



*A Free Church Voice on Education*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a role for a Free Church voice in education, both generally and in relation to religious education and spiritual development. The Free Church perspective is free from the Christian establishment and is shaped by past and present circumstances. It is not limited by an interest in denominational schools, but is committed to what is best for all in education. The Free Churches are rooted in local communities. Despite theological differences, they are united by their nonconformist convictions and a concern for the education of the whole person.

The Free Churches' voice must be a Christian voice, informed by its nonconformist context. It will speak the language of the Kingdom of God; it will speak of justice, integrity, equality, truth, freedom and peace for all. The source of these values is the Bible, in which the churches are rooted and grounded. Apparent clashes between biblical authority and increasing scientific knowledge challenge both traditional assumptions and negative portrayals of Christianity. A Free Church voice must resist secularism and encourage the use of Christian language in education, particularly the vocabulary of hope.

The Free Churches speak from an inclusive perspective, beyond the specifics of any individual tradition, yet recognising the commitment of some denominations to their faith schools. In the belief that every individual is important to God, a Free Church voice, silenced in the past by discrimination and inequality, must speak for those who are disadvantaged because of difference. A Free Church voice recognises the importance of young people's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development in all aspects and all phases of education. Furthermore, it acknowledges the potential of religious education in nurturing the individual into full personhood and supports good practice. The story of Christianity is incomplete without recognition of its diversity, including the contribution of nonconformists in its development. Education needs to be broader than that which is measurable: it should enable individuals to live life in all its fullness.

The Free Church voice on education finds expression through the Free Church Education Committee (FCEC) whose members all have experience and an active interest in education. The FCEC is committed to upholding respect for religious faith, of whatever creed, and the right of an individual to hold that faith, whilst recognising its own rootedness in the Kingdom of God. It will use its voice to critique present values; to sensitise the denominations; to lobby and inform the government; and to support individuals involved in education, whether as professionals or volunteers. It sees its purpose as seeking to clarify the distinctiveness of the nonconformist Christian voice in education and to articulate its message with conviction and confidence.

## INTRODUCTION

The Free Church Education Committee seeks to work on behalf of the Free Churches collectively, offering a nonconformist Christian voice on matters to do with education.

This paper is intended to support all Free Church women and men who work in education as part of their Christian vocation, whether full or part time, paid or voluntary; including teachers, school governors, members of Standing Advisory Councils for RE (SACREs) and those who work in any other capacity. Its purpose is to clarify the position of the Free Churches in the ongoing shaping and running of the state system of education, and thus help such men and women exercise their Christian vocation more effectively.

The paper reflects the discussions of the Free Church Education Committee (FCEC) on the nature, purpose and role of a nonconformist Christian voice on matters to do with education. The reflections have been stimulated by presentations from a number of established Free Church perspectives.

In its structure, it explores what it means to be working in a context that is *free from* the historic Establishment of the Anglican Church, how it might be *free to* put forward Christian perspectives and why that context and philosophy enable the FCEC to be a voice that is *free for* the good of all in education.

This paper is not intended as final piece of work. It is a discussion paper, both for the FCEC and for other interested parties. Each section concludes with a list of issues which the committee continues to ponder for itself and commends to the denominations, individual churches and Free Church SACRE members for consideration. It is hoped it will raise interest and provoke discussion.

## I. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### **FREE FROM the Establishment, working to nonconformist convictions ...**

The opportunities for expressing a Free Church perspective on education are as much shaped by centuries of unfolding development as they are by present circumstances.

The Church of England and the Church in Wales assume a mission to the whole of society with parishes and schools that, nominally at least, include every resident. The Roman Catholic Church invests enormous resources in schools as part of its mission and ecclesiology, thus creating a symbiotic relationship between school and parish. Although many nonconformist denominations founded their own schools in the latter part of the nineteenth century, only the Methodist Church has kept a substantial stake in providing schools. The Free Churches are mission-oriented in a different way, with a broader focus on the whole community and on every school. Traditionally, therefore, in the nonconformist denominations there has been an emphasis on endorsing state education. This commitment allows both the Christian faith to have its place in the widest sphere of education and Christians as teachers to work out their vocation in schools that do not have a religious character.

