

Education: the issues, the pressures, the options

Whilst home schooling or a Christadelphian school might be an option for a minority, across the Brotherhood at large most of our children find themselves in conventional schools. They will spend a huge amount of their formative years within the educational system, and they will be strongly influenced; by the system itself, by their teachers, and by their peers. In this article, Michael Owen (Seaton, UK), an erstwhile headteacher and now a school inspector, guides us through the key issues and points out that the most important education is done in the home.

EDUCATION IS NEWS. Governments are always trying to win support by making out that they are raising standards in education and in this way improving people's life chances. Newspapers love to point to deficiencies in schools. In many societies there is intense pressure on parents to try to ensure that their children do well at school—normally judged in terms of academic success. The more children show themselves to be academically gifted, the more parents have high expectations of what schools should deliver. Christadelphian parents get caught up in this somewhat competitive world too, wanting their children to be successful in examinations and tests.

It is certainly the case that a good education is an asset and can be well used in the service of the Master. We can think of many examples in the Bible of people for whom this was true; Moses, Daniel and Paul come to mind. In all three cases (in Paul's case, after his conversion), each person's prime motivator was service to God. Throughout the Scriptures, there is no compromise on the principle of seeking first the Kingdom of God. Those who do are seen to be faithful people; those who put worldly advantage first are seen to be investing in this life only. The justification for having a good education must be not simply the desire for worldly success but the belief that knowledge, skills and understanding can all be made to serve our growth as servants of the Lord.

Whose responsibility?

The prime responsibility for inculcating a God-fearing attitude in children has to lie with parents. God's commendation of Abraham is instructive: "I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment" (Gen. 18:19). We have a hint of this earlier, when the record refers to Abraham's "trained servants", who went with him to rescue Lot (14:14). "Trained" suggests more than prepared for fighting. They were

educated in Abraham's faith and understood how they should behave on this mission. When the three angels visited Abraham unexpectedly, the expectation that they would be treated as honoured guests was shared by Sarah and "a young man"—a member of his household—who "hasted to dress" the calf "tender and good" that Abraham provided for a meal (18:6-8). Clearly Abraham's household was one where God-fearing attitudes were promoted by instruction and example.

When we consider the life of Joseph, we realise that here was a young man with strong faith in the promises of God, whose priority throughout his experiences was to "seek" his brethren, seeking to educate them and thereby to save them. His faith is epitomised by the instructions he gave on his deathbed to his children, his grandchildren and his great-grandchildren. His bones were to be taken to the Land of Promise, for that was the land at the centre of his hopes (50:23-25; cf. Heb. 11:22). The impact of his faithful example was still being felt when the daughters of Zelophehad, another two generations on, were insistent that they should not lose their inheritance (Num. 27:1-4).

These examples serve to illustrate the principle outlined in the Law of Moses, that the love of God and His commandments must be taught by parents when at home, when out and about, at the start of the day and at its close (Deut. 6:4-9).

Here is emphasised the importance of parents spending time with their children, educating them by word and example in the course of daily activities. Such an expectation is a challenge to Christadelphians in affluent, developed countries, where parents work long hours to maximise their income and are prepared to pay others to look after their children. Worse still, they can afford to equip their children with all the technological hardware to occupy their minds without getting in the way of the parents' own activities. TV, DVD players, computers, digital music players and mobile phones are almost considered essential items these days. All can be put to good use when made servants to Divine values and not worldly masters.

Resisting the world's pressure, releasing the Word's power

The passage in Deuteronomy referred to above goes on to warn against going after the gods of the people round about (v. 14). Peer group pressure is considerable during school years. It's very hard to stand aside from the prevailing fashion and from the icons of our age. But this is a requirement if we are to grow up into our head, the Lord Jesus Christ. "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould", Paul writes, "but let God remould your minds from within" (Rom. 12:2, J. B. Phillips).

If parents invest the time needed to do things with their children rather than leaving them to feed on the diet of the world around them, they will build up a rapport with them. As Deuteronomy makes clear, it is while we are engaged in wholesome and fulfilling activity that we have the opportunity to educate in the things of God: "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6). This is what Timothy's mother and grandmother did so faithfully, so that Paul could write to him, "from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation" (2 Tim. 3:15).

