

The Church of England Vision for Education

”Deeply Christian, serving the Common Good”

Executive Summary

This document is a summary form of “The Church of England Vision for Education” (2016). This is a fresh articulation of the Church’s vision for education to meet the challenges and opportunities of the present situation. It is not simply for Church schools but promotes educational excellence for everyone and in all educational settings. The vision is deeply Christian and has a desire for “life in all its fullness” at its heart. It is worked out theologically around four core elements described as wisdom, hope, community and dignity. The vision, in line with the Church of England’s role as the established Church, is for the common good of the whole human community and its environment, whether national, regional or local. It is hospitable to diversity, respects freedom of religion and belief, and encourages others to contribute from the depths of their own traditions and understandings. It invites collaboration, alliances, negotiation of differences, and the forming of new settlements in order to serve the flourishing of a healthily plural society and democracy, together with a healthily plural educational system.

The History, the Present and the Future

The Church of England’s involvement in Education is well known; it was in the vanguard of providing mass education in this country from the foundation of the National Society in 1811, thus pre-dating the State’s involvement in the national system of schooling by over fifty years. The 1944 and 1988 Education Acts then recognised a dual system of Church and State working in partnership, in which Local Authorities played a strategic supporting role for all schools. Now the changing education landscape, (including the government programme to convert all schools to academies) has changed the role of dioceses in all Church schools, especially with relation to school improvement and performance. Since 2001 the Church has produced a number of significant reports and documents¹ which have re-stated and re-interpreted the Church’s role in education and these have now been brought together in this new vision document—the “Church of England Vision for Education” (2016).

The Bible has motivated centuries of Christian involvement in schooling around the world. The belief in the God of all Creation, and of all people being intrinsically related to Jesus Christ, of itself means that each individual is regarded as a person of great worth. This in turn leads to a concern with the learning and teaching of understanding, virtues and habits that shape individuals, families and communities and with the wisdom, truth and knowledge that is passed down the generations. No educational establishment is values neutral, and the Church of England has the opportunity to offer here a model of education which is thoroughly Christian in its foundation, as well as being highly attractive to most others because of the quality of its outcomes for children and young people. In Church schools the deeply Christian foundation for this vision will be seen explicitly in

¹ The Way Ahead (the Dearing Review 2001); The Church School of the Future Review (the Chadwick Review 2012); A Diocesan Board of Education for the Future (2013).

teaching and learning both in RE and across the curriculum, and also in the authentically Christian worship and ethos of those schools. In other schools which are not rooted in an explicit Christian ethos, our vision for education can still be expressed and promoted as one of “human flourishing” that can inspire what the school is and does. It is a special strength that this vision aims for educational excellence in a broad framework within which pupils and teachers can pursue the big questions of meaning such as ‘Who am I?’, ‘Why am I here?’, ‘What do I desire?’ and ‘How then shall I live?’

With its over-riding commitment of service to the common good, the Church of England’s role in education is both deeply Christian in its inspiration and healthily plural in its operation, as befits this country’s increasingly diverse religious and ethnic profile. This is summed up in the subtitle of the Vision Statement: “Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good”.

We currently have a complex educational system that has developed over a long period. It has been shaped by the interaction of many stakeholders in response to diverse visions and pressures, and through extensive negotiations. It is like a rich ecosystem that has to be understood in its complexity, as its long-term and newer elements interact with each other. Often current policies and pressures force us to focus on shorter term priorities, but it is important to take account of long-term perspectives which may only become clear over decades. The Church of England is embedded in this system, which is plural in several respects, not least religiously. We are committed to sustaining the health of the system and supporting wise improvement and innovation. Healthy religious plurality recognizes deep differences in religion, belief and worldview, understands the history that has led to the present situation, and creates settings where there can be ongoing negotiation in which the diversity of voices is taken seriously.

