What Motivates Christian Education Practitioners?

This paper was published by The Stapleford Centre based on an event at which the Revd Dr Howard Worsley, Senior Lecturer in Christian Education at Canterbury Christ Church University, spoke on the topic of "What Motivates Christian Education Practitioners". For more information please visit: stapleford-centre.org/conferences/what-motivates-christian-education-practitioners

State of education in our country

The Academies Act. Competition. The standards agenda. Assessment culture. Those are some of the many things happening in education at the moment. Education has become a commodity. It is being used as something to fuel the economy. And in the process, we are allowing our children to be turned into products. This is leading to a tragic result: in many ways, the country is losing its heart.

One should not forget the great things we have achieved: education is free and, as a result, children both young and old are being educated. This is a great achievement that we should not take for granted. However, something else is also happening: we are not sure of the reason for education any more. Like John Newman, in The Idea of a Christian University we ask, "What is the point of Education?"

When looking at recent education white papers, one finds a general move from the idea of the student being someone whose character is being formed to something that is servicing the economy. That
movement towards functionality is taking place slowly but surely. This poses the question: if that is the case, then what is the Christian contribution to this situation? In other words, what are we, as Christians, going to do about it?

**The Christian response**

Traditionally, the church has worked in three particular ways in education: Mission, nurture and service.

- **Mission**: broad, explicit (mentioning Jesus, prayer, etc), implicit (doing things in a Christian manner, relying on the Holy Spirit in us).
- **Nurture**: nurturing people in the faith or as simply as human beings, nurturing the child as it grows up.
- **Service**: serving the nation. This is an inclusive understanding of education, often attached to government agendas.

To paraphrase Jeff Astley, Honorary Professor in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Durham, there are three other ways of seeing Christian involvement in education:

- Educate into Christianity
- Educate about Christianity
- Educate in a Christian manner

**What contribution do we have?**

All this poses the question: "What contribution do we have for education?"

And, what can actually make a difference? Sometimes it feels like we are running on a treadmill, doing our best to stop where education is going, often from the "top down", and yet, despite our best efforts, nothing seems to change!

So we begin to ask ourselves: do we need to do things differently? Do we need to start influencing from "the bottom up"?

To do this, it can be helpful to start by examining our own motivation. It starts with the individual:

- **Why do I get out of bed** in the morning?
- **What motivates me**, as a Christian education practitioner?
- **Why do I do** what I do?

It can be helpful to start by focussing on that, rather than only looking at the frustrating picture of the current education environment.

Hearing *why* Christian educators do what they do highlights what is distinctive about Christian Education.

At a recent education retreat, Christian educators came up with the following responses, that roughly divided into three groups:

**Generosity**

- Resourced because of the **character** of God, because of *who God is*
  - God’s generosity and graciousness (grace)
  - God’s extravagance
  - God’s affection for children
  - God is sovereign
Graciousness

- God’s **action** in the world
  - God forgives
  - God redeems
  - God operates with grace

Extravagance

- There is a specific mission of God (**sovereignty**)
  - God has made us in community and God shows giving in community
  - God’s desire for everyone to learn
  - Teaching is a gift of God
  - God delights in engaging in risk and vulnerability

Faith versus reason?

Canterbury Christ Church University recently conducted research on NQTs which looked at what NQTs who have religious faith do in the classroom compared to those who don’t. The question asked was “Do you bring your faith and worldview into the classroom?”

The results were astonishing. Religious NQTs (of different faiths) were extremely cautious about how they responded to faith questions asked by students. By contrast, NQTs who considered themselves atheist were very open about their faith position, eager to steer people away from faith questions to, as they thought, rational ways of thinking.

This is reflective of a huge shift in public thinking that has taken place in recent years. The measured, gentle voice of faith is no longer heard, but the more extreme, hard-line humanist voice is being readily heard.

It is time for a more explicit voice for Christianity. The theologian Hans Küng said it well when he stated that "Christian does not mean everything that is true, good beautiful, human. Who could deny that truth, goodness, beauty and humanity exist also outside Christianity? But everything can be called Christian which in theory and practice has an explicit, positive reference to Jesus”

He is saying that love, for instance, is only Christian if it is based on “love in Christ”.

In other words, values are inadequate, we need to speak about **Christian values**. Christian values are values that are grounded in the story of Jesus.

Contributions from a recent education retreat

- God’s graciousness and extravagance
  - When the teacher is aware of this it will change the way they teach.
  - We blame ourselves for our shortcomings, so we need to be aware of the love of God for us and how he sees the best in us, so that we can see the best in the pupils.

- God’s extravagance and generosity
  - God’s reckless extravagance and wonderment of creation impacts on how we teach. Job 38: *Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?*
  - Part of this is an awareness of God’s extravagant presence in nature.
  - Educators who wonder about the marvels of education are seen as people who are still learning. This creates space for spiritual reflection.
  - Rather than leading to the polarised debate between creation and evolution, it allows one, with faith, to ask more questions (not, as atheists claim, to ask less questions).
  - Allowing oneself to believe in wisdom beyond understanding leaves the mind open.
Being motivated by God’s **character**

When thinking about God’s character, some of the questions that need to be considered are questions like:

- What is the point at which extravagance needs to be measured against frugality?
- Is it possible for a teacher to be too generous? How is generosity balanced?
- What are the complexities of affection at school?
- To what extent is God’s sovereignty constrained by human responsibility?

