). However, children are astonishingly efficient at absorbing things from any significant adults in their lives. So, the question is never simply whether it's right to teach children, but which of the many influences on children are proving most powerful in forming their minds and character.

- **Fear of being wrong**

Other Christians, being keenly aware of their own doubts and questions about spiritual matters, lack the confidence to witness to children about what God has revealed to us. Indeed, the British church corporately is suffering a crisis of confidence in the effectiveness of the gospel, in which most believers are happy to talk about Jesus with people who enquire about him, but don't ordinarily expect their faith to be of interest to others.

Right now

As a result of this feebleness in Christian witness, what Western society is instead witnessing is a great extinction of the knowledge of God. Unlike our recent forbears, most young people in Britain today do not know the most basic things about God's self-revelation to humanity. They do not know the Lord's Prayer, which tell us that we can relate to God as Father. They do not know the Ten Commandments, which tell us how to live well. They do not know that sin will one day be judged, and they do not know that eternal life is freely available.

Religious engagement and faith literacy are ebbing away. Whereas Victorian churches typically provided two services each Sunday, plus an afternoon 'Sunday school,' today's congregations do well to draw their members in as often as every week. Even then, it is common to hear complaints if the teaching element takes more than half an hour.

It is hardly an overstatement to say that a library-destroying "fire or flame" has been kindled, and that the blaze now raging lays waste to more and more of the true knowledge of God in our land with each passing decade. If the librarians who care for books would never allow this, then why would parents, who are entrusted with a sacred duty of care for their children?

There is hope

Of course, this is not the first time that history has seen such sweeping amnesia. The people of Israel entirely forgot the Law of Moses until it was re-discovered in the Temple during Josiah's reign (2 Kings 22). The fall of the Roman Empire destroyed most centres of Christian learning. The fall of the 9th century Carolingian Empire led to civil society being replaced by Mafiosi-style knights who enacted widespread violence and appointed local clergy who lacked the most basic of training. The English Civil War was followed by such a coolness concerning religious enthusiasm that J.C. Ryle could later write, "From the year 1700, England seemed barren of all that is really good... Christianity seems to lie as one dead... Morality, however much exalted in pulpits, was thoroughly trampled under foot in the streets."¹

Amazingly, there was a recovery from each of these tragic situations, and each involved education. Josiah himself read the Law to all the people (2 Kings 23:2) and worked through the Levites to instruct them all (2 Chr 25:3,6). In the 5th century, Irish monasteries kept Christian learning alive, and sent missionaries back across Europe, such that they have been said to have "saved civilisation".² In the 10th century, the abbey at Cluny in France sparked a reform movement through the training of young men as priests, who would train all Christian people. And England's spiritual life in the 18th century was revived by the Methodist movement, in which John Wesley, the university trained son

¹ J.C. Ryle, pp.13-14 *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century*, 1885

² Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilisation*, 2003

of an evangelical vicar, broke with long-held tradition by training lay people to teach God's word to those who had never heard it.

Again and again, we see God's choosing of education as the primary means by which he brought about widespread spiritual renewal and then equally widespread social transformation.

As the Methodist movement and its offshoots kept growing through the 19th century, their concern for education only increased. It gave rise to Ragged Schools and Sunday Schools, which were the first serious effort to provide working class children with basic literacy, not least so that they could read the Bible for themselves. These schools taught the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, and provided prizes for memorising scripture. In this way, whole generations were told about God's historic deeds and his revealed Word, offering the promise of comfort in all their distress.

State Education

As the nineteenth century wore on, Christian ambitions reached even further, to the idea that every single British child would be guaranteed an education, which would of course be a Christian education. To that end, many Christians began to campaign for state funding for church schools, and the State proved to be willing. Thus, Britain's Christian schools, which can themselves be seen as 'children of the church,' were taken into state care.

This financial and governance arrangement was driven pragmatically as the only way to ensure the provision of education for all children, but it soon settled on a rationale for this being the best sort of arrangement. It was found in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who had himself fathered illegitimate children with his housekeeper and then sent them to a terrible orphanage, but who wrote eloquently about the suitability for the state taking responsibility for all children.

More recently still, governments have taken to heart a role for schools in the state's God-given task of restraining wickedness (see Romans 13:4). Schools have been required to take on safeguarding responsibilities that previous sat with social services, as well as a role in combatting evils such as female genital mutilation and Islamic extremism. Some governments have been so concerned about the inadequate care provided by some parents that they have sought to take over aspects of all parents' roles (e.g. the Scottish government's proposal to provide an 'assigned person' for each child in Scotland, with authority to overrule the parent's decisions concerning their children's schooling).

As a result of all this, it is fair to say that state-funded schools in Britain are a mixed bag. A few build very deliberately on their Christian foundation, insist on employing Christian teachers who can lead the school community in prayer and worship, and teach the Christian faith alongside other knowledge in ways that are appropriate for their local community. However, the vast majority of schools cannot provide all this, even if they have a Christian head teacher, due to some combination of having a secular Christian foundation, a lack of vision amongst their governors, a lack of active support from local churches, pressure from Ofsted and difficulties in staff recruitment.

Christian parents in some local communities are blessed with a local state-funded Christian school that teaches their children well what God has done for others and for them, and trains them to respond through worship, prayer and whole-life discipleship. Such parents are indeed blessed, and can enjoy a fruitful partnership with their local school in bringing up their children to play their part in God's grand long-term plan for "heaven on earth," and all at no direct financial cost.

However, most parents are not in such a favoured position. For them – indeed perhaps, for you – greater pains of one sort or another will need to be taken to try to ensure that our generation is not a weak link in the chain of human history, in which only a minority of children embrace the Christian salvation enjoyed by their parents.

New expressions of Christian education

Faced with this challenge, most Christians in the global South are passionate about starting a new Christian school wherever and whenever they can, and see this as an unfettered good.

Until recently, any British Christians who shared this passion either needed to seek expression of it through existing Anglican or Catholic state-funded schools, or else start new fee-paying schools.

In the 1980s, many of the new ‘house churches’ found the courage to pursue the latter option. Their stories have been written in a book entitled, *The Love of God in the Classroom* (Sylvia Baker and David Freeman, 2005), which is full of testimony of God’s guidance and help. Since that time, a number of those churches have dwindled, or else shifted their focus to other ministries, but some have sustained their involvement in education, and continue to enjoy the provision of a full-bodied Christian education that is both evangelical and charismatic. Such schools are now few and far-between, and so it is a huge privilege to have The King’s School in Witney. It is not uncommon for families to move right across the country (or even internationally) in order to allow their children to benefit from this school, whilst educationalists from across the country and from other countries are also frequent visitors, as they come to see an example of what might be possible in their own community.