Free Churches come from a long history of dissent. Over the centuries, freedom of conscience and freedom of speech have been vigorously defended by the Free Churches. Christian nonconformists did not, however, start out with the principle of general religious freedom; they simply wanted freedom of conscience and belief for themselves. Dissenters in the past experienced some of the same kinds of discrimination and inequality as minority groups experience now. Unified as they are by their common nonconformist heritage, the Free Churches are nevertheless different from each other and represent a variety of theological positions, ethos and mission priorities.

Notwithstanding their theological diversity, these churches are locally based and have experience of every type of community; they are free to adapt as communities change. Rootedness within communities and a sense of freedom within the Free Churches are gifts to be offered and explored in education as well as on the ground in every local community. Examples from the past include the Sunday School movement and the early Sabbath Schools, which educated the whole person and gave people skills, such as reading, writing and mathematics, as well as a faith perspective. In essence, they gave people the skills for learning and living, motivated by their faith.

### **The Free Church Education Committee continues to consider:**

- how distinctive the Free Church voices are and how they differ from the voices of other Christians and people of other faiths;
- how this distinctiveness can be emphasised as a positive feature of Free Church identity;
- how nonconformist Christians can express better what they have in common;
- who is marginalised today and whether the FCEC could speak for and with them more effectively;
- whether there is wisdom from the Bible or Christian teaching that can help to strengthen the Free Church voice;
- how presence in local communities might be used to strengthen active Free Church engagement in education, with the present emphasis on involvement in schools belonging to particular faith traditions.

## 2. PHILOSOPHY

### **FREE TO put forward Christian perspectives ...**

Through Christ, Christians are called to be children of God. Every church, of any denomination, is called to be a witness to life in the Kingdom of God; to stand for justice, integrity, equality, learning, truth, simplicity, freedom and peace for all. In common with other Christians, these key values are the essence of what nonconformist believers hold dear. These values derive from biblical revelation of the nature of God and God's purpose for human beings, affirmed as an authoritative source by the Free Churches.

The Free Churches' work of faith and community involvement has always been rooted in the Bible, which has at its heart God's vision of human creativity for the world; this challenges the churches to explore the world with eyes of faith and to share a vision of hope and possibility for all people. A voice for the Free Churches looks to the Bible to give a rootedness to its involvement in the education process, always seeking to discover the context in which the words were written and finding relevance in them for the wider community, as well as for people of faith, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A populist image of the church as being reactionary and irrational has grown out of frequent clashes between biblical authority and an emerging scientific methodology within other community perspectives. While there are times when this accusation may legitimately be levelled, Christians are too often thought of as people who are seen to be against everything, yet there is within the body of Christ a deeper sense of vision which seeks a 'more excellent way' (1 Corinthians 12). Although this means there will, at times, be a need to disagree or to challenge perceived wisdom and traditional assumptions, the majority of churches are trying to be 'salt and light' in very positive ways. The distinctive message from the Free Churches should be one that reflects the positive message of the Gospel.

So where is the faith perspective today? Christians are motivated by the faith, prayer, love and worship of the people of God. They have insights into human characteristics and hopes and an opportunity to look at the Gospel message of righteousness and justice, peace and blessing. There is a contribution to be made in sharing something of God's story within the wider community narrative in which everyone shares. That story of people and their experience, of challenge and choice, of opportunity and grace, is the motivation of the Free Churches. But understanding that story of faith and action, the story of the Bible, has to be based on the best scholarship and shared within the ministry of prayer of the people of God.

A Free Church voice needs to identify and use Christian language, particularly the language of hope. The currency of particular language does not necessarily divide; it is not mutually exclusive. The language of equality, valuing individuals, empowerment, enjoyment and identity is commonly used in education. There is an emphasis on promoting human rights for all and removing discrimination, including religious discrimination. All of this is language with which Free Church Christians identify.

