Meltdown
in schools

– *the church's response*

ANDY HICKFORD

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Meltdown in Schools – the church's response
is the edited text of a seminar, sponsored by The Stapleford Centre, given by Rev. Andy Hickford at The Christian Resources Exhibition at Esher, in May 2001.

Rev. Andy Hickford

Andy nearly became a teacher! Instead, God called him to church leadership; he is currently minister of Maybridge Christian Fellowship, Worthing. His acclaimed book, ***Essential Youth***, challenged churches to reassess approaches to youth work. Andy has a deep understanding of schools, young people and teachers, and has a passion to see more Christians in the classroom.

The Stapleford Centre

The Stapleford Centre exists to promote development in education from a Christian perspective by:

- providing high quality teacher education and training
- publishing high quality curriculum resources
- promoting high quality research into education

"Unless action is taken by the church to encourage Christians to see teaching as a valued profession, and to show by its actions how it values Christian teachers, the long-term prospect is daunting."

Lord Dearing [1]

1 Meltdown in Schools

I travelled up this morning from Worthing in Sussex, which has been described as the only graveyard above ground in Britain! You may know that Worthing has a very sleepy seaside town reputation.

The measure of meltdown in schools can perhaps be gauged in part then, by a recent story from one of the large local high schools. In mid-May 2001, the Year 11s were due to leave school. On Thursday afternoon, ten minutes before the end of their penultimate day, they received a letter written by the headteacher. It informed them that they had only ten more minutes of their school career left. The next day, school was being cancelled for them, and they weren't to return to school again. Some started to cry. They had spent their school careers together, and now they had ten minutes to say goodbye.

A governor told me later that the reason the action was taken, was because there weren't enough staff to control what they feared would happen the next day. They had a large rowdy element, who were difficult to control, and so instead of risking trouble, they closed the school a day early.

What happened next, actually vindicated their decision. One teacher was assaulted, and there were a number of difficult incidents. If that happens in sleepy old Worthing, it's just a measure of some of the problems we face in our educational system nationwide.

I don't want to be in any way sensationalist or over dramatic. But when David Blunkett, the then Secretary of State for Education, was quoted just before Christmas as saying, "The education system has nearly experienced meltdown", you get an indication of the seriousness of the situation. Normally, it is a Cabinet Minister's job to put a positive spin on things. Yet, Blunkett was recognising there is a serious problem in schools.

Teacher hours continue to rise

Where have all the good heads gone?

Teachers 'deserve greater respect'

Shortage leads to 4-day week

Crises confuse the ministers' messages

1,400 new staff drop out

Country has 'run out' of teachers

Demand for workload inquiry

10,000 extra staff needed in four years

These recent *Times Educational Supplement* headlines sum up the problem. The overall picture is that teachers are some of the most demoralised people working in the public sector. Teachers are dealing with high stress levels, long hours, poor pay, and a feeling of lack of respect from the wider community. One piece of research said that they're working an average 52 hour work, with headteachers working 60 hours. The country needs a 20% rise in students qualifying with Postgraduate Certificates of Education, to fill teaching posts.

The government is trying to respond with a number of new initiatives. It has offered £6,000 bursaries for student teachers, to try and find this extra 20%. So far there has been only a 3.8% increase. Of those people who do qualify, the alarming statistic is that 1400 newly-qualified teachers pull out during their first year, such are the pressures of the job. Graduates can now train in school, on a work-based graduate training scheme. One enterprising Local Education Authority, Croydon, went all the way to Australia to try to recruit 40 teachers. Some schools have had to resort to a four day week. Plans include 'fast-tracking' teachers through the salary scale, and paying more cash to new teachers, but that just breeds resentment in other teachers who have done several years more than these new recruits. There is a

growing picture of real, serious meltdown. Lord Puttnam did some work with teachers recently and he said, "I struggle to understand their collective lack of self-worth".

In April 2001 there were nine thousand jobs in teaching advertised in one week in the *Times Educational Supplement*, the largest number ever. All the statistics and headlines can be matched with anecdotal stories. I was talking on the phone earlier today, to the deputy head of a primary school, who has been under incredible stress and pressure at work. Three weeks ago, he suffered a very severe heart attack. He was actually brought back from the dead six times with electric shock treatment, and he vowed to me on the phone this morning, "I am not going back to the job, I am not going back to school".