The Church of England Vision for Education reaches beyond Church of England schools; it is concerned with *all* young people, from primary schools to universities. It encapsulates the understanding that a good education should promote life in all its fullness, and that no educational establishment should feel it has to make a choice between academic rigour and the wellbeing of its students. The Vision Statement is not the final word on the Church’s vision for Education, it is rather both the beginning of an act of reflection and the commitment to a long term vision, and to both of these you are invited to contribute.

Our Christian Inspiration

Educating for Life in All its Fullness: Wisdom; Hope; Community; Dignity

The Church of England approach to education which follows is one rooted in Christian understanding and in the experiences of schools around the country. It is based on a core desire for “life in all its fullness” (John chp 10 vs 10) and “educating the whole person” (as demonstrated in ERA² and succeeding Education Acts) and is enabled by excellent education³. This framework is one in which the daily business of schools – learning, teaching, leading, governing, guiding, encouraging, counselling, feeding, exercising, celebrating and inspiring -can go on. It is also a vision which can stretch and challenge everyone.

There are four basic elements which run through this approach, **wisdom, hope, community and dignity**: together they form an ‘ecology’ of the fullness of life, each in interplay with all the others.



In John’s Gospel the miracle stories (healing, feeding, raising the dead) are all seen as “signs” – signs of abundant life. The story of the water turned into wine at Cana, especially, is a quiet miracle but one which brought abundance for the common good (in this case the unknowing hosts and guests). In the same way Church schools are places of fullness of life for all, but, like the wedding guests, many will celebrate this but not recognize where this abundance flows from.

Educating for Wisdom, Knowledge and Skills

Wisdom seeking is one of the great themes of the Bible and several books are described as “Wisdom Literature” (e.g. Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes). Even the child Jesus himself, like all children, is described as “growing in wisdom” (Luke chp 2 vs 52). The wisdom of the Bible is not simply religious, it is about all aspects of life and culture including economic, political, relational and environmental. The ultimate source of all wisdom is God.

A passion for the pursuit of true wisdom clearly relates to the four themes of the Vision Statement and life in schools:

- God has shaped the world and ourselves to pursue wisdom, knowledge and skills



Good schools foster confidence, delight and discipline in seeking wisdom, knowledge, truth, understanding, know-how, and the skills needed to shape life well. They nurture academic habits and skills, emotional intelligence and creativity across the whole range of school subjects, including areas such as music, drama and the arts, information and other technologies, sustainable development, sport, and what one needs to understand and practise in order to be a good person, citizen, parent, employee, team or group member, or leader.

² Here physical and intellectual development is united with spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

³ “Excellence” is here understood to mean an education with as broad a horizon as is possible

- Wisdom brings possibilities of reconciliation and transformation to difficult situations – it brings hope
- God is a God of relationship as well as wisdom, compassion and peace. Created in His image, we recognize the worth of fellow human beings and of the community and the world. This shows itself in relational practices such as service, worship and prayer, as well as in our relationships with the human and natural world
- Each person is respected as a being created in the image of God and is an object of God's love and compassion.

The wisdom literature found in the Bible can also help to model tested forms of learning:

- The Book of Job, in which Job wrestles with God in the face of terrible suffering and argues with "friends" who give him trite and neat answers to his questions, emphasizes the importance of radical questioning and imaginative and daring exploration rather than unquestioning acceptance.
- The wisdom traditions demonstrate how to stay true to our roots while, at the same time, being hospitably open to experience, new events, new knowledge and to other people. The challenge of combining continuity with innovation in a valid and valuable way is one the Church of England has continually had to face, and one where the Church and its schools can offer a hospitable space for debate. That, in turn, could enable the quality of our disagreements to be improved so that it leads, not to bitter conflict, alienation or even violence, but to deeper mutual understanding and to peaceful, negotiated settlements that can live with ongoing disagreement.
- Jesus himself spent a great deal of time during his ministry in teaching and conversations, and formed a community of learners / disciples around him. His teaching was vivid, imaginative and challenging and offered to all, not just the elite. Empowered by the Holy Spirit⁴, these disciples themselves initiated communities of teaching and learning of which we are the heirs. This sets a goal for an education which looks to him as the Word and self-expression of God and the source of truth and wisdom in all reality.
- The wisdom tradition in Job, Proverbs, and the teaching of Jesus himself all see the natural world as a place of wonder, exploration, reflection and self-discovery. In an age of multiple ecological challenges and where there is an increasing disconnection between many people and first-hand experiences of nature, this is more important than ever.

