

Independent School Chaplaincy

Paul Glass¹

‘Education has always been a fundamental part of Methodism ever since the remarkable ministry of John Wesley in the 18th Century. The first school was founded in 1748. Now, wherever Methodism is established, you will find Methodist schools, colleges and sometimes universities.’²

Currently in England the Methodist Church has 14 schools in the independent sector and 64 in the maintained sector. There are also two other important Methodist schools one in Belfast and the other in Dublin. The relationship of the Church to each of these schools is varied. Presbyters and others go into schools and lead assemblies, many serve on the governing bodies of the Methodist school in their area (and other schools as well), others work as teachers or in some other capacity. Many Methodist schools have chaplaincies arranged as another way of the Church engaging with what that institution is doing. Schools in the independent or the state sector that bear the name Methodist have a specific ethos and heritage that needs to be understood, developed and safeguarded.

My experience is both as governor of a Methodist school in the maintained sector but mostly as a chaplain (at various times) of two of the schools that are in the independent group of schools. I have also served as a governor at one of those schools and spent some time serving as a member of the Board of Management (that is, the group that has overall responsibility for nine of the independent schools but also has links with the others).

Why is the Methodist Church involved in education? Apart from the obvious historical factors there are good reasons why the Church has always felt that education is an important field of engagement. In his excellent book *Transforming Lives* (Epworth, 2008), Gary Best, the recently retired headmaster of Kingswood School, reminds us that the word ‘education’ may well have one of two different Latin roots. ‘Educere’ meaning to draw out, or ‘educare’, meaning to nurture or to nourish. Either fits well with Christian ideals not only for young people but for adults as well. The ideal of drawing out of a person their God-given abilities, strengths, gifts and talents, and the belief that, through education, we can draw out what is best in an individual – a sense of justice and self-worth – these are noble and deeply Christian aspirations. Equally the aim of nurturing within a person a sense of fairness and justice, a deep understanding of the needs

Independent School Chaplaincy

of others and a sense that the world, through our efforts and with the help of God, can be transformed into something more truly reflective of the Kingdom is surely something to which Christians should aspire. Both of these definitions of education usefully counteract the current strain of thought that continually makes education an examination grade factory production line. A line of thinking that makes the whole process about examination grades and how to phrase answers to get an A*. This thinking makes education about league tables and makes good teachers nervous about delivering anything that may be of immense value and great interest but is not on the syllabus. Those of us involved in teaching have either had the experience or have heard of pupils, focused completely on a final grade, clutching a copy of the curriculum in their hand and asking why a certain detour into an unexamined area of interest has been taken.

‘True education should be challenging, exciting, vibrant and interesting. It should extend our horizons . . . It is life-enhancing not life-restricting. It helps individuals find meaning in life and to make sense of themselves and their lives.’³

What does a Methodist School look like? There is a Board of Management document which begins with these words, ‘Shared values for Methodist education embodied in vibrant communities which enable people to live their lives to the full and transform society for the better, to the glory of God.’ The document (which is available on the excellent Methodist Education website) lays out the values a Methodist school should work towards and goes on to talk about challenging, inspiring and encouraging pupils in our schools to grow, achieve and question. It talks of working to promote social justice, forgiveness and renewal. In a particularly telling phrase it states: ‘We encourage our students to refuse to accept that things have to be the way they are and to believe in larger possibilities for good because education should be an instrument for reforming and reshaping society for the better.’⁴

Again, these statements look like a useful corrective to much current educational thinking which is about check-lists and ticking boxes. A Methodist school, whilst clearly wanting to stretch its students academically as much as possible, must be about other things. It must be a place where pupils of all abilities and backgrounds find themselves to be cherished, supported, challenged and nurtured. It must be a place where, sometimes subtly and sometimes more overtly, spirituality and religious experience are taken seriously and celebrated. It must be a place where world issues of justice and global responsibility are taken seriously.

It is into this context that a chaplain is placed. There is a document drawn up by the Board of Management (and also available on the Methodist Education website) about the role of a chaplain. From my experience of chaplaincy in two of the independent schools I want to draw out two strands which I have found to be of importance.