Following the government’s adoption of the ‘Free School’ policy in 2010, a number of Christian organisations took the opportunity that it provided to start new Christian schools. According to the New School Network, 45 new schools with designated Christian character had been opened by late 2018, of which 28 were Anglican and a few were Catholic or Orthodox. The remaining ‘non-denominational’ Christian schools have faced very significant operational pressures, as the government seeks to combine smaller multi-academy trusts into larger ones, and the future of most remains uncertain.

Some questions to ask of schools

All the above developments have led to significant diversity amongst British schools. As already stated, the schools available to Christian families are therefore a rather mixed bag. So much so that parents will want to spend some time and energy considering the strengths and weaknesses of the schools to which they might send their children.

What follows is a list of questions to help parents as they try to choose amongst schools:

Atmosphere

- Can you see your child being fully what God made them to be, whilst at school?
- Is it a safe environment?
- What is the likely peer pressure?
- Does the school culture treat Christian living as normative, optional or abnormal?

Spiritual life

- What is collective worship like? Does it even happen?
- Will children be presented with the core Christian message (i.e. the gospel) and given opportunity/encouragement to respond to it?
- How and when does prayer occur in school life?
- Does the school exhibit a concern for the local community beyond its walls? And for more disadvantaged people/communities who may be at a greater distance?

Role of parents

- What do current parents think and feel about the school?
- How well do they respond to parental complaints?
- Do they involve parents in school life?

Longer term outcomes

- Academic record – not just headlines, but evidence of support for your child's likely needs
- What do alumni go on to do?

If you are a parent considering your own child's needs, then may God give grant you both insight and faith as you face one of the most significant decisions of your life!

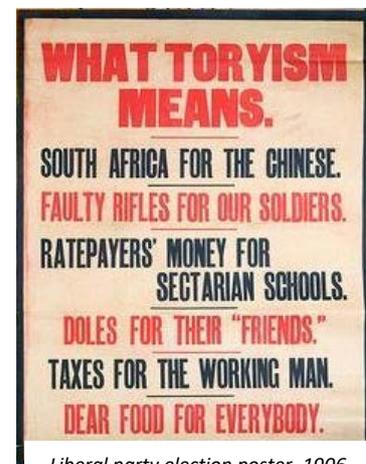
3. Values Matter

So last century

British schools started the 20th century in a storm of debate over their religious role.

Historically, all schools had been run by individuals or churches, supported by fees or charity, and attendance was voluntary. Then, during the 19th century, the state began to pay towards the costs of these schools, whilst also making attendance compulsory. The driving force behind this state-funded expansion was not to promote Christian education, nor to ensure opportunity for all, but rather accompanied the expansion of democratic rights to working class men, and was also felt necessary to enable competition with other nations. In this context, it is unsurprising that whilst local councils were allowed to levy taxes to support schools, they were only allowed to give money to 'nondenominational' schools.

Eventually, in 1902, a Tory government simplified matters by putting local councils in charge of all state-funded schools – but that led to a popular revolt against the idea of 'ratepayers' money for sectarian schools.' National leaders of non-conformist churches even refused to pay their local taxes, protesting the great injustice that they were being forced to pay taxes to support Anglican schools in giving their children a religious education! This revolt contributed to the 'Liberal landslide' in 1906, when the Conservatives got their lowest ever number of seats, and the Labour party first entered Parliament.



Liberal party election poster, 1906

However, once the Liberals were in power, they could find no easy solution to the matter. Rather, an uneasy settlement was reached, in which state-funded schools could be religious, as long as they weren't too religious, and as long as parents could withdraw their children from religious education. Critically, schools were also banned from selecting teachers on basis of their own religious beliefs. At the same time, religion was increasingly being seen a private and subjective matter, best avoided in everyday conversation. Thus, Christian teaching remained a consistent but rather awkward presence in British schools, and was increasingly taught by unbelievers, who viewed it as peripheral to a good education, rather than foundational.

By the late 20th century, it was common to encounter the argument that community schools (the term then used to describe non-denominational schools) provided an objective education that prepared children to make their own adult choices, in contrast to faith schools that sought to indoctrinate children, or even 'brain-wash'. Indeed, that was very much the criticism faced by Oxfordshire Community Churches on founding The King's School in Witney.

The debate has shifted

Even as late as the 1990s, the arguments between the Christian church and secularising humanists over schools seemed to encapsulate the age-old conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness for the future of Britain, and battle lines were drawn accordingly. Now, however, twenty years into the 21st century, this long-running argument has shifted onto different terms.

Firstly, there has been a change of mood within academia, which ought to affect our philosophy of education. It started a generation ago, as writers like Foucault began to create a framework to justify/explain the rebellious character of the 1960s and 70s. This intellectual movement grew in the 1990s to become 'postmodernism,' which saw it as wise to doubt the power of rational argument, and a great many people now feel wary of trusting the so-called 'experts' and their oh-so-clever arguments.

Prompted by all this, psychologists began to investigate the role of both relationships and emotions in our decision making, and have found that we are far from simply rational beings! Indeed, there is now plenty of scientific evidence in favour of what Julian Barnes wrote in *The Sense of an Ending* (2011):

"Most of us, I suspect... make an instinctive decision, then build up an infrastructure of reasoning to justify it. And call the result common sense."

Of course, there is nothing new under the sun, and Blaise Pascal had written more or less the same things in his *Pensées*, published in 1662:

"The heart has its reasons of which reason knows not."

And indeed, Jesus himself said that "the mouth speaks what the heart is full of" (Luke 6:45).

What all this means for education is that a good school will not only pay attention to what children can write and argue, but to their character – and it is widely accepted that Christian schools do a better job in that regard.

Secondly, the ongoing reduction in the number of churchgoers, together with the consequent reduction in Christian influence on society, has had several consequences in education. On the one

hand, some Christian parents and churches have been tempted to adopt what we might call a 'bunker mentality,' and have sought to found new schools or to place their children in schools that are relatively free from "the corruption of the world" (2 Pet 2:20).

On the other hand, concern for the future of British society has also led to a renewed passion for mission has led some Christian parents to immerse their children in the world beyond the church, and has led some Christian educationalists to try to develop the Christian discipleship and missional impact of church schools. In particular, Anglicans and Methodists have upgraded their expectations of the Christian distinctiveness of their schools (through the SIAMS framework).³

At this point, having described a contrast between two apparently polar opposites, it is helpful to note that no single school actually conforms to either pole. No Christian school is ever free of the influence of the world, as wheat and tares will always grow together (Matt 13:24-30). No secular school is entirely free of godly influence, as God chooses to shower blessings on all people (Matt 5:45b). My missiologist friend, Len Bartlotti, who has visited many nations that are yet untouched by the Christian gospel, tells me that even the darkest cultures display glimmers of glory, just as a murky pond may be beautified by water lilies.