The word "wisdom" is not much used in contemporary educational debate, but it is used here to denote not just a deeply rooted Christian concept⁵ but also a deep, broad and long term context which can include within it all other key educational concepts and practices such as knowledge, information, skills, excellence, academic rigour, critical thinking, measurement and assessment, appraisal, outcomes, ethos, values, and religious or other forms of literacy⁶. Wisdom is about ethics as well as cognition, about values and purposes as well as facts. Christianity has been engaged in wisdom seeking for two millennia and across many different academic, social and global contexts – it is this wisdom we wish to nourish in education in our schools.

⁴ See John chp 16 vs 13, chp 20 vs 21f, Colossians chp 1 vs 15-20, Ephesians chp 1 vs 8-10

⁵ "Wisdom" is also a concept which will be recognised by other religious and non-religious traditions represented in our schools.

⁶ A major concern is to promote the literacy required for reading well, i.e. for depth and meaning.

Educating for Hope and Aspiration

Hope in God's future for the world, in God's ongoing love and compassion for all people, and for the whole of creation, and in God's promise of life in all its fullness are at the root of our dedication to educating for hope and aspiration.

Our belief in the worth of each student impels us to work with them to fulfil their God-given potential, whatever the religious or other tradition with which they or their family identify. It also gives special consideration to those who are disadvantaged. Each student is encouraged to stretch themselves spiritually, morally, intellectually, imaginatively and actively, and to aspire to be well-educated. This is done in the context of families, groups, communities, institutions, nations, and the whole of creation, because no individual's personal fulfilment can be separated from that of other people.

The story of Jesus' life, teaching, death and resurrection, and the understanding of God's involvement with creation and history, helps us to see ourselves realistically as flawed and fallible beings, but also gives us the confidence that transformation for the better is possible. In turn, this means that even while immersed in difficulty, disappointment, failure, suffering, and even tragedy, our trust and hope in Jesus inspires perseverance, patience, gratitude, openness to surprises, and celebration.

Church schools are places where we can set out this vision of living life in all its fullness. We want pupils to leave school with a rich experience and understanding of Christianity, and we are committed to offering them an encounter with Jesus Christ and with Christian faith and practice in a way which enhances their lives. To this end we have been developing a fresh approach to religious education in Christianity, a resource called *Understanding Christianity*⁷, which is designed for use in any school and to be used with integrity by those of any faith and none.

The Church of England teaches its understanding of God through its rich worship tradition. The pattern of the Church's year, beginning with Advent, tells the story of Jesus and the gospel message in an annual cycle. Collective worship in schools, including prayer, reading and reflecting on the Bible, liturgy, sacrament and experience of the musical and other imaginative riches of Christianity,



In the drama of ongoing life, how we learn to approach the future is crucial. Good schools open up horizons of hope and aspiration, and guide pupils into ways of fulfilling them. They also cope wisely with things and people going wrong. Bad experiences and behaviour, wrongdoing and evil need not have the last word. There are resources for healing, repair and renewal; repentance, forgiveness, truth and reconciliation are possible; and meaning, trust, generosity, compassion and hope are more fundamental than meaninglessness, suspicion, selfishness, hardheartedness and despair.

⁷ CPD on "Understanding Christianity" will be available throughout 2016-2018 in Ely Diocese.

provide a vital opportunity for encountering Christian teaching through worship. There is a strong educational case for worship being part of school life because it promotes religious and theological literacy and helps people understand all those traditions in which worship is an important part. It also encourages deep thinking on themes such as justice, mercy and hope.

Hope in God's future, coupled with natural aspirations for students or schools, can also stimulate critical and constructive dialogue about society and education.