It is a sad fact that many Christadelphian families neglect to set aside time every day to read the Word of God together. The *Bible Companion* provides an excellent basis for this, accepting that small children will need to be catered for in ways which will adapt the principle. 'Doing the readings' provides a really good opportunity for discussion on all manner of topics, since all of life is to be found in the Scriptures. This means that our children's minds are tuned into Divine values

and attitudes, which will provide the strength to cope with peer group pressure. The Scriptures are "able"; the Greek word means 'dynamic'. We cannot release that power without reading them regularly and absorbing the messages they contain.

What we have been emphasising is that the overriding need of the children of God is for the education that the Word of God provides. All other educational provision comes in second place.

Home schooling

How will this affect decisions that we make about schooling? Some parents feel so concerned about the climate of the age and how it is reflected in schools that they choose to educate their children at home. Home schooling is especially popular among Christadelphian parents in North America. It has a lot to be said for it. Committed parents can really concentrate on planning and delivering a programme that will be consistent with our faith.

It takes a special kind of parent to do it, and often the responsibility falls largely on the mother, if the father is out to work. A father in such a situation should recognise the commitment and share it in whatever way he can, providing support, resources, leadership. For example, he can ensure that the family members enjoy good recreational times together, as well as making prayer, the daily readings and attendance at the meetings non-negotiable activities in the family routine.

Children benefit from learning social graces, and the ecclesia provides the best environment to learn about consideration for others, about taking an interest in people of all ages and backgrounds, showing the love that should characterise our life in Christ. This is true for all children, whether home schooled or not, but home-schooled children need to develop social skills by interacting with others outside the family circle. Inviting brethren and sisters and their families to the home is another way of teaching about the importance of hospitality and the skills involved. It should also provide further stimulus for doing the readings together, and for showing how prayer is a natural part of our ecclesial experience.

If we show our love for our brothers and sisters in Christ in sharing time together with them, we can build up our children's sense of belonging to the community. They will see their 'aunties' and 'uncles' in the meeting as a natural extension of

their immediate family. They will develop friendships with others their own age, which will mean a lot more than any friendships with neighbours' children or at school.

The wider ecclesial family

What if there are no other children of similar age in our ecclesia? We have to work even harder to plug into the wider Brotherhood. There are Bible Schools, fraternal gatherings, youth gatherings, camps—a whole range of opportunities to get together with others and to have fun, form friendships and learn in a God-fearing environment. There are correspondence Sunday Schools and other services to help those in isolation. We need to do everything we can to show our children that they are growing up in a lively, caring and healthy community. As they develop the sense of belonging that should characterise all of our lives together, it will help to hold them through the turbulent years of adolescence; and even if they drift away at some point, there is a solid foundation in their life's experience that they may well return to in later times.

You may be wondering why, in an article about education, I am writing so much about the family, home and ecclesial life. The reason is that I believe this is where the most important education takes place. Parents who neglect this and emphasise success at school and in public examinations, parents who provide material and technological benefits for their children but neglect the weightier matters of their spiritual development, are in danger of sacrificing their children to Moloch.

Pre-school education

So, having got our priorities right, we have to make prayerful decisions about the legally required education of our children. We dealt briefly with the option of home schooling. Many children these days attend pre-school nurseries to give them learning experiences that will help their later adjustment in full-time school. It is interesting that in some developed countries the idea of sending children to any kind of school before they are, say, six years old is seen as tantamount to betraying their childhood.

It should be noted that, although much is made of the value of pre-school education, there is little evidence that children who start later do not progress as well. The exception to this would be children from homes where there is inadequate parental care. More often, pre-school provision is

for the benefit of mothers who want some time to themselves or want to get back to paid work. Our decision about whether to send our children to school when they are very young needs to be based on our priorities where the Truth is concerned. Pre-school experience at a play-school or nursery may be a good thing, it may be helpful. But we need to ensure that we are not losing those precious opportunities to guide and stimulate young minds in the ways of God.

Private or state school?

What about full-time schooling, a legal requirement in almost every country in the world today?¹ For those with means, there may be a choice of private fee-paying school or state school, both for primary and for secondary education. In some countries, private schools are much better than government schools, simply because the latter are so under-resourced. In the UK, parents may argue that in private schools children are in smaller classes and get more individual attention, but individual attention is not necessarily lacking in state schools, and most these days are well resourced.

In some countries, the prevailing governance of schools is permissive, and parents may feel anxious about the values being promoted. Or it may be that the culture and moral and social climate of the area the school serves is so hostile to all that we stand for that parents will look for some alternative provision. This has been the thinking behind the Christadelphian schools that started in Australia a few years ago, and are now well established and increasing both in Australia and now in North America. I personally had some reservations about this idea at first, thinking that children are better learning to cope with the reality of the world around them. But, having visited two of them, I was so impressed by the ethos and the happiness of the children—and their achievements—that my doubts were swept aside. The evidence is that those who have benefited from education in Heritage Colleges (as they are termed) have been able to find suitable employment or have moved onto higher education without any problems.