2 How can the church respond?

We have to ask the question today, when a fundamental part of our society is under such stress and pressure, and education is in danger of meltdown, how can the church respond? How can the church respond, when the bible sees the care and welfare of children as a performance indicator for the health of a nation? How can we respond when the command of Jesus is to love God and love our neighbour? How did he define our neighbour? Anyone who has need. How can we respond, when we are told to seek the welfare of the city? How can we respond when our calling is to be salt and light? How can we respond and serve a nation? How can we respond and invest in the next generation?

I think the first thing we need to say is that this is undoubtedly a complicated issue. There are issues of pay and bureaucracy. Issues about the discipline of pupils. Issues about working conditions and resources. All of those are contributing factors to two crucial concerns; the recruitment and retention of staff. In other words, getting the right people into teaching in the first place, and then keeping them in teaching. Recruitment and retention.

Recruitment
Retention

For the church to respond to the meltdown in schools, it is more about the 2 Rs than the 3 Rs. It's not reading, writing, arithmetic, it's about recruitment and retention. How can the church encourage the right people into teaching, and then see them retained in that teaching career?

3 Recruitment of Christians into teaching

Central to this, is the idea that we who are the church, need to rediscover teaching as a Christian vocation. All the evidence is that the same crises we face in the country as a whole, are mirrored in the church. In other words, there is not just a shortage of new teachers, but also a shortage of Christians going into teaching. There is also a similar alarming dropout rate of Christians once they are in teaching. It is our responsibility as the church to rediscover teaching as a Christian vocation.

The relationship between church and education in this country goes back a long way, and many of the great education initiatives and reforms have been led and influenced by Christians. At that time teaching was seen as a worthy calling, an important vocation for followers of Jesus. All the evidence today points towards the fact that the concept of vocation has become confused. If we are going to understand and recapture this idea of teaching as a key vocation for Christians, there are four pieces of a puzzle which need to come together. I believe these four key beliefs have to be recaptured, if we are ever again going to encourage recruitment from within the church to the profession of teaching.

3.1 The challenge of discipleship

The first part of that puzzle, is to look again at the challenge of discipleship. It goes back to a basic understanding of what the gospel is and what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Let me ask you the question, "Why did you become a Christian?"

I became a Christian because I was frightened of going to hell.
I became a Christian, basically, because of what was in it for me.
I became a Christian as a very sophisticated form of health insurance, just with longer terms! I became a Christian, without my selfishness ever being addressed. It seems to me that part of the challenge to the church, to recapture the sense of teaching as a Christian vocation, is to challenge us again about the very nature of the gospel, the very nature of what it means to follow Jesus.

In presenting Jesus as this pre-packed consumer-orientated personal saviour, we have turned things upside down and missed the point.

The church is meant to be an antibiotic, working for the health of society. But in the gospel, as it was presented to me, the church becomes an anaesthetic, numbing us from the pain of the world. The church is called to be a lifeboat station, rescuing lost people. But somehow the church has been turned into a yacht club, where people go for their own pleasure and enjoyment. Our evangelism ceases to be outreach, and becomes in-grab. We don't go out into the world. We hold back and retreat into the church, every now and then jumping on some poor unsuspecting soul and bringing them into Christendom. We are called to be a United Nations peacekeeping force, salt and light to the world, but we behave more like an SAS snatch squad. (Dragging people in, but staying separate and apart from the world!)

To understand teaching as a vocation again, we've got to capture the heart of 1 John 3:16, "This is how we know what love is. That Jesus Christ laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers." Unless we recapture the sense of discipleship, taking up our cross and dying to self, then teaching, with all its demands, will never be attractive. Certainly, the church should advocate greater improvement in pay and conditions for teaching, but to advocate that just in order that Christians should consider joining the teaching profession, is to miss the point completely. The challenge of discipleship is about surrendering our lives, not for our material benefit, not for our comfort, but to join in the redemptive action of Christ's work in the world. We are called, in short, to lay down our lives for our brothers.

