



Education is at the heart of the work the Church of England does for the common good. Through its 4,500 primary and 200 secondary schools, it educates around one million children a day. It is estimated that around 15 million people alive today attended a Church of England school.

The fundamental purpose of Church of England education is to nurture people to live life in all its fullness, inspired by Jesus's message in the Gospel of John: "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it abundantly." Non-church schools also have inspiring visions, albeit articulated in different language; to inspire and educate the whole person, building them up to flourish in the world.

As teachers across the country well know, the education of children, in church and non-church schools, is taking place against a backdrop of deep uncertainty and rapid change.

This is a time for hope in the midst of uncertainty, of a hopeful expectation that education in a Church of England setting will contribute to a society founded in hope. The challenges are certainly severe, but they can be overcome.

The country faces a period of profound challenge and even uncertainty following the decision to leave the European Union. It is too early to say what its implications are for education policy specifically, but it is clear that the referendum exposed deep divisions in society. Early analysis of the vote – for example by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation – suggests that a significant number of people who voted Leave felt they had not benefited from the political and economic system they were told to place their trust in; many felt like losers in an unfettered market economy.

The wider global economic picture, particularly in the West, is equally uncertain. Some economists predict that economies may grow very slowly indeed over the next 25 to 40 years, and that inequality could widen considerably, both as a result of demographics and technology. In the UK, meanwhile, significant demographic shifts are forecast, having a huge impact on how the state supports the elderly population and what responsibility the next generation need to take on.

The mental health of children and young people is also a cause for deep concern, as teachers and parents know only too well. The most recent statistics suggest that 1 in 10 of 5-16-year-olds suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder (around 3 children in every class), and 80,000 children and young people suffer from severe depression. Schools have a crucial role to play in providing support.

Religiously-motivated violence and extremism are also presenting a challenge to society in a way not seen for a couple of hundred years. In such difficult circumstances, religious literacy is key: understanding the motivations and ideas of those who commit violence is essential, even if we, rightly, condemn it. This need to understand religion is a new experience for many, not least for politicians and educators.

In the midst of these economic, social and political challenges, Church of England schools aim to provide an education that is deeply and authentically Christian, but also inclusive and embracing of diversity.

This approach is articulated forcefully in a new document published by the Church of England's Education Office, *Church of England Vision for Education: Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good*. It is one of the things I will be speaking about when I address the Anglican Academy and Secondary School Heads Conference in Coventry today.

There are four basic elements that run through the Church's approach to education, at the heart of which is enabling pupils to live life in all its fullness. These core principles also address some of the challenges outlined above.

First, church schools aim to provide those they educate with the wisdom, knowledge and skills they need to navigate a complex, often daunting, world. This includes equipping them with academic capabilities, creativity and emotional intelligence – never more important than in a time of economic uncertainty.

Second, our schools educate for hope and aspiration – paramount in working with young people and children with mental health issues. This involves teaching in a way that assures that “bad experiences and behaviour, wrongdoing and evil need not have the last word” and offering “resources for healing, repair and renewal”.

Third, Church of England schools each intend to provide “a hospitable community that seeks to embody an ethos of living well together”. Church schools must be places of welcome for all, not cosy clubs for Anglicans. They must challenge all forms of sectarianism, faithfully and confidently.

The fourth and final element of the Church's vision for education is educating in such a way that cherishes the dignity and respect of each person. This is rooted in the Christian theological insight that every one of us is made in the image of God, but it also “encourages others to contribute from the depths of their own traditions and understandings”, as the Vision states. It was this commitment that led the Church to publish guidance on tackling homophobic bullying in schools.

Confident in our vision for education, the Church of England has ambitious plans to expand its provision of schools, particularly secondary ones.

The Prime Minister spoke this month in support of more free schools opening, particularly in areas of social and economic deprivation. It is an opportunity the Church plans to seize, and we are drawing up ambitious plans to open many more free schools.

The Church is also more committed than ever to training up creative and innovative school leaders. The Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership was set up recently to provide networks, programmes and research for leaders in education. The Foundation is an example of visionary leadership from the Church of England in education policy, and I'm delighted that its work will be accessible to all leaders in education, whether they are working in Church of England schools, community schools or at a system level.

Church schools may be viewed with suspicion in some quarters. It is my passionate belief that they are a gift to our society – serving the common good and equipping every person to flourish in a challenging, uncertain world.

<https://www.tes.com/>

5 min read

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-and-writing/latest-news/news-archive-2016/archbishop-church-england-schools-can-help-shape>