Moreover, when thinking about schools, we should not be trying to choose between pastoral and missional aspirations, since both are absolutely in the heart of God. So, surely every Christian would aspire for every school to be both a safe space and a community where people are regularly born again!

Rather than making blanket judgements about types of schools, we do well to ask more detailed and nuanced questions about each and every school – such as those at the end of section 1.

Thirdly, British society has become much more diverse, ethnically, religiously and morally. This has led many Brits towards a laissez-faire relativism, in which it is seen as really bad form to claim that your beliefs are really true. At the turn of the century, somewhat paradoxically, this provided another argument against church schools indoctrinating children with religion, whilst also being used to justify giving immigrants more space to raise their children according to their own religious faith. However, since 9/11, a critical spotlight has been shone upon schools that promote more conservative forms of Islam, and the British government has been forced once again to grapple with enforcing certain standards for religious education in schools.

As a result, values are in

All three of these changes have led to a fresh consideration of school values:

- Education of the character demands that we state what qualities of character we value (i.e. virtues)
- The SIAMS framework hinges on the articulation and implementation of Christian values
- To combat extremism, the British government now requires Ofsted to check that each school promotes 'British values'⁴

³ For info on SIAMS, see: <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/education-and-schools/church-schools-and-academies/siams-school-inspections>

⁴ These are named as: democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, respect and tolerance for people of other faiths.

This focus on values is a huge help to Christian parents as we try to assess any given school, as the chosen values provide a window into the heart of the school, or at least the heart of the school's leader(s). If you look at almost any school or academy trust's website, you will find a list of values like these ones from a range of Oxfordshire schools:

The Bicester School	Combe Primary School	Wood Green School	West Oxford Primary School
Empowerment Enterprise Connectedness Transformation	Community Compassion Wisdom	Learning Effort Aspiration Respect Nurture Wellbeing	Inspiring curious minds and responsible citizens: We have high expectations We are an inclusive community We encourage a growth mind-set We consider the future

These values may be chosen with reference to some evidence that they promote good outcomes for children, but they inevitably reflect underlying beliefs about what is most important. They express something of what is in the hearts of those running the school(s). As such, they are what we expect children at that school to imbibe, since they learn more profoundly from what are like (impartation) than from what we say (instruction). Moreover, these values find expression in both policies and curriculum.

Amongst policies, the school's 'Relationships and Sex Education' policy can be a clear indicator of underlying values, but so can the behaviour, complaints and exclusion policies, as well as any 'Home School Agreement' policy, amongst others. Indeed, since such policies guide the actions of school staff and governors, they are arguably the surest guide to the school's actual ethos.

Curriculum communicates values every day to every child in school. Depending on what the school really values, it can teach maths and economics with a view to enabling self-serving exploitative business practices or inspiring generous philanthropy. It can teach French to make consumerist tourists or hospitable cross-cultural missionaries. It can teach art purely as a means of self-expression, or also as a medium for communicating truth. And so, whilst pupils are two different schools might achieve the same GCSE grades in maths, French and art, their purpose, vision and character – all reflecting what the school most values – may be utterly divergent.

Questions to ask about a school's values

Given the over-riding importance of a school's values, and given also the current vogue for each school to articulate and promote its values, parents will do well to take investigate those values and to take them very seriously indeed. Christian school leaders and governors will also do well to invest time and energy in promoting and nurturing Christian values as robustly as they can.

Christian parents and educators alike will want to take time to consider the following questions:

1. Are the school's stated values pleasing to God?

School values are rarely explicitly anti-Christian, though some come very close to saying that personal morality does not matter. Consider, for example, this 'guiding principle' from one independent school:

- 'Creativity: intelligently breaking convention.'

It is much more common for schools to articulate values that have their historic origin in the Christian faith, albeit now expressed in somewhat diluted form, such as these values statements from national academy trusts:

- 'A sense of perseverance to keep going for the long haul.' (Oasis Community Learning)
- 'Determination: to overcome obstacles and reach success.' (United Learning)
- 'Exemplary behaviour: We teach, recognise and reinforce good behaviour, and we don't tolerate poor behaviour. We don't accept any excuses, and we don't make any either.' (Ark Schools)

Some Christian parents will take comfort in the lingering aroma of a bygone era when Christian ethics were the explicit foundation of a good education. Others, taking a more radical approach, will lament how much 'saltiness' has leached away, and wonder quite what the resulting education is now good for (cf. Luke 14:34-35).

2. What is not being said?

The liturgical prayer of confession rightly reminds us that we have each sinned against God "in the evil I have done and in the good I have not done." Or, as quoted by John F. Kennedy, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." In other words, whilst we rightly consider the values that a school has articulated, the absence of other values is just as significant. For example, we would rightly criticise an education that placed not value on the body and made no place for physical exercise. Should we not be equally critical of an education that does not value the human spirit and lacks spiritual exercises?

It is rare even to find a school that explicitly promotes that most basic and universal of spiritual principles, that we flourish best when we are in relationship with God. To this we could add other core Christian values:

- The priority of prayer
- The wonder of worship
- The obligation of obedience
- The honouring of parents –together with the recognition that children are not simply autonomous individuals who realise their own future, but that they gain identity and purpose come from God's plan for their lives and from their family
- Going beyond mere tolerance of other faiths to active friendships in which deep differences can be discussed with frankness

It is sobering to note that Muslim parents in Britain typically choose the most robustly Christian school available to them, on the basis that it is better for their children to be engaged with Christian prayer and scripture than for their children to be left with the impression that religious practice is

merely a private family matter. In contrast, Christian parents tend to be more typical Brits, who prefer locality and academic attainment.

3. How are the values being lived out?

There can be a big difference between the values to which a school aspires and the values it actually lives out. It is quite possible for a Christian school that teaches the importance of marriage to be a hot bed of adultery. It is also possible for a Christian teacher in any school to try to make their own classroom into an outpost of Gods kingdom, albeit under certain – and often substantial – constraints.

In other words, the character and expectations of teachers and, especially, school leaders are also important.

The kind of questions worth asking here might be:

- Do the teachers seem really to like children?
- Are challenging children effectively helped, or instead excluded from school?
- Which kinds of diversity does the school do best in including/celebrating, and where does it struggle to do so?
- Does collective worship actually happen regularly? If so, is it really inspiring?
- How and when does prayer occur in school life?

4: The Spiritual Development of Children - Helps and Hindrances

Flourishing?