Theology of the world

3.2 Our theology of the world

The second part of this puzzle, is our theology of the world. Generations of Christians bought into a kind of Greek view of the world, which divided it into an upstairs, downstairs universe: there were sacred bits and there were secular bits, and never the two should meet. So we read the bible through that filter, when all the time, the bible fights such a dualistic worldview, and actually says, the whole of the world, the whole of our life has got to be imbued with spiritual significance and meaning if we are to truly follow Christ. Look at these verses which outline that tension with which the bible holds the world.

1 John 2:15, "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." **John** 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave His only Son." (Don't love the world. Love the world!)

John 15:9, "I have chosen you out of the world." **John** 17:15, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world." (Out of the world, in the world.)

2 Corinthians 6:17, "Come out and be ye separate." **Matthew** 28, "Go into all the world, and make disciples." (Come, go.)

James 1:27, "Keep yourself from being polluted by the world."
1 Timothy 4:4, "Everything God made is good." (!!)

As C S Lewis put it, "There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every inch of it is claimed by God and counter-claimed by Satan." When the bible talks about separating ourselves from the world, it talks about it in the context of separating ourselves from its authority, not its geography.

If we are going to recapture a sense of teaching as a Christian vocation, we have to see that it is actually the world that we are supposed to be part of. We are not supposed to be retreating into the church. The world is to be claimed by God. D T Niles said this: "When the church ceases to be concerned with the world, then it ceases to hear God speak to it. For God's conversation with the church, is a conversation about the world. The church must be willing to converse about the world if it is to converse with God. It is the world which is the direct object of God's action. He made it, he loved it, he saved it, he'll judge it through Jesus Christ. Indeed, a church that is disobedient to its commission to go to the world, becomes a menace both to the world and to God."[2] There has to be the understanding, that the world is an arena in which Christians have to be active. Not only do we have to be active in it, but it's our primary focus of calling.

3.3 Our Understanding of the Future

The third part of the puzzle is that we not only have to understand the challenge of discipleship and think about our theology of the world, but also there has to be an understanding of the future. Because we have misunderstood discipleship and our role in the world, that's distorted our grasp of the future. We want to retreat and hold on to our

own personal relationship with Jesus, rather than anticipating the new heaven and the new earth, which was one of the primary motivations for Paul. That was the hope before him, which compelled him on. Christian theology is really very simple. God made everything good and we messed it all up again. Through the Cross, God wants to make it good again. That's the redemptive calling we have to follow. Living redemptively, as one Christian speaker put it, means dragging the future into the present. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven". The bible implies that all of our present work is for a better world, which has eternal significance.

Here is the great paradigm shift that needs to take place in the church. At the moment, we are trying to help Christian teachers to survive within education. But it's not about Christian teachers surviving in education; it's about Christian teachers transforming education for the Kingdom of God.

3.4 A strategic mission

The fourth part of this puzzle, if we are to recapture Christian teaching as a valid vocation, is to understand how strategic a mission field it is. If we begin to take on board all four parts of the puzzle, then we begin to see schools in a new light. Today, schools in this country are the 21st century mission field. We have been preoccupied about the world's influence in the church, instead of the church's influence in the world. Consequently we have lost sight of propelling people into the mission field of our society, particularly into schools. The 97% of teenagers in this country who never darken the doors of a church have not rejected Jesus. They simply do not know enough about him to have done that. The only realistic place that 97% of our teenagers are ever going to hear about Christianity, is school. In all likelihood, it's the only place they're going to see a Christian role model.

We've also got to get beyond thinking that Christian teachers only teach RE. That's ridiculous. We need Christian teachers in every curriculum subject, living out the values, modelling what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We've got to get beyond naive ideas about proselytising people in school and using school as a place to hand out tracts etc. The church's responsibility is about authenticating the claims of Jesus by the way Christian teachers live and operate, in the

staff room, in the classroom and in the corridor. School is a strategic mission field, which realistically, is the only place where the vast majority of the 97%, are going to hear about Jesus today.

