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09 September 2022

### ***Anglican Church Schools as Sites of Mission***

*– a pastoral letter to Heads of Schools; School Chaplains; Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging portfolio leads & Diocesan Bishops*

The report of the Archbishop’s Provincial Task Team on Discrimination in Anglican Church Schools<sup>1</sup> has affirmed that our schools are not only reflections of societal challenges, but sites from which the mission of God flows into society. This mission is captured in a framework entitled the ‘Five Marks of Mission’ “which express the Anglican Communion’s common commitment to and understanding of, God’s holistic and integral mission.”<sup>2</sup> The ‘five marks of mission’ are, to:

- TRANSFORM – overcoming unjust structures
- TEND – responding to human need in loving service
- TEACH – nurturing faith
- TREASURE – safeguarding the integrity of God’s creation
- TELL – proclaiming the good news of the ‘kin-dom’

It is this ‘holistic and integral mission’ which inspires all Anglican Church schools to respond meaningfully to both behavioural instances, and the systemic nature, of discrimination and injustice. These responses will understandably be met with constructive critique as well as misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

Like you, ABESA is alert to the Twitter handle #SchoolCapture used by Richard Wilkinson, Ian Macleod and more recently by Chris Waldburger. Whilst their written material should not remain unexamined, the video interview<sup>3</sup> of 9<sup>th</sup> May 2022, between Macleod and Wilkinson, makes for an important starting point of discernment.

In their video, Macleod and Wilkinson state that elite schools in South Africa have been captured by a ‘woke agenda’. In their minds, ‘woke’ means radical identity politics, which they ‘characterise’ as the decolonisation of curriculum, the promotion of diversity and transformation, and critical engagement with the topics of race, gender, and privilege.

They believe that this agenda is imported from the United States by activists who want to destroy our institutions, and that it is being pushed by a small group of consultants who are

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<sup>1</sup> This report has been submitted to the Archbishop and is to be tabled at Provincial Standing Committee on 28<sup>th</sup> September 2022. Diocesan Bishops will be asked to commend and distribute the report to schools.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOAa1yVDans&t=374s>



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in it for the money. They move from warning of “outbreaks” of queerness, to belittling people for being victims, to making jokes about colonial dispossession of land. Essentially, they seem to be arguing for everything to stay the same with no acknowledgement of how the current situation is potentially broken and unjust. In seeking to instil the fear of a conspiratorial plan to undermine schools the argument advanced is, to my mind, a deeply prejudiced and disrespectful disregard for the careful and sensitive work schools have done in response to complex societal issues.

Their conclusion is that the problem with this so-called ‘woke agenda’ is that it misses the point and secret of life – that being the production of material goods for profit. Unqualified praise for classical liberalism, capitalism, and the free market belies their nod to the hope of redemption within the Christian faith tradition, not to mention the attendant ethical considerations for how we show up in the world.

There is little to be gained though from being drawn into a shallow and inflammatory argument. A more helpful response to these provocations is to state clearly who we are, what we are trying to do and why, and ultimately, what we believe in.

As the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA) and ABESA, we affirm that our schools are at their heart Christian, and as such are committed to the difficult and multifaceted journey towards the healing and wholeness of our society. We pray daily “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6: 10). We are clear about what we stand for. We do not believe in materialism and that the point of life is to make money with no regard for ethics. We do not believe in belittling victims or making fun of people’s desire to feel like they belong. We do not believe in hyper-individualism. We believe that we are together the ‘body of Christ’, sharing in its joy and in its pain (ref 1Cor 12 & Rom 12). We believe in the Christian ethics of love (ref. 1Cor 13) and of empathy (ref. Gal 6:2), and that our schools should embody these even when it is difficult. We believe that our schools are seeking to be better places – places of care, respect, and belonging.

Our Anglican Church schools and the people in them are also hurting in various ways, to different degrees and for multiple reasons. We live in a society with a traumatic past and present. Our society is full of racialised, gendered, and classed violence, prejudice, inequality, and discrimination. Our schools are not independent of these issues, or immune to their consequences. Our schools are places in which these broader societal issues are reflected and replicated to varying degrees. To deny or avoid this shows a complete lack of empathy, a capacity to understand and share in others’ experiences, as well as the discernment of intelligent and compassionate responses. The #SchoolCapture discourse fails to offer any legitimacy to the substantive nature of these complex societal matters, adopting rather a supposed moral high ground from which to discredit all forms of engagement and response on the part of our schools. There is no easy fix to these issues.



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Indeed, it takes a keen sense of justice, kindness and humility (ref Micah 6:8) – as well as some bravery and courage - to acknowledge pain and choose pathways of healing, instead of denial.

To take no action – based on whatever argument – is a denial of justice and withholds the possibility of healing. The healing process is not going to be comfortable or simple. It will be complicated and unsettling, as all growth must be. This process includes articulating and embodying our Anglican Christian identity, and reviewing the curriculum to better reflect our culture and changing understanding of history. It includes actively promoting diversity amongst staff and student bodies. It includes critical engagement with the topics of race, genders, and privilege, which will also require holding accountable people who act with prejudice and a lack of kindness.

To give Macleod and Wilkinson credit where due, there is a risk that some people may exploit this process for personal gain, to make false accusations, to punish the innocent, and to overstep the appropriate line of how children could be helped to understand and respond to certain issues. The fear of these challenges should not discourage us. These are challenges that must be faced with integrity, and which will sharpen our discernment towards just, kind and humble responses.

Please be assured of my prayers and my ongoing availability to journey together with you in this process of discernment and response. I know that other members of the ABESA Board, together with Diocesan based colleagues around the Province, are equally concerned and available, and any of us could ‘be there for you’ when needed.

I leave you with a prayer, based on John 1:14 and Hebrews 13: 13-14, which may help us articulate some important elements of the journey we undertake together:

*O God,  
who am I now?  
Once, I was secure  
    in familiar territory  
    in my sense of belonging  
unquestioning of  
    the norms of my culture  
    the assumptions built into my language  
    the values shared by my society.*

*But now you have called me out and away from home  
and I do not know where you are leading.*



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*I am empty, unsure, uncomfortable.  
I have only a beckoning star to follow.*

*Journeying God,  
pitch your tent with mine  
so that I may not become deterred  
by hardship, strangeness, doubt.  
Show me the movement I must make  
toward a wealth not dependent on possessions  
toward a wisdom not based on books  
toward a strength not bolstered by might  
toward a God not confined to heaven  
but scandalously earthed, poor, unrecognized...*

*Help me find myself  
as I walk in others' shoes.*

*Kate Compston (1990)*

May God bless you

*Jaques*



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