“May the Lord cause you to flourish, both you and your children” (Psalm 115:14 NIV)

When you are planning a garden, you must imagine what you want it to become. You consider the soil, you plant, you water, then feed, tend the young plants, prune, protect, look at the prevailing environmental conditions, adjust accordingly, and wait, and watch. Those who have had the vision and then the wisdom to patiently engage with this process, are most likely to see their garden flourish. Our churches, our family, and our children are no different.

There is human joy in seeing a flourishing flower or fruitful plant, and this mirrors God’s great celebration of Eden. It is good!⁵ We are made in the image of God, and this joy is a reflection of His joy, part of the *imago dei* being expressed in us! There can also be great sadness and disappointment in seeing potential unfulfilled.

What is true for a garden, is even more so for our children, isn’t it? God has made each one of us with a body and a spirit⁶. Both must be healthy for us to flourish, and just as parents and community can help or hinder the *physical* development of our children (by not giving them nourishing food, or encouraging exercise), the same is also true of their *spiritual* development. As has already been explained in previous articles, there is a God given authority handed to parents and churches to actively seek the flourishing of our children. There is a garden set before us. Can you see it?

It is sobering to recognise that there are also clear words from the Lord regarding choices which could cause children to ‘stumble’, which could be made by those responsible for them.

“And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!” Matthew 18 v 5-7a (NIV)

Children need our help to be guided towards the Lord. However, alongside the assumption of a fallen, rebellious nature in our children (who hasn’t found they learn to say ‘No’ to you from a fairly early age!) there is fascinating research which has shown that children have an in-built propensity to believe in God⁷. Apparently, you have to train them to be atheists! The bible is clear we all have what we need, even from creation itself, to be able to believe in the existence of God⁸. Our children are the vulnerable little ones, who believe in Him, and are referred to by Jesus himself above⁹. For their spiritual flourishing, we can provide the food, the nurture, the environments, the protection

⁵ Genesis 1:31

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:23

⁷ <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21328562-000-the-god-issue-we-are-all-born-believers/>

⁸ Romans 1:20

⁹ Matthew 18:5-7

they need, but it is also possible for us to abdicate, forget, or be ignorant of what can hinder their spiritual development. *‘Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them’*¹⁰.

Is it possible to hinder them in ways that affect even their eternal destiny and flourishing? A salutary question to ask indeed, but it must be asked. In answering, we must have a full understanding of the grace of God, our understandable imperfections as parents, and the individual responsibility that our children have, as they mature, to make their own free choices. A perhaps more uplifting question to ask is, what can we do to help them flourish spiritually? With young people now spending 30 hours per week imbibing data and discipleship from devices, and 30 hours per week being trained by teachers, surely an hour a week of children’s or youth activities each Sunday will not be enough to ensure parents and church are tending the development of those in their garden diligently. What will the true master of the garden find when he returns?¹¹

Let’s look at six hinderances, and six helps as we consider this essential question for the sake of our children.

Hinderances	Helps
Pressed Parents	Peaceful Parents
Toxic Teaching	Effective Education
Distracting Devices	Monitored Mobiles
Consumerist Culture	Cultural Commentary
Casual Congregations	Churches for Children
Enemy Enticements	God’s Grace

Hinderances

“Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” Hebrews 12 v 1 (NIV)

Pressed Parents or Peaceful Parents? Toxic Training or Effective Education? Distracting Devices or Monitored Mobiles? Consumerist Culture or Cultural Commentary? Casual Congregations or Churches for Children? Enemy Enticements or God’s Grace? Let us consider these issues together.

Hinderance 1: Pressed Parents

Note the ‘us’ in Hebrews 12:1! Together as church and community we can support each other, and especially our children, in ‘the race’. If you are a parent, God has planned your race to be run with your children, God’s children, joining you. You are supposed to *spend time* with your children. You. This is part of your race.

Too often the 21st century culture of hurry has been embraced by Christian parents¹², and especially church leaders. This ‘hurry culture’ primarily shapes the rushed, and therefore surface level, relationships we have with God, with each other and with our children. The lack of depth in the

¹⁰ Matthew 19:14

¹¹ Mark 12:9

¹² John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping: Caring For the Most Important Part of You-* page 224 *“You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.”*

relationship with God that we have as parents, easily becomes evident to our children, and leads to an inauthenticity of our eager encouragements to them to follow the Lord. In reality, any encouragement, when combined with such a lack of modelling, is more likely to lead to an *inoculation* to the gospel-founded life based in a daily life-giving relationship with God.

Time appointed for motherhood and fatherhood has been overwhelmed by society's value of identity through work and career development. '*So, tell me, what do you do?*'. Hours assigned for parenthood have been taken over by our cultures' undervaluing and despising of a mother's and especially a father's role. The father - the perpetual butt of the joke. The mother – the undervalued heartbeat of the home. Christian fathers and mothers, where are you? Don't fall into these traps. Your children need you.

As parents we can sometimes end up feeling we only have time to undo the negative results of influences around our children. Weeding, but never feeding. The time on devices, in social media groups, or in school, end up becoming the main influencers on their character formation.

But take heart there are choices we can make to throw off this hinderance of being a 'Pressed Parent', if we can be decisive enough to take them.

Hinderance 2: Toxic Teaching

Not all teachers are 'toxic' of course! In my experience most do everything they can to be fantastic role-models and teachers. However, the *teachings* in a school atmosphere and some teachers' attitudes can have a significant and potentially detrimental effect on a child's spiritual development. Something is being breathed into their spirit, day by day. If parents have less time to shape the lives and loves of their children, teachers become even more influential. All children automatically assume that those the parent hands them over to, must be trustworthy, and especially when the parents of their friends seem to be doing so as well. '*You have been given this authority by my parents so you must be okay!*'. Parents must understand that children have an inbuilt and God-given nature to trust, and this means they are vulnerable.

The relationship of a child with their teacher has always been a powerful dynamic. Children assume the attitudes and beliefs of those around them. It is a law of nurture. As far as spiritual and character formation is concerned, cynicism of godly values, can quickly be caught. Drip-fed doubt can become a significant hinderance to a growing faith in young minds. This doubt is then a strong influencer regarding moral development and religious questioning as they enter the teenage years. '*Did God really say?*'¹³. Schools, and teachers, are shaped by needing to demonstrate how they are passing on the latest British value to be emphasised, or what the latest campaign group is advocating¹⁴. The myth that it is possible for individual teachers and even education itself to be totally neutral is owned by too many of us. Much of what may be explicitly *taught* in curriculum as well as implicitly *caught* from attitudes, can be toxic to the wisdom, joy, and faith in God which could be flourishing in our children. The controversial nature of some recommended Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) books or materials are an example of the subtle but potentially toxic teaching, which is sexualising children¹⁵.