Recruitment
Retention

4 Retention of Christians in teaching

But what about the second R, what about retention? Once Christians enter teaching, with all the pressures and all the responsibilities, how can we encourage them to stay within that chosen career? I want to put another four suggestions to you about how we can help retain the right people in teaching.

4.1 Encouragement and pastoral care

The first is, we need to rediscover teachers as missionaries whom the church must support.

Earlier this year, I was asked to speak at the Association of Christian Teachers Annual General Meeting. In preparation for that, I wrote to 30 or so of my friends who are in teaching around the country, in different areas and different schools. I asked them questions about their current experience of teaching. It was a way of helping me prepare for the conference, and helped me to understand the issues they faced. What came back was a crushing sense of loss of perspective on what they were doing.

Listen to some of these quotes:

"I feel crushed under a pile of paperwork."

"Even if I filled in forms for 24 hours, I would not get it all done."

"One government initiative after another actually distracts me from teaching."

Some talked of the sense of isolation. Others of overt hostility in the staff room. They talked of a battle to stay positive. Some, of an emotional roller coaster, of fulfilment one minute and frustration the next. All of them talked about the pressure to produce the grades at exam time. And one of my friends confessed to me that he felt bad for putting pressure on pupils to perform, because he himself was under pressure to get the exam results that the senior staff wanted. "No matter how hard I work," wrote another, "it never seems to be hard enough. No matter what the percentage pass rate is, it never seems to be high enough."

That is the experience of teachers in our churches today. So, how can we support teachers as missionaries?

The first thing teachers need is individual encouragement and pastoral care. Think about how we care for our missionaries:

- we have them back on furlough
- we write to them
- we communicate with them
- we support them

If we start thinking about teachers in the same kind of way, then it leads to some concrete steps. Teachers are crying out for some perspective. They need encouragement that the church believes what they are doing in school is important and significant. What does this support look like practically?

- Don't ask them to lead the Sunday School or run the youth club. They need a break from work!

- Regularly pray in church for local schools and talk about the pressures of teaching. Some of my friends found it immensely helpful when, from the main stage at Spring Harvest a couple of years ago, came the invitation, "We want the teachers, the nurses and the social workers to stand up, because we recognise you to be front line people under immense pressure".

That's the kind of validation which brings perspective to the crushing pile of books to mark, reports to write, papers to fill in, discipline problems in the classroom, not feeling respected and parents' evening

coming up. Teachers need that kind of validation to bring back a right perspective.

- We need to make sure that their pastoral network is in place. Teachers need individuals they can turn to and talk to, and who they know will support them in prayer.
- Let's not be slow to encourage teachers and express the value and significance we attach to the job they do. It is a difficult, demanding, stressful job to be in. But if we abandon the next generation of this country, then we are really committing a great, great mistake for the sake of our nation.

It was Gladstone, the British Prime Minister, who, when considering whether he should go into the church or go into the world of politics, said: "I felt God call me to be a warrior on the ramparts, not a priest within the citadel." It's about bringing that perspective to teachers. To become a full-time Christian schools' worker may be right for certain individuals, but we also need Christian teachers as warriors on the ramparts, in there, day in, day out with the difficult pupils, not just doing the odd PSE lesson and then going on to another school.

Practical involvement

4.2 Practical involvement

Secondly, not only do we need individual encouragement and pastoral care, for teachers, but churches need to get practically involved in school. Think again, if people are missionaries, what do churches do? We often send out people to encourage them, to go and have a holiday with them; there's communication between them. We try and find ways of supporting them. If we think like that about our Christian teachers, then we need to get our church involved with the local school, so that the Christian staff don't feel so isolated and alone.

There is a number of ways we can do this. CARE (and others) have produced some excellent material on governorship. We can encourage members of our churches to be on the governing bodies of schools. My experience is that schools are desperate for quality governors and it's a way of real Christian influence and support. I have seen one relationship with a school turn completely around, because of the input of a couple of Christian governors into the school's governing body. I have been involved in parent/teacher associations because I

wanted to express solidarity with the aims, and the goals of the local school. There is lots of scope for classroom helpers, to help with reading or to help children with learning difficulties. There is a whole range of opportunities, where people from the church can go into schools and get involved.