Educating for Community and Living Well Together

The conviction that we are created and sustained by God for living together in families and communities is at the root of our dedication to educating for life together.

Jesus embodied the importance of relationships in love, compassion, generosity, truth-telling, forgiveness, and gathering together as a community. The community he created was bound together with a commitment to love God and our neighbour (interpreted in the widest sense)⁸. The central role good relationships play within education is inspired by the example of Jesus, thus every school should be a hospitable community where all, staff and students alike, can flourish.

Schools are highly different in inspiration and practice, and such diversity is a strength and to be encouraged, but we also aim to support networks of schools which face similar concerns and challenges through training, website resources and research.⁹

Beyond the individual school, or group of schools, the Church of England is committed across the whole country:

- It is a national, regional and local presence in parishes, dioceses and central bodies, with a network of congregations and other organisations
- It is committed to chaplaincy, with thousands of workers, both paid and volunteer, involved in schools, colleges of further education, universities, hospitals, workplaces, prisons, the armed forces, airports, and other settings



We are only persons with each other: our humanity is 'co-humanity', inextricably involved with others, utterly relational, both in our humanity and our shared life on a finite planet. If those others are of ultimate worth then we are each called to responsibility towards them and to contribute responsibly to our communities. The good life is 'with and for others in just institutions' (see Paul Ricoeur). So education needs to have a core focus on relationships and commitments, participation in communities and institutions, and the qualities of character that enable people to flourish together.

⁸ See Deuteronomy chp 6 vs 5, Leviticus chp 19 vs 18, Matthew chp 7vs 12, chp 22 vss 36-40, Luke chp 10 vs 27, Matthew chp 5 vs 45

⁹ E.g. see "The Fruit of the Spirit: A Church of England Discussion Paper on Character Education" (2015)

- It is committed to educational institutions

All of these three areas interact and work together, and all are concerned with the quality of life in this country. A crucial task is for the Church to realize the potential of connecting its national network of church communities and organisations more fully with their local schools, and also to initiate a new level of collaboration with others, which is even more vital with the blurring of boundaries between education which is based in schools, in colleges and in universities. The Church of England also works in close partnership with the Methodist Church (especially through joint schools and the SIAMS Inspection Framework¹⁰) and collaborates with the Roman Catholic Church, including through joint schools.

The Church of England wants a healthy plurality of providers, who converse and collaborate as much as possible together, and are able to respond critically and constructively to governmental initiatives and other challenges, negotiating settlements in the light of the vision for education we are describing here.

Educating for Dignity and Respect

Our commitment to the dignity and ultimate worth of each person, is rooted in each being created in the image of God and loved by God, and is further shaped by the person, teaching and example of Jesus.

Jesus embodies the love and compassion of God for each person, and Christians are called to follow him in this, and to join with others in demonstrating it. He paid special attention to the disadvantaged, excluded, despised and feared. The ultimate worth of each person is shown in the Gospels through his teaching, healing, feeding, sharing hospitality, befriending, and forgiving. It is a relationship which crosses barriers of differences of religion, race, nationality, gender, and economic or social status. Issues which are especially relevant to dignity in education include safeguarding, prevention of bullying, special educational needs and disabilities. Ensuring our children



Human dignity, the ultimate worth of each person, is central to good education. The basic principle of respect for the value of each person involves continual discernment, deliberation and action, and schools are one of the main places where this happens, and where the understanding and practices it requires are learned. This includes vigilant safeguarding. It is especially important that the equal worth of those with and without special educational needs and disabilities is recognized in practice. For the first time in history, there is now something approaching global agreement on the worth of each person through the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and its successor declarations, covenants and conventions, including that in 2006 on the rights of persons with disabilities. How that is worked out in each nation and each school is a massive task that calls on the inspiration and resources offered by each tradition of faith and belief.

¹⁰ Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools

are kept safely from harm and educated in an environment where all God's children are valued is of the highest priority and highlighted in our work on the prevention of homophobic bullying.¹¹ Special educational needs and disabilities are often associated with shame, humiliation and lack of self-worth. We see it as vital for the health of our whole educational system that we do well with regard to both issues, and we will search out and spread good practice.