¹³ Genesis 3:1

¹⁴ See 'The New Normal' The Transgender Agenda; Wilberforce Publishing

¹⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_Tm0xFIO8s&feature=emb_title ;
<https://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/all-about-me>

Being surrounded in an educational setting by children, and teachers, who have a non-Christian worldview can at least undermine, and potentially destroy the foundations of faith, which could otherwise be laid. They can be undermined through the repetition of other worldview mantras and mindsets, and their subtle but toxic denial of God. The physical environment, the place, of education is also hugely important. The signs and displays, that which is written upon 'the doorposts', makes a difference to what is taken into the heart of a child or young person, as Deuteronomy makes clear¹⁶.

Hinderance 3: Distracting Devices

Do you even need persuading that this is an issue? YouTube, films, media, gaming, Facebook, streaming, constantly demanding advertising, all incessantly being reached for by us and our children; a constant, instant, servant, living in our pockets. Servant or Master? Entertain me! Titillate me! Communicate with me! 'Like' me! Respond to me!!! The content is *always* educational to some degree or other. Think about it; those conversations shape their understanding of relationships, and the content shapes their understanding of the world. And, for so many children, the parent's present, potentially becomes the primary source of their pollution. For example, the damaging hinderance of widely distributed pornographic content cannot be underestimated¹⁷. How sad that the playful, unconcerned, freedom of childhood relationships is being stolen. Invaluable innocence being swiped, as they swipe.

The pressure from social media, can become totally distracting from real relationships. In February 2019, The Prince's Trust eBay Youth Index found that 57 per cent of 16-25 year olds believed social media creates an "overwhelming pressure" to succeed, while 46 per cent said that comparing their lives to their friends on social media made them feel "inadequate"¹⁸. Again in 2019, research showed that 1 in 6 eight-year olds had been involved in sexting¹⁹. King's College has published research that shows that up to 30% of young people use smartphones in a dysfunctional way and show signs of depression, anxiety, poor sleep and stress as a result.²⁰ Let us all be completely clear on this matter, this is not an environment designed for the flourishing of our children.

Outdoor collaborative and creative play, so essential for the development of children and young mammals of all kinds, can be totally shelved, as our children are given access to so much immediate self-stimulation through screens. Research clearly shows this leads to unhealthy social, physical and spiritual development²¹.

Hinderance 4: Consumerist Culture

Globalising western society is founded on consumerism and an identity found in *self*. 'I shop therefore I am'. A selfhood based in what I can *have* to be happy, fuelled and encouraged by the needs of the economy to relentlessly grow, at all costs. The cost, even, of sanity. The cost, certainly,

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 6:6-9

¹⁷ <https://www.issuelab.org/resource/effects-of-pornography-on-adolescents.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-the-trust/research-policies-reports/youth-index-2019>

¹⁹ <https://blog.jiminy.me/2019/12/17/children-and-sexting-a-jiminy-report/>

²⁰ <https://bmcpyschiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12888-019-2350-x>

²¹ Toxic Childhood: How The Modern World Is Damaging Our Children And What We Can Do About It : Sue Palmer

of the environment. Even at the cost of our children's flourishing. Christmas has become a mammoth religious celebration, of all that Mammon has to offer our children.

Parents' highest goal has become 'I just want them to be happy', without the understanding that a flourishing life is one that is joyfully given away to Christ and to others²². The world preaches actualisation of *self*, with that *self* primarily being found in being an autonomous consumer. Autonomous and therefore 'free' from any authority figure's assignment of identity. Free to consume and be happy? This cultural mindset points our children to the lie that life and identity is found in expressing your 'true' inner self, outside of any reference to God, and then gathering to yourself all that will please. No reference to anyone else is necessary in this worldview, and so they learn to please themselves without regard to any external source of wisdom. The main source of such pleasure is falsely prophesied by the culture to be found in consuming.

A consumerist mindset leads to a belief, which is taking root in our children, that people also are objects to satisfy *me*, and not to sacrificially love. The poisonous mix of consumerism with sex, showers our children through the many screens, sexualising and objectifying their view of personhood. Have you discerned how the latest dolls are dressed, and what the clothes are designed to do? What more insidious hinderances to sacrificial love, putting others first, patient faith or learning to wait, could there be?

Hinderance 5: Casual Congregations

Between 2001 and 2011 the number of those who would state they are Christians in Britain fell by 5.3 million, about 10,000 a week. If that rate of decline continues, Christianity will come to an end in the UK in 2067²³. The average age at which Christian parents' children leave the church is 14²⁴. Now, combine this with the therefore disturbing fact that, at the most optimistic reading of the statistics, two thirds of all those who are ever going to become committed Christians do so *before the age of 18*²⁵... If someone in the UK has not made the choice for Christ before they reach university age, it is fair to say they are unlikely to do so. In many churches around 25% are under the age 16. What an opportunity we have! Yet most churches spend less than 5% of their budget, and much less of their time, in reaching and supporting their children, when they are the ones in the congregation who are most likely to be responsive to the gospel²⁶. Casually missing the captive audience. This is strategically and spiritually tragic. Churches who were once the main source of education provision, have handed this over to the state, and no longer find themselves able to provide anything resembling a regular Christian witness *to children*. Even the provision of *any* sort of Religious Education, especially in secondary schools, is now under threat²⁷.

The absence of the young is often fruit of a lack of conviction from parents that the church should even play a substantial role in the spiritual direction of their children. Some Christian parents on

²² Mark 12:30-31

²³ <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/06/2067-the-end-of-british-christianity/>

²⁴ <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/19-january/features/features/why-i-left-church-in-my-teens>

²⁵ <http://www.comresglobal.com/polls/church-of-england-mapping-survey/>;
<https://www.barna.com/research/evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids/>;
<https://humanism.org.uk/2017/09/18/new-poll-reveals-just-5-of-uk-christians-become-christians-after-leaving-school/>

²⁶ <https://holysoup.com/the-shocking-truth-of-church-budgets/>

²⁷ <https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf>

Sundays encourage the sports-field gathering above the spiritual-family gathering. We can demonstrate our undervaluing of our younger children in our, '*Baby sitting on Sundays please, and please don't ask me to join the rota!*' attitude. Church leaders can collaborate with the state in this lack of focus on the flourishing of our children. But not all churches. Some have not adopted the casual attitude and have demonstrated the love of their children in action and investment. Can more be done to stem the tide, by God's chosen vehicle to disciple the children of world? That is, namely, your church and mine²⁸.

