

# EDITORIAL

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**What does it mean to be a Christian teacher in the modern world?<sup>1</sup> This question remains as relevant for today's educators, as when first framed six decades ago by famous theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer.**

Teachers are significant people in their students' lives; as in the case of Helen Keller's teacher, Anne Sullivan. Similarly, David Williamson's teacher had a far-reaching influence on his life. The celebrated Australian playwright recalls:

The first seminal moment I can remember was way back in infants' school, when I wrote my first essay and was praised for it by my teacher, Mrs Nettie ... The story was a very simple affair, just a couple of sentences about a seagull... Eventually, the seagull in my original story reappeared in one of my plays, *The Club*.<sup>2</sup>

In a private meeting with Jesus, Nicodemus paid him one of the finest tributes, when he called Jesus, 'Rabbi ... a teacher who has come from God'.<sup>3</sup> The essence of what makes Christian teachers different is expressed here. The 'ground of their being' is in God. They have a vision of hope, manifested in the grace and power of the Gospel that transforms contemporary lifestyles and enriches personal and community relationships. Jesus challenges them to be the 'salt of education'; not to live *off* education but *for* it. Teachers who have this passion will walk the talk, narrowing "the gap between 'what [they] believe in' and 'how [they] live...'<sup>4</sup>. Vaclav Havel, poet and former president of the Czech Republic referred to this kind of authenticity as, 'living in truth rather than living a lie'.<sup>5</sup> For him, changing and transforming the social order begins with the moral revival of the individual.

Christian teachers can have a part in this transformation, in their privileged position of mentoring. In settings and circumstances that permit<sup>6</sup>, they can open windows of opportunity for their students to catch a glimpse of God's purposes; aware that students are most open to the Gospel when it touches them at points of relevance or need in their lives, which then become 'lightning rods' for the Holy Spirit.

At every level, ranging from early childhood education to university, teachers are constantly exhorted in education literature to be 'professionals'. A distinguishing mark of Christian teachers is that they perceive teaching as more than a profession; they see it as a vocation, a calling, a servant-hood ministry.

Accepting the notion of ministry does not imply a devaluation of the contribution that knowledge, skills, expertise, ethical practice etc. make to the quality of professional work. Indeed, these have their proper place. Moreover, *ministry* acknowledges the importance of the motives, attitudes, and values system that individuals bring to their work. However, status, lucrative remuneration and especially power—characteristics that seem integral to the culture of professions, stand in stark contrast to the kingdom values of the New Testament. There is the ever-present temptation for Christian teachers to borrow uncritically from, and conform to the idealisation of successful and financially profitable models of a profession.

A ministry paradigm of teaching is significantly different from a secular professional paradigm. This inaugural issue of *TEACH* highlights teaching as *ministry* and presents the writers' distinct perspectives. It is my sincere hope and prayer that forthcoming issues of the journal (published online at [www.ministryofteaching.edu.au](http://www.ministryofteaching.edu.au)) will explore a wide range of relevant topics and issues in response to the probing question posed by Bonhoeffer. **TEACH**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For the question, in its generic form, see Bonhoeffer, D. (1948). *The cost of discipleship*. Translated by R.Fuller. London: SCM Press, p.49.

<sup>2</sup> Donaghy, B. (1995). Turning Points. *Good Weekend; Sydney Morning Herald*, November 4, p.42.

<sup>3</sup> John 3:2, NIV.

<sup>4</sup> Hugh Mackay quoted by Richard Eckersley, in Don't panic—it's only the apocalypse. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2007, July 21-22, pp.28-29.

<sup>5</sup> Havel, V. (1986). The power of the powerless, in *Living truth*. London: Faber & Faber.

<sup>6</sup> Christian teachers in secular schools or institutions, as described by David Stafford in his article, face a challenge quite different to those in Christian schools.



“**Christian teachers have a vision of hope that transforms contemporary lifestyles and enriches relationships**”

[Photography: Janet Rieger]