Live in all its Fullness

Our Christian concept of the human person is not limited to wisdom, hope, dignity and community; to live "life in all its fullness" includes many other elements, such as the ones below:

Blessing. God blesses human beings and creation, and in this context our vision is of God-given fullness of life in which each person is both blessed and a blessing. Education can be one of the greatest blessings in anyone's life, and our commitment is to help this be the case for as many as possible.

Creativity. If human beings are made in the image of the Creator God, then they too can be creative. In education, this is partly about the importance of art, design, music, drama, dance, poetry, fiction, and film; it is also about discovery and innovation in the sciences and technology, constructive as well as critical thinking in the humanities, entrepreneurship in business, leadership in all spheres, and inspiration, imagination and improvisation in ethics and religion.

Joy. Joy in learning is a mark of the good teacher and the well-taught pupil. The Book of Proverbs (chp 8 vs 30-31) poetically imagines wisdom playing before God at creation. This shows play and playfulness are part of a full life, and any education that does not communicate joy, wonder, amazement, fascination and delight has failed.

Reconciling. It is usually not too difficult to honour the dignity of those who seem to be 'one of us', similar to ourselves, or 'normal' by our own measure. The challenge is how we treat those who seem alien, abnormal, even disturbingly or dangerously different. How schools deal with such difference is a crucial indicator of their quality. On many issues there can be no decisive resolution, and a wisdom of living with long-term disagreement is often needed. The Church of England is continually negotiating divisive issues, and has much experience of trying to find settlements that give priority to human flourishing while honouring the demands of conscience. Schools need to debate and deliberate on sensitive matters, but they also need resourcing, and we will host conversations and debates, offer guidance, and conduct relevant research on these. We will seek a Christian wisdom that, as discussed above, is open to the wisdom of other traditions, and recognizes that there is often need for rethinking, changing positions, and repentance.

Glory. God's glory is something in which we can all share, for we too can be transformed 'from glory to glory'¹². We respond to the glory of God with awe, adoration, praise and thanks and by honouring and respecting all those created in the image of God. The supreme form of human dignity is found in the intensity of eternal life in communion with God, enjoyed with others in the loving, infinitely creative and attractive presence of the God of glory.

¹¹ Valuing All God's Children (2014).

¹² 2 Corinthians chp 3 vs 18.

Conclusion

We have presented an educational vision that is both deeply Christian and in the service of the common good; it is also a service which can be resourced from the depths of other traditions. The vision has at its heart education for fullness of life and is consistent with the Bible and with the best traditions of the Church of England. We have given a theological and educational account of the four basic elements in a long term educational ecology: **wisdom, hope, community and dignity**.

Versions of our vision will be shared with a variety of audiences including teachers and head teachers, educational leaders in dioceses, parents, governors, other churches and religions, the Government, sponsors of academies, and the media, but these four basic elements will underpin them all.

Finally, we are clear on three related matters:

The first is that parents who send their child to a school formed around this vision will not be disappointed as they discover an education that embraces excellence and academic rigour within the wider framework of spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, moral and social development and enables their children to flourish. We want pupils to leave school with a rich experience and understanding of Christianity, and we are committed to offering them an encounter with Jesus Christ and with Christian faith and practice in a way which enhances their lives.

The second is that there is a unique opportunity for the Church of England to renew and enhance its contribution to the education of our nation's children, especially through the expansion of Church of England Free Schools, an opportunity which should be seized wholeheartedly. Standing still is not an option: we will either seize the opportunity or our contribution to State education will decline.

The third is that there is recognition of a pressing need to develop leadership within schools and provide centres of excellence in promoting leadership models that work in the new landscape. Our new Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership will be underpinned by this vision and provide the networks, training and research required to equip leaders to continue to play a vital role in education for this new phase of the Church of England's involvement in education.

We invite you to share the vision, making education that is deeply Christian, serving the common good, a priority now and in the years to come.