Hinderance 6: Enemy Enticements

Make no mistake, we are at war. At war with an enemy who prowls around like a roaring lion²⁹. A prowling lion lurks and watches to pick off the young and the vulnerable; who hasn't seen the wildlife programmes? There is a temptation not to protect, not to guard, and to go with the flow of the culture when it comes to our children. Like an ignorant and aimless herd of antelope. It could be expensive in time and money, to pay close attention to the spiritual development of our children. There is so much else to be getting on with after all...

The more attractive nature of the world's more immediate and visible rewards and entertaining distractions can hinder our attention and take our eyes from our children. To some, having a smaller house, less of a career, fewer holidays, less time for self, fewer gadgets, and looking different from the neighbours, is a price too high to even consider. The enticements of the world have succeeded in turning our attention away from the young, and hindered our vision for seeing them flourishing in the kingdom of God. How can we then expect them to learn to resist these temptations, these enemy enticements, themselves?

Helps

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Matthew 19 v 14 (NIV). So how do we *help* them come to Jesus?

Help 1: Peaceful Parents

To counteract the hindrance of 'Pressed Parents', what do our children need us to become? When our children ask us a question or attempt to show us something they have made or done, are they more likely to get a welcoming response, or a 'not now'. The truth is, if they come to expect a rebuff, or distracted disinterest, they will stop asking. Your opportunity for influence in their lives diminishes over time. But you can learn to say 'yes' more often, and make decisions that bring less hurry and more peace to your home³⁰. Plan for unplanned time, not just when you have your scheduled appointment with your child, as though they were some task to complete; real time, where you are present with them in the moment, their moment. In these occasions of peaceful communication, and even silly playfulness, then their questions will come, you can offer to pray with them, demonstrate your sacrificial love for them and point them to Jesus, letting them into your relationship with Christ. One small change which can make a big difference... can you ask them about their school day, where your question shows you *knew something* about what their day held? We won't always get this right, but we can make it our aim, while we have the chance. The song *Cinderella* by Stephen Curtis Chapman³¹, expresses this so well if you have a daughter. The song *Cats*

²⁸ Matthew 28:19; Ephesians 3:10

²⁹ 1 Peter 5:8

³⁰ Parenting for Peace: Raising the Next Generation of Peacemakers; Marcy Axness

³¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrWMBC6yoME>

in the Cradle by Harry Chapin, and then covered by Ugly Kid Jo in the 90s, is worth a listen if you have a son!³² Why not google them now, or follow the link, and let God speak to you?

Help 2: Effective Education

I want to emphasise, not all teachers or teachings are toxic of course! And where there are attitudes and actions being encouraged which are against the Christian spiritual formation we would want, we have the ability to counteract this as parents and church communities. We can regularly help our children and young people detox, in the evenings and holidays, through prayer and discussion. We can also seek to provide the best schooling, given the circumstances we are in. Making a choice for the best school, and the best teachers is clearly crucial. It is also important for our churches to encourage Christians into the teaching profession, to be salt and light in this highly influential position. I believe I was able to have a profoundly positive effect through my teaching in state primary and special schools over 17 years.

The joy of the research conclusions from studies on present and past pupils in Christian School's Trust Schools, like The King's School, has been to see the difference Christian teachers make in the encouragement of faith in children³³ (see Chapter 4). The positive results in the mental health of past pupils is also a powerful testimony of this kind of education. Parents who are able to home school can also have a high level of involvement in the ongoing development of their children as they help them to follow Christ. What value there is in an education where the Bible and prayer are a creatively integrated part of the daily experience for a child! For many this is not an option. However, regular effort from parents in intentionally connecting with their children and young people, deliberately disciplining, can result in good foundations being laid. If parents take account of the relevant hinderances and helps, and avail themselves of the power of prayer, relying on the grace of God, then children can be helped to flourish in their faith. This was my experience as a child. Hopefully, parents will also be able to enjoy the active support of the wider church they are called to join. Those stewarding and parenting our children can, and should, regularly assess the trends in culture, and in addition discern what attitudes and beliefs are developing in our children. This is only possible if they spend time with them. This consideration by those with responsibility for children and young people, can result in the wisdom that is needed to shape their beliefs, mitigating well against any negative discipleship from society.

Help 3: Monitored Mobiles

It is possible to train our children to use the technological tools of the 21st century for the Lord. But as with any sharp tool, wise and age-appropriate exposure from parents is essential. Regular monitoring, sharing of passwords and 'friends', time limits, and encouraging a balance of other activities can all be put in place. But this requires attention and resolve. It also requires good modelling from the grown-ups! Parents must recognise they are the gatekeepers to their home, and should be those who guard the doors and the windows (pun intended), so children are not left to their own devices³⁴. The unfettered modern-day global circus and playground available is just too dangerous to give them their own free ticket to explore. As our children grow and mature, teaching

³² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B32yjbCSVpU>

³³ *Swimming Against the Tide: The New Independent Christian Schools and their Teenage Pupils (Religion, Education and Values)*; Sylvia Baker 2013

³⁴ *Left to Their Own Devices?: Confident Parenting in a World of Screens* Paperback – 19 May 2017; Katharine Hill: Care for the Family Publications

them to discern what they watch and who they communicate with, becomes essential to prepare them for life. We must point them towards discernment, not experiment.

Help 4: Cultural Commentary

As adults we are influenced by the culture that we are immersed in. The conscience of a child is something which is even more strongly affected by the 'voices' of those around them. Parents who can discern the cultures presented, when watching or experiencing things together, can helpfully *commentate* on the messages, so that norms of society do not become the norms for the inner conversation of the child. For example, when seeing persistent advertising, noting '*can you see how we are constantly being told we need to buy things to be happy, that's not true is it...*'. Additionally, when hearing children speaking in unrespectful ways to each other on TV, just commenting, '*They are not talking very nicely are they? What do you think would have been a better response?*', can make a big difference. This helps to prevent the development of assumptions in a child's mind that all the cultural attitudes being expressed are 'fine', from the songs, adverts, films, and games they connect with. As the young person becomes more mature, deeper issues should be addressed, such as the ubiquitously negative view towards authority figures in contemporary media, the new sexual ethics and gender ideology, or the prevailing 'dissing' of prominent Christians and Christianity's core beliefs in comedy or satire. Really thinking through what messages culture is conveying and then discussing these well with our children, can bring into focus where these ideas agree or disagree with the beauty of the gospel and the security and desirability of a growing relationship with God. And if all this seems too hard on our own, we can ask God to provide Christian community or even a Christian school to support us and helpfully commentate with us.