The voice of the Free Churches on education must therefore be a Christian voice, informed by its nonconformist context. It must confront negative portrayals of Christianity and resist the prevailing advance of secularism and the secularisation of society, challenging and resisting their effects on education. All this must be done in partnership with parents and carers, with teachers and governors, with communities and churches. There is both challenge and opportunity in working with those inside and outside the church who seek to bring the best education for all to all.

**The Free Church Education Committee continues to consider:**

- how it can ensure that the common language of education is not that of secularism, but is language with which Free Church Christians can identify because it gives meaning and resonates with the Christian faith;
- how it can encourage a more creative use of language in education, reflecting the Christian belief that every person is made in God's image;
- how the language of faith might be recaptured in a way that makes it credible;
- its role in sensitising the Free Churches to do more to support their members who are involved in education;
- its own potential role in supporting all Christians in education, both professionals and volunteers such as school governors, who are being challenged to expand their spiritual life but feel unsupported by their local church.

### 3. PURPOSE

#### **FREE FOR promotion of the good of all ...**

Education is for everyone. Every individual is important to God and Christians believe that there is something of God in every person. This demands an acknowledgement of equality and justice as key values for education. Equality does not necessarily mean treating everyone the same. Allowing each individual to develop her or his full potential inevitably means some require more resources than others. This view is not the prerogative of the Free Churches, by any means; it is shared with other Christians, people of other faiths, humanists and those with non-religious beliefs.

Free as they are, in the most part, from a commitment to denominational schools, the Free Churches are able to offer an inclusive witness, valid beyond the specifics of any individual tradition. The Free Churches speak from that inclusive perspective, recognising nonetheless how the deep commitment of some churches to faith schools provides a huge resource beyond their own communities. Acknowledging the role played by such schools in the current educational landscape by no means undermines the commitment to inclusivity, since freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, expressed in the continued existence of a growing diversity of faith schools, are intrinsic to a Free Church perspective.

Given their past experience of discrimination and inequality, the Free Churches are well placed to understand and support those who are different, especially those who are disadvantaged because of their difference. The task for the Free Churches is to be a voice for inclusion, taking on issues of justice, of standing up for what is right in unjust situations. The grounding belief is one of equality and justice for all, including those who believe differently, for the best possible provision for all within the public system of education.

The first of the stated aims of education since 1944 has been to promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and of society. In reiterating this aim, the 1988 Education Reform Act reinforced the importance of spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development but, although there has been no change to that legislation, the primacy of these aspects of development has slipped in recent years. Limiting phrases such as 'teaching and learning' are in common usage; 'educating and becoming' would be more appropriate. The Free Churches emphasise the importance of ethos and the spiritual and moral dimensions in all aspects of education and for all young people.

A Free Church Christian voice in education should include the maxim 'What is to be valued is worth measuring, rather than valuing only what can be measured'. Education is about the whole person, not just literacy and numeracy, important though they are. Every good gift and potential in a child should be developed. Jesus said that he came so that people could live life in all its fullness (John 10.10). Much of what is of value defies any kind of measurement; this includes spiritual development, yet without such development what can be measured loses much of its importance.

After parents, teachers are the greatest resource there is for children's development as rounded individuals. The Free Churches are well represented in the profession and there are also many members who serve on SACREs and as governors, all in the system and contributing to it; their work is part of the calling of the church and there is much that they can learn from each other. They deserve the support both of their local churches and of the denominations nationally, which should be empowering them to live their Christian values, exemplifying them in their attitudes and relationships. Many teachers flounder in the face of terms such as 'spiritual' and 'spiritual development'. There is a

need to offer them support and to ensure these dimensions are not overlooked, especially in revisions of the school curriculum.

Good religious education helps to nurture the individual into full personhood, promoting respect and empathy, a capacity to question, to imagine, to value self and others, and to have hope. Along the way, it does much to provoke questions about the meaning of life, ideas about God, issues of right and wrong and the nature of reality. The Christian story, along with the treasured narratives of other faiths, helps to source this growth. Yet Christianity is richly diverse and, without reference to the Free Churches, its story is not complete.