Lobby and influence

4.3 Lobby and Influence

Thirdly, it is about lobby and influence. If we knew, for example, that missionaries in the mission field were coming under persecution, we would write to our MP, and to that country's ambassador. When it comes to supporting Christian staff in schools in this whole issue of retention, we need to use our lobbying and influencing powers. We need to do that in relation to individual schools, to the LEA and County Councils, and at government level. We need to be encouraging Christians in our churches not to vote just for the party who might line our pockets more, but to vote for the party who is going to, in our view, work for the furtherance and the improvement of our nation as a whole. Education should be part of the Christian's filter process of who we vote for, making our cross count. We should see who we vote for as a discipleship and worship issue, not just voting on the basis of our traditional bias and prejudice.

As a church, we should be encouraging our church members to lobby and influence those in power to put education higher up the agenda.

Prepared to learn

4.4 Prepared to learn

And finally, on this issue of how do we encourage retention of Christians in teaching - it is not only individual encouragement and pastoral care for teachers, the church's practical involvement in school, or its lobbying influence that count. Most importantly, if we are to really support our Christian teachers, then we must be prepared to learn from them.

One of the things the church has been learning recently, is that the lessons missionaries have learnt on the other side of the globe, have incredible significance for our life in 21st century Britain, because here we are in a missionary context. We are taking the gospel from the culture of the church, to another culture of postmodern society. The lessons which the missionaries have learnt in cross-cultural our

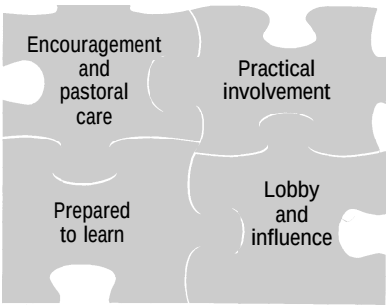
communication are the ones which shape our strategies for evangelism in Britain today. The most important thing we can do, in my view, to support existing teachers in the local school, beyond their individual pastoral care, is to allow them to become prophets to the church.

The great pressure we place on Christian teachers, is that we induct them in a process of faith which has church separate from the world in which they operate. The culture of their church experience is different to that of the school within which they work. We have got to work in the church, not so much at building bridges into the community, but making those bridges completely unnecessary in the first place. It shouldn't be an exercise in cross-cultural communication. If we are to support Christian teachers, we have got to allow them to be prophets to the church, telling us that:

- what we do is irrelevant
- the way we communicate is not being heard
- our structures are past their sell-by date

and allowing their experience of daily cross-cultural communication to shape what we say and do in the church context. In the church, we continue to think that evangelism is an issue of the gospel's plausibility, while teachers will tell us that it is not about the intellectual plausibility of our claims, but about the credibility of the culture of the church. We have to allow teachers to become prophets to us, if we are to support them properly.

Our involvement in schools as a church, is a barometer of the level of engagement with our world in general. If we are not meaningfully involved in schools, then we will be missing our culture as a whole.



5 Preventing the meltdown

In conclusion, if we are to address the meltdown in the educational system of our country, we need to address this whole issue of the 2Rs of Recruitment and Retention. We will not see recruitment of teachers increase from within the church, unless we again establish teaching as a Christian vocation; something very worthy, very focussed, very strategic for followers of Jesus. We have also got to learn to support existing teachers as we would missionaries, making sure we give them the pastoral support, provide them with the encouragement of practical involvement of other Christians in the school and allow them to speak as prophets to the church. Lord Dearing said this: "*Unless action is taken by the church to encourage Christians to see teaching as a valued profession, and to show by its actions how it values Christian teachers, the long-term prospect is daunting.*"

REFERENCES

[1] The Archbishop's Council Church School Review Group Consultation Report, Dec 2000, ISBN 0-7151-9045-8, Para 5.13

[2] D T Niles, 'The Knock of Midnight' - quoted in *A Treasury of Great Preaching*, Vol 12, p188, Lourd Publishing

Further copies of this booklet, together with a wide range of Christian resources for use in both primary and secondary schools are available from The Stapleford Centre.

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