**Incarnation: God’s generosity and extravagance**

These questions link in to the idea of the incarnation. The incarnation is where we see both the generosity and the extravagance of God. Isaiah 11:1 (NIV): "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit." (*Emphasis added*)

**Incarnation: God risks**

The incarnation was a high-risk strategy: a fresh shoot from the stump of a tree-trunk. In the same way there is risk involved in Christian education. This is because God takes risks with people, with children. The divine birth went largely unnoticed. Similarly, the minute changes in attitude and performance in children are often only noticed by the teacher.

**God’s affection for us**

One way in which education flourishes is in the natural affection that flows from the teacher to the child. Encountering the "other" without reference to the educational target. Reflecting something of God in their unconditional regard for the "other". God’s love is evidenced through such natural affection.

The level of personal care and the level of classroom interaction lead to attainment and achievement. However, the motivation for attainment must not lie, as is so often the case, in the success of the school or the teacher, but in the well-being of the child.

God’s affection for the child wishes the child, not attainment, to be the focus of learning. This can be seen in the gospels in the way Jesus puts the child in the centre.

**Being motivated by God’s **sovereignty**

The "other-ness" of God is seen in His sovereignty.

We believe in a God of love who is sovereign. This means we need to be aware that we cannot achieve anything in this world except through and by Him.

We also know that “God’s ways are higher than our ways”. There is real comfort in this truth. We know that God is sovereign, beyond our Parliament, beyond the Academies Act, beyond the entire education environment we operate in.

**Being motivated by God’s **action**

**God of forgiveness**

Forgiveness feels like a concept that is completely alien to education. The culture in education, perhaps due to its focus on standards, is perceived to be unforgiving.

Ofsted’s focus on standards can feel a bit like the Old Testament focus on law. And forgiveness in a school can be compared to the arrival of grace. In the early church, there was a fear that grace was too “soft”, that it might lead to a life of sin, an “anything goes” culture. The same fear exists in schools: that forgiveness might lead to a drop in Ofsted standards.
In many ways, Christ lived in an “Ofsted culture” where he had to abide by the terms of the law, but had some things to say about the application of the law. He healed on a sabbath, his disciples picked and ate grain on a sabbath.

Yet Jesus claimed he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. In the same way, we can fulfil and even go beyond Ofsted.

Jesus came because it is impossible for us to fulfil the law’s demands by adhering to it. We have all fallen short of God’s standards. It is through grace that we can fulfil the law, because grace goes beyond the law. Grace is general: it looks to the whole person and the planet and it operates through love and trust. Law, by contrast, cannot forgive without recompense.

The Apostle Paul says “where sin increased, grace increased all the more” (Romans 5:20, NIV).

**God of redemption**

Grace is not just about forgiveness, it is also about redemption. In the same way, when we dream about the ideal school, it’s not just about forgiveness but also about redemption. Imagine a school where love is explicit, where love operates. Imagine a school where systems operate with grace.

There is a story about a boy who lost his beloved model boat. Months later, he found it in a local antiques shop. So he went home and scraped together the money and bought it back. He redeemed the boat, and loved it even more as a result.

**God operates with grace**

The biggest distinction about Christianity is grace. Grace is unconditional love, forgiveness without recourse to justice. Grace is a concept beyond the operational powers of any organisation.

True Christian justice is the experience of the impossible. It goes beyond revenge, beyond repayment, and it requires the giving of a gift: grace.

**The “now and not yet” of grace**

If the global economy operated on grace, the system would implode, prisons would be empty. If examinations boards operated on grace, nobody would fail.

Thus, grace operates at the interface of the “now”, that God’s kingdom is here, and the “not yet”, that it isn’t here yet in its fullness. In other words, grace hopes for a world which is on the horizon. And even if the prevailing culture is not gracious, grace can coexist in the standards culture. It cannot fully replace it yet, but it believes that one day it will.

Crucially, in a culture of assessment, grace cannot be measured.

**Being motivated by God’s mission**

Shackleton transantarctic exhibition in 1916 ended in his being stranded on an ice-float for 18 months. Yet he got there in the end. In education, the impossibility of the task can leave us feeling stranded on an ice-float, helplessly exposed to the currents. However, we can rest assured that we will somehow get there in the end, because God is with us. There is hope. Christ is with us. And we know that at the end of time, the things of Christ will last, but Ofsted, which has its place now, will fade away.

**God of community**

God has made us for community and it is here that God most choses to show Himself. Schools are communities where Christ can operate. If a community is a place where Christ is known and loved, then it can be compared to a church.

In church school communities, we have to resist the notion that exposing the child to faith means we are abusing our place. Mission can be described as being “Missio Dei”: it is God’s mission. It is not ours, but God’s. God has made everything in existence, including humans as the pinnacle of creation. The human in community best expresses who God is (“it is not good for man to be alone”). In the context of education
the community is the school or the university. Schools often show inclusivity and diversity, community cohesion, that is not present elsewhere. School communities mean that everyone pulls together in one direction.

**God of learning**

God is the God of learning, and the learning God. In Genesis 6, God was “sorry that he had made man on earth”, and, later promises that “This will never happen again”. Likewise, Jesus demonstrates the learning character of God. In Jesus, God appears as a learning God - a child, who was educated and had to learn.

To speak of a learning God is not heretical. Learning does not imply that the learner is inadequate or simple. Rather, it shows that the learner is open to development and growth.

In the gospel of Luke, we see that as Jesus became stronger, he also became “more pleasing” to God.

**God of teaching**

God is not only a learning God, but also a teaching God. To bring together the concepts of learning and teaching is the task of the learning teacher who mirrors the image of God. It’s a God who is imminent/learning as well as transcendent/teaching.