Help 5: Churches for Children

We should carefully think through the practices in our churches, our events and messages, and all play our part in encouraging a faithful witness to our children. The '*belong before you believe*', paradigm is certainly true for our children. We can help children believe we want them as part of our corporate times of worship and testimony, if we really do want them to stay into their teens. They will quickly see through any inauthenticity. We can pray for them as they go to their groups, remember their birthdays, and value those who do lead and support their activities. We can even pay for the best resources and staffing, so that they are a focus of our community's service and blessing as a strategic part of our churches' vision. Our children, who are all in the valley of decision about faith, can have many valuable, and at least weekly opportunities to be welcomed into the life of the extended family of church under our wonderful heavenly Dad.

Parents can also commentate on what goes on in church meetings, to help their children understand what is happening. It is important to show them, this is important enough to explain. To a child it can all be quite mysteriously ritualistic, and the words and practices are really quite strange at times! Parents can remind busy church leaders of their responsibility to those most responsive to the gospel. Church leaders should be at the forefront of encouraging the attitude of welcome, and genuine participation which causes our children and young people to feel they fit with the family of faith. Mentors and role models for our young people should be sought and encouraged. Such confidants are so important as the natural detachment processes occur through adolescence that will lead to maturity and the inevitable dislocation from the close nurturing of parents³⁵. Our

children will all need safe places to be given biblically based answers to the increasingly challenging questions they will have. Churches that have schools, can make the most of this fantastic resource of Christian witnesses who are able to point children and young people towards Christ. This then occurs not only in the few hours of organised church activity each week, but in strengthening the foundation of faith day by day in support of parents and churches. It truly takes the village to raise the child.

Help 6: God's Grace

Whatever the limitations, whatever the trauma of our own education, whatever the imperfections of our parenting, whatever the attitude in church leaders, whatever the provision of education available to us, God is able to bring about his purposes. Whether we need grace for our children to be in our local school, grace to find provision to respond to his call to home school, or grace to make a decision to send to an independent Christian school, His grace is sufficient. Whatever the mistakes we will make as parents and churches (and we will make them!) the presence of God is able to work all things together for the good of those who love him and are called according to His purposes³⁶. This, of course, does not negate our responsibility to respond to the wisdom which God gives to us through his grace. Decisions do have consequences now and into eternity. As seen above it is possible to hinder or help. However, we must remember, salvation and flourishing are God's sovereign blessing over us and there will never be the perfect conditions or the perfect people getting it right this side of judgement day! We cannot secure this flourishing in our own strength. The Lord is our Shepherd and however he leads us we can be assured we will lack nothing, as we follow Him. May we have the enabling grace of God to make wise choices so that the garden he has set before us flourishes with life and is fruitful for his kingdom purposes. May our children receive the grace of God through us His church, as His extended family, and especially through those of us as parents who have been given this most unique and holy responsibility for His children.

"May the Lord cause you to flourish, both you and your children" (Psalm 115:14 NIV)

A Comment on Mental and Spiritual Health

Christians rightly tend to believe that there is a strong link between spiritual wellbeing and mental health. In schools, the current adoption of 'mindfulness' language, also acknowledges this connection.

The Princes Trust completed extremely thorough research on 18-25 year olds across the UK in 2018. At the same time detailed research findings on past pupils from what are called 'The New Independent Christian Schools', from the similar age range, was coming through. The statistics from the latter were extremely encouraging on whether these adults had what most Christians would describe as healthy Christian beliefs and behaviours. On the key beliefs that affect mental health the conclusions could not have been clearer. The main example of this was that of the UK wide survey of thousands of 18-25 year olds, 27% *disagreed* with the statement 'Life has a sense of purpose'³⁷. Of the past pupils of independent Christian Schools like The King's School in Witney, 98% stated they felt life did have a purpose³⁸. Even more starkly, 18% in the Princes Trust survey *disagreed* with the statement 'Life is worth living', whereas 99% of the past pupils felt life was worth living. The past pupils were 18 times less likely to think life was not worth living. Despair, self-harm and suicide are

³⁶ Romans 8:28

³⁷ <https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-the-trust/research-policies-reports/youth-index-2019>

³⁸ Sylvia Baker, David Freeman & Richard Brittan; Warwick University- Research unpublished. Presented in 2019; due 2020

natural end points to these negative beliefs, whereas *flourishing* is the result of a sense of purpose under God, through a saving faith in Christ Jesus.

The Christian worldview, proclaimed by churches, encouraged by parents, embodied by congregations, and then supported by Christian teachers through the 30 hours per week in school, seems to make a huge difference to the beliefs developed, and their mental health. Why would we not want this for our children? At a time when we are facing a mental health crisis in adults as well as the young³⁹, it is hugely encouraging to understand through clear research findings what can make a significant and long-term difference. The spiritual and mental health of our children results in them being able to '*enjoy long life*' and is promised in the context of Deuteronomy 6 v1-9, as commented earlier in these articles.

Prayer and reflection

We have been thinking through what most hinders or helps the spiritual development of our children. We have considered the image of a garden which needs thoughtful tending. Why not take time to pray and consider if any of these hindrances or helps are something which you need to recognise in this season and do something about.

"Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus..." Hebrews 12 v 1-2a (NIV).

Our children deserve that we reflect and prayerfully think this through.

5. What is it like to step out of the boat?

*“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”
“Come,” he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.
Matthew 14:28-29 (NIV)*

Christians in the UK have a profound mental blind spot when it comes to independent Christian schools. Experience over many years shows that Christians across the world in Asia, North America, Australasia and especially from Africa, do not have the same mental hinderances in considering an independent Christian education for their children. Indeed, if it is at all possible, they seek out and invest in any opportunity for their children to be in such a school. They have an understanding that faith and academic achievement go hand in hand⁴⁰. They have an understanding that Christians *should* be the ones teaching their children, and that teaching should not primarily be regarded as the remit of the state. Therefore, the potential step of faith to this call of Christ, seems to be more readily taken because of this understanding.

The confines of the boat for many in the UK, start with the constricting sense that it would be wrong not to send a child to the most local state school. Where does this come from? For many there is not a philosophical objection, but it’s just what we do and what we’ve always done! It’s where I went to school! For others, only the elitist rich would consider doing something independent?! For some they fear the ties with the local community could be lost, and with it the potential to evangelise. For some, rather than being the *raison d’etre* of joining the local school in the first place, the parochial community concern only becomes a recognised reason to stay, once they have reached the point of actively considering an independent Christ-centred school. For others there is the ‘Christian ghetto fear’. Will my child be helpfully prepared for the variety of people they will meet in the world if surrounded only by Christians? Finally, and often the main confining factor is the financial cost? Is it possible? Is it worth it?