The first of these strands is that of being in the position of relating the church to the school. This is becoming increasingly important. A difference between chaplains to the Methodist schools and some other chaplaincies is that in the schools the chaplain is placed within an institution that says it is Methodist. It may even use the fact that it has a Christian ethos in its advertising material because it has discovered that the 'customers' (parents) have a positive reaction to a school that claims that particular set of values and ethos. We are currently in a situation nationally where none of the head teachers in any of our independent schools is a Methodist. That does not mean that they are not interested in or sympathetic to the ethos; of course they are. It does mean that an increasing role for chaplains within the Methodist schools group is that of being guardian and safe keeper of the ethos. There are other people whose responsibility it is to guard that ethos as well. Schools will often have Methodists serving on the staff; they will certainly have a denominational presence on the governing body. Still an important role for the chaplain is to represent the Methodist Church in as positive, engaging and helpful a way as possible. In the particular school that I serve there are nearly 600 pupils. Once staff (both academic and support), parents, governors and past pupils (an important constituency in most independent schools) have been added to the equation then a community that easily numbers in the thousands can be counted as having some meaningful connection with the school (and by extension its chaplain). Many of these people will have little or no religious commitment and very few will be Methodist. The task of representing something larger than yourself with integrity becomes crucial. In many cases the chaplain is the only connection with the Methodist Church that these individuals will have. The theologically significant role of representative person becomes crucial. As the representative figure of the Church, which plays a central role in the ethos and history of the particular institution for which you are a chaplain, there is a hugely important task to be fulfilled.

The second strand is that of representing the school to the Church. This is more difficult to identify and a rather more complex task but equally important. The school chaplain has a unique opportunity. Across its nearly 80 schools the Methodist Church is in contact with thousands of young people every day from many different backgrounds and cultures (my own

Independent School Chaplaincy

school draws students from 35 different countries). We share with, discuss, cajole, laugh with and care for these young people as well as for the hundreds of staff and parents with whom we come into contact daily. While chaplains represent the church to these individuals there is a valuable job to be done of representing the thinking, attitudes, struggles and successes of these young people back to the Church. In these young people we are going to see the shifts in ideas and opinions which will shape society now and in the future. We have an opportunity to listen carefully to what young people on the fringe of religious commitment think of the Church and what it says. We can wonder about how the message of God's love in Christ can best be presented and understood by young people in today's society. All of these things could be done; very few of them are being done. In my role as chaplain I have always thought that it was important to preach as often on the circuit plan as possible. I have taken students from the school with me from time to time to take part in the services. I have always thought that it was just as important for the local church to feel that the school was as much part of what they were about as the school feeling that the church had something to offer them.

This straddling of two worlds, both of which I am immensely passionate about, representing one to the other, hoping that they will see the value in each other, is a large part of what I see chaplaincy as being about. There is something here of the representative nature of the ministry. There is much here about the incarnation – about going to people where they are and engaging with them there – where they live and work, not expecting that they will somehow find their way to you.

At the end of the document of 'Shared Values for Methodist Education' we find this statement:

'John Wesley told the first Methodist teachers to always remember that 'an ounce of love was worth a pound of knowledge' and his challenge to teacher and pupil alike was this:

'Do all the good you can
By all the means you can
In all the ways you can
In all the places you can
At all the times you can
To all the people you can
As long as ever you can.'

Independent School Chaplaincy

That still remains our challenge today and why we see our schools aspiring to be beacons of inclusive excellence developing confident, tolerant, and enthusiastic young people who enjoy working with others and are ready to influence the world.⁵

At the heart of this transformative process are great, exciting, inspirational teachers – there might just also be a chaplain.

NOTES

- 1 The Revd Dr Paul Glass is the Chaplain at Kent College, Canterbury.
- 2 Statement on the Methodist Education web-site www.methodisteducation.co.uk.
- 3 Gary Best, 'Transforming Lives - Christian Education in a multi-cultural society', Epworth, 2008, p. 19.
- 4 Board of Management 'Statement of Values' www.methodisteducation.co.uk.
- 5 Board of Management 'Statement of Values' www.methodisteducation.co.uk.