There is great benefit for young people in learning about the Free Churches' role in the development of Christianity and of society, as well as in broadening their understanding of the diversity of Christian traditions. In this respect, resources for learning are generally not as good as they could be: there is little reference to nonconformism in published text books.

The people of the Free Churches are motivated to take an interest because of their faith. Other people in the education process are motivated in different ways. All are seeking, in partnership, to provide the best, most creative, challenging and realistic educational opportunities to all individuals, their families and their communities.

### **The Free Church Education Committee continues to consider:**

- its understanding of the purposes of education, in the context of Christian tradition and theology, and in what ways this complements or challenges secular understandings;
- what it is that holds communities together and how people live with difference;
- what sort of communities are being developed in education;
- what is the public good and how faith communities can engage with it;
- how the school becomes a place where everyone is valued and no one group is favoured;
- how young people can be assured of opportunities to learn about and from the nonconformist traditions.

## 4. ACTION

### **FREE FOR the future ...**

The Free Churches' voice on education finds its expression through the Free Church Education Committee. Representatives on the committee are nominated by member churches of the Free Churches' Group. The members all have an active involvement in education and draw on their experience of working in a wide range of educational settings.

Preparing this paper has afforded an opportunity for shared reflection, which has led the members of the FCEC to recognise that the committee's rationale is rooted in Kingdom values which find expression in a collective commitment to fullness of life, equality of opportunity and lifelong learning for all. The FCEC upholds respect for religious faith, of whatever creed, and non-religious beliefs and the right of the individual to hold that faith or belief, especially those whose faith has been marginalised. Without undermining the faith of others, it will seek to reclaim the language of the Christian faith in what it says and put a positive focus on the 'nonconformist' label.

The FCEC will use its voice to prompt, lobby, inform and support, whether directing its energies towards the denominations, the Government or individuals involved in education. Representing denominations outside the Establishment and generally without direct responsibility for schools gives the FCEC considerable independence and autonomy. It has, therefore, the freedom to speak, to critique present values and policies in education and to offer a Christian comment for the good of all.

At times of continuing educational change, the FCEC is represented in national discussions about curriculum development and guidance, as well as contributing to routine multi-agency meetings. That level of representation, working with Government departments and other organisations, will continue to be a priority for the committee.

The FCEC is committed to sensitising the denominations it serves by raising levels of interest in education. Through individual members' contacts and denominational press, it will seek to encourage the churches to take seriously their responsibilities to exercise their voices and keep them informed about developments and issues.

The committee sees itself offering support for nonconformist Christians in the classroom and those serving on a school's governing body or the local SACRE. Individuals in any of these roles are to be encouraged to understand how they can put their Christian faith into practice, without inappropriate proselytising. The major ongoing task for the FCEC is to strengthen Free Church representation on SACREs. It will continue to support recruitment, to inform and network Free Church SACRE representatives through its newly established newsletter and to offer, where possible, training opportunities for members. The FCEC also has work to do in critiquing published resources for learning and, where possible, encouraging coverage of the impact of the Free Churches on society and education.

If the Free Church message lacks clarity or distinction, maybe it is because what has historically been said by the Free Churches about education has filtered into the state system and is now taken for granted. The FCEC is seeking to clarify the message and what is distinctive about it; it may not be a different perspective, but a different emphasis. This is all part of the Free Church ministry.

**The Free Church Education Committee continues to consider:**

- its role as a voice for the Free Churches on education;
- how prepared it is, when necessary, to be 'grit in the system';
- how space and opportunity can be found to engage with and critique the values espoused by the present education system;
- how to connect with the immediate concerns of the day;
- how to bring education back onto the agendas of the Free Churches.

Julie Grove, John Keast, Sarah Lane Cawte and Philip Wagstaff

For the Free Church Education Committee

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