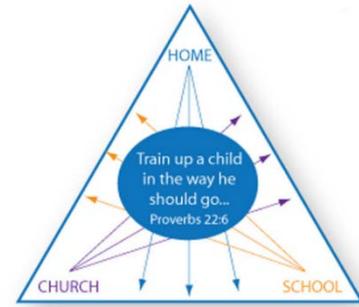
Firstly, as we look at these constraining questions, the more important question is this. Is the Lord calling? I can tell you He is! He is always calling us *to faith!* Maybe to ‘step out of the boat’ is the call to stay in the local state school, to home-school or something else? But if the possibility of walking on water, in sending your child to an independent school, is something He is calling you to consider, the philosophical, financial, educational, parochial and missional objections should come way down the list as reasons to reject the opportunity. It is Jesus’ calling after all, and we can trust Him. *“Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water”*.⁴¹ Perhaps it is safer on the water than in the boat?

Secondly, it is important to recognise that children were not designed to go to school! They were designed to grow and flourish in families, and as part of communities. This is not the same as the 21st century vision and purpose of state or many independent schools. Many schools today are filled with hundreds, even thousands, of children being prepared for the workplace and the needs of the economy, where, as an aside, they are also trained to hold the Fundamental British Values of the

⁴⁰ <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2020/01/59167/>

⁴¹ Matthew 14:22-33

state. Schools can be wonderful places, but they can never be the parents or the extended family, where love is the primary motivator. They cannot substitute effectively for the close family and community they were designed to be raised in. However, they can embody as much as possible of what makes a family function well; a family where spiritual, character and faith development is as essential as GCSE results. Christian parents, if they value their faith and understand their role, will want to do everything they can to pass on this faith to their children, and have teachers who will support this alongside their family if this is possible. Who are best placed to pass on and encourage the Christian faith? Parents. The King's School only has Christian teachers who deeply understand this role in supporting Christian parents. It is a genuine occupational requirement for a teacher to be a committed Christian!



The size of a school is important. Being known and being noticed for a child or young person is essential for their emotional and spiritual flourishing. Jesus Christ had a class of 12 for a reason. In a class of 30, in a 60-minute lesson, how much individual connection can occur? Then factor in that some children understandably need more attention than average. I'll let you do the maths. Conversation and communication with teachers who have hundreds of parents and children to bear in mind can become institutionalised and cold all too easily. This is so the staff can survive and manage the crowds. I've been there, and maybe you have too? Being known and noticed by all in the community is possible in a smaller family setting. It is true that with a small school, the academic offer will be different. In practice this is not, on balance, a negative. The academic offer can be more flexible and more tailored to the individual. We believe that no pupil at The King's School has been restricted in their post GCSE decisions, as the range of subjects covers all relevant areas for future choices. In a small school there is more flexibility in looking at bespoke solutions in line with God's calling over a child, rather than being restricted to the option boxes, shaped by English Baccalaureate (EBacc) parameters, that state schools must provide for the masses.

It is undeniable that children and young people are at their most *formative* stages during their years of school. In other words, they are being *formed*. They are clay being shaped. They are sponges soaking up the atmospheres. Their minds and spirits are gardens being cultivated. The patterns of thinking are steadily being crafted, as neural pathways connect, laying foundations for the future. Many young children are not ready to be defending their faith, not astute enough to analyse the attitudes and agendas of others, formed enough to weather, unprotected, the prevailing winds of state culture or school atmosphere. An independent Christ-centred school whose vision is to support parents, 30 hours a week or more, in welcoming children to the feet of Jesus and inviting young people to consider growing in a relationship with God, has incredible value in these forming years. This is especially true in culture increasingly hostile to Christian faith. The image of a greenhouse has been used, where the young plants, in order to be robust enough to face the elements, need a period of increased protection in order to flourish in the long term. Seeing the value of such a greenhouse has helped many be persuaded to 'step out of the boat'.

The financial cost must be considered in the context of the above value. This is often a considerable 'stepping out' for many. Families, and staff, are significantly sacrificing possible lifestyle choices which would otherwise be available. The church stands with parents where financial challenges arise. We have testimony after testimony of God's provision in many and varied ways, as well as stories of sacrifice and generosity being richly rewarded. Where many churches in the western world spend less than 5% of their income on those in their congregation who are under 16, the Oxfordshire

Community Churches have a much more laudable record. They have substantially invested in those who are most responsive to the gospel⁴², most likely to be formed into disciples of Jesus Christ, by supporting their members in attending The King's School since 1984. 80%-90% of past pupils continue today identifying themselves as followers of Christ⁴³.

Disciples of Jesus Christ are on mission. Some have felt that having their children at the local school supports this important Christian principle. Surely, they should be in and amongst the fallenness of the world and with their peers? The truth is that children and young people are not formed Christians, even if they are from Christian homes. They are all sinful and need a saviour! Moreover, they are vulnerably positioned in the valley of decision themselves⁴⁴. As part of us working together to lead children to salvation, parents and staff are working together to help them face the challenges of relationships, homework, obedience, school uniform, unkind words and even significant rebellion, so that they can learn about Christ's forgiveness and grace in and through all these experiences. No school is a ghetto of perfect people, and children at The King's School face these same issues, but they face them with Christian teachers nurturing and discipling them. For parents, there can be many opportunities to engage with non-Christian adults in multiple ways, and sending your child to the local school to be educated is only one way to make these sort of contacts and relationships. Neither the fear of being too protected, nor the fear of being unable to be connected to the community seem definitive arguments in themselves not to 'step out of the boat'.

Far from being a Christian ghetto, children at The King's School are regularly taken to other settings to understand how to bless others and speak about Christ through actions as well as words. Two notable examples are the annual Besom projects and the mission trip to Zambia. Through the Besom projects with a local charity, the teenagers are serving needy families in the region around the school, seeing real poverty and deprivation, and as they help with gardening and decorating, so their lives are profoundly impacted, as well as those who receive the help. We have saved some from losing their homes, and many from losing their hope. The experience of poverty and the excitement of adventure during the Zambia trip has been a life-changer for many of the young people. Whether serving disabled children, experiencing dire need, climbing mountains or wrestling with character challenges, we see God form and direct them in the most wonderful ways.

When parents are considering stepping out of the boat, they often see the challenges. Peter, alongside the challenge, saw the Lord, heard the Lord, and experienced the adventure of following His master. Peter lost focus and began to sink, and the Lord graciously took him by the hand and led him. The Lord is ready to lead and help parents, who recognise their unique responsibility, and their unique opportunity. The King's School is a unique and wonderful opportunity to 'step out of the boat', in a way which will support the flourishing of children. It is *not* the solution or call for everyone to respond to, and none of us should ever claim that it is, but the opportunity to carefully consider it must surely be taken.

⁴² <https://www.barna.com/research/evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids/>

⁴³ Sylvia Baker, David Freeman & Richard Brittan; Warwick University- Research unpublished. Presented in 2019; due 2020

⁴⁴ Joel 3:14