



A TESTIMONY OF CHRISTIANITY AND EDUCATION

Across Europe Christians and the Christian Church are very involved with education, though it can look different depending on where you are. Some countries provide financial resources for Christian or Church schools, some don't. Some allow private schools with a Christian character, some do not. Christians are involved with teaching in every country but the freedom that they enjoy to allow their faith to inform their vocation varies.

This brief document tries to explain some of the reasons for our desire to be involved in education.

CHRISTIANS CARE ABOUT IDENTITY

Christians have had an interest in education for as long as we have been around. Ever since Christianity first came to Europe in the 1st century we have tried to build strength into communities so that they can be healthy and flourishing.

To build healthy communities it is important for people to have a story that gives a sense of identity, history and purpose. Whether or not the Christian Church figures strongly in any of these stories we still believe that people should have them, preserve them and have the freedom to pass them on through the generations so they can live out those stories in harmony with everyone else trying to do the same thing.

Education is fundamental to this being possible and that is why the Christian Church cares about it so much.

CHRISTIANS CARE ABOUT PEOPLE

Christians also care deeply about individual people. This does not make Christians unique of course, lots of groups care about people. Why wouldn't they? People are wonderful, individual, fascinating, creative, curious, innovative, loving and precious. What motivates our care is that we believe people are really important to God and because He is important to us it gives people the highest priority.

Caring for people through education can look different depending on your perspective and values but in basic terms Christians believe that it should look like good quality, safe, accessible, joyful and loving education that explores and develops knowledge and skills for the sake of building healthy people and healthy communities.

In our view education must be fully inclusive. The Christian message has no room for excluding people from education on any basis. Our belief is that Jesus brought a radical message of inclusion that requires everyone to have access to an environment of sound, holistic education.

Christians care about relationships as well. It is our belief that schools should be communities which emphasise that pupils are not just individuals growing up into an individualistic society. We value people so highly that we want to teach our pupils how to develop and maintain healthy relationships, both face to face as well as through social media and other channels, so that they and others can thrive.

CHRISTIANS CARE ABOUT THE FUTURE

Education's purpose is nurturing and strengthening the next generation. We believe firstly that we have a vital contribution to make in this process and secondly that in our democratic societies we should also have the freedom to do this.

We do not claim perfection or a greater right of involvement than anyone else, we are well aware of our weaknesses and imperfections both historical and current but we do believe that on balance Christians have brought many more good things into society than bad. We believe that countless actions throughout European history, known and unknown, done by individuals motivated by God's love demonstrate that our perspective is valid and beneficial.

Nobody can be certain of what the future will look like for those currently in schools so we are concerned to present an education which gives equal emphasis across the curriculum so that the gifts and skills of every individual can be developed to the fullest of their God-given potential. We want to see every area of society, human endeavour and our environment enhanced in a way that benefits individuals, families, communities and nations.

CHRISTIANS CARE ABOUT FREEDOM

In our European culture that values the freedom for people to live, act and speak from their deep convictions we have to learn to express our disagreements in a way that doesn't restrict other people's freedom to do the same.

For the most part Europeans are not too bad at this but it stops working well when people with different outlooks stop extending hospitality and respect to each other. When this happens fear, suspicion and hatred can develop. Nobody wants this and so an education system that does not promote hospitality and respect must have a problem somewhere.

Sometimes the way that people express their deep beliefs can be a part of this problem.

Christians face this accusation at times but it is interesting to note the results from where this has been studied in depth over long periods of time. What seems to be true is that schools and teachers rooted in the Christian faith have a good track record of developing people with the ability to handle differences and disagreements well in comparison with those that claim to have a neutral or no faith position.

CHRISTIANS CARE ABOUT HONESTY

Despite evidence to the contrary the last claim sometimes makes people think that Christians in education are involved with indoctrination in a negative way, so it is an important one to think about, especially if you are a parent. Some schools and educators claim that they are completely neutral and do not bias their pupils at all in the way they relate to other people's values and beliefs; but this seems unlikely. If education is concerned with helping people discover the answers to questions such as 'Who am I?', 'How did I get here?', 'How do I relate to all these other people?', 'What do I do with my life?' and so on, then everyone gives an answer from their own point of view.

Christians believe that it is impossible to have a completely neutral point of view because everyone has experiences that shape them and those experiences make a big difference to the way that teachers in schools teach and lead their pupils to discovering the answers to important questions.

In education it is much better to be honest about what shapes our perspective. Christians wish to do this, not in a way that restricts choice but in a way that enhances and develops it and we think that this is good for people, communities, nations and our World.

CHRISTIANS CARE ABOUT GENERATIONS

Most people would agree that it is complicated and sometimes confusing to be young today. The information revolution has really changed the world we live in. Often we are asking the younger generation to navigate their own way through this new landscape when they really need some help. We must be careful that children and young people are not brought up in such a value-neutral way that they are left to find their own path with insufficient guidance from those who care about them most. Schools must be safe spaces where children are free to be just that, children and where young people can grow without the distorting influence of false expectations.

Despite this, in certain matters we are seeing new values laid upon our societies without good guidance or understanding. Many of us as Christian educators are really concerned about this development and our observation is that as a result of the manner in which young people are introduced to such things they can become confused about their identity, purpose and value in life. All kinds of problems can result from asking children and young people to make important decisions before they are fully equipped to do so. These can manifest as increased insecurity, overly self-centredness, mental ill-health and performance anxiety and Christians in education too often observe these things in our pupils leading to a sense of resignation, hopelessness and unhappiness.

CHRISTIAN EDUCATORS CARE ABOUT OTHER EDUCATORS

Christian educators are also concerned to be able to encourage all other educators to use freely in their own spheres of education the principles that have been developed and tested in Christian education. In the same way we wish to remain open to all good influences that we can find in other philosophies of teaching. If something is of excellent educational value then everyone should benefit from it. The responsibility to educate coming generations is not a competition between educators of different beliefs.

CONCLUSION

So what are Christians trying to achieve in education in Europe? We would love to see all schools and teachers help students explore and develop excellent knowledge and skills. In addition we want to see pupils enabled to develop as people that build strength and health into families and communities. This is education that promotes care, respect, enquiry, justice, well-being, diversity, inclusion, sustainability, freedom, health in relationships and unconditional love all according to our understanding of God's loving and wise purpose for humanity that we find in the Bible and through our relationship with Him. These things are not easily measurable and so sometimes are not prioritised but we all notice when they are in short supply. It is for this reason the Christian Church has sought to promote good education. Times and circumstances will change but people will always be people and because we consider that God has made us all so beautifully it is really important for us to do the best job we can for each generation. The Christian Church will continue to care about education not because we have to but because we choose to.

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On behalf of the participants of the Brussels Consideration,

All Christian schools in Europe,

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