What is not a good idea, it seems to me, is if parents choose to send their child to a private school simply believing that money will buy a

1. Properly managed home school fulfils the legal requirements in many countries.

better education. Many state schools, certainly in the UK, are fine schools in which children achieve well in a climate of positive values. There is no reason for us to be afraid of our children having contact with a range of pupils of all levels of attainment, including those with a range of physical and other special needs. Part of their education is to learn to understand and value people from all backgrounds. If we have done our parenting well at home, our children will be able to stand their ground in the many issues that will arise. They will come to understand why we separate ourselves from the world's values and behaviour.

For example, they may come across swearing and 'playground' language; they will find most people have little respect for the Bible or the characters within it; evolution is normally presented as a 'scientific' explanation of life; the Christian faith is viewed as on an equal footing to all other faiths; various lifestyles, including homosexual relationships and pre-marital sex, are presented as a matter of preference . . . and so on. It can be a pretty scary list. But the reality is that much of the same will also be found in the most expensive private schools in the land. Our children are going to be exposed to such stuff in the media and in the society around them, even if they are home-schooled or attend a Christadelphian school.

If we have established sound teaching, good routines, daily family gatherings around mealtimes and to do the readings, and do wholesome recreational activities together, they will be well able to talk to us about what they are seeing and experiencing, especially when they are little. We then have the opportunity to show the leadership that characterises effective parenting, opening up discussion, helping our children understand and see for themselves the better ways of Divine wisdom.

Religion in education

Some children will attend schools with a church foundation, for example a Church of England school, where broad Christian values are emphasised, but usually in a liberal manner. This is not to say that a Roman Catholic School is a good choice; despite the fact that many of them do have a strong tradition of upholding Christian moral values, and their religious ethos is much more evident, it is difficult to see how a Christadelphian could be helped by the strong emphasis on Roman Catholic doctrine. But in any school in countries like England, where religious education

and an act of collective worship are legal requirements in state schools, we will have to support our children through their experience.

Some denominations, notably the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Exclusive Brethren, often home school their children. In the case of the former, their objection is that the name 'Jehovah' is not used when addressing the Lord God, even though most of the content of assemblies in schools will be very anodyne as far as doctrine goes. My own view is that our children have little to lose by attending normal assemblies. At their best they encourage the view that worship is a 'normal' activity, and they may raise awareness of the supernatural and of spirituality in the most general way. The 'celebration' of the festivals and traditions of other faiths can help them to understand where we differ.

At their worst, a local church minister will come in and try to curry favour with the lines of agnostic faces in the audience by misrepresenting Scripture. I recall our children coming home in high indignation because the vicar had spoken on Ascension Day and suggested that Jesus did not really go to heaven but this was a way of explaining that he was no longer on the earth. It served to reinforce why we stand aside from the church and do not join in the 'churches together' groups in our locality.

The same is true of religious education in some countries. It will seldom be presented with any attempt to indoctrinate—at least, that would be the case in English schools; practice may vary elsewhere. If the curriculum simply provides knowledge and understanding of a range of world religions, much is to be gained from our children learning where others are coming from. They will be well able, with our support, to discern truth from error, and they may well have opportunity to present a Biblically based point of view. If done without bigotry, this may well be welcomed by the teacher, who will be pleased that someone at least has a point of view and believes in God. There may be a statutory right to withdraw children from religious education, but we will usually find there is more to gain by not exercising this right.

Beyond the basics

How far should we encourage our children to join in extra-curricular activities, or recreational pursuits in the local community? Much will depend on what is involved. Much sport is extra-curricular, and our children will benefit from

this and other healthy activity. In our family we always discouraged participation in local sporting clubs or other activities, but in all these things parents have to make informed decisions, seeking to involve the children in the decision-making process, so that they understand and accept the outcome. For many, the demands of homework and the time needed for the readings, youth circle and other ecclesial activities will deter anybody from joining in local clubs.

How about higher education? Higher education can provide opportunities to gain qualifications that enhance a person's development and prospects. If our children have been firmly rooted in the life in Christ and have strong friendships in the Brotherhood, they will want to go to universities where they are close to a good ecclesia and other young people who will provide the right kind of support. Some parents try to make sure their children attend a university close to home, so they can stay at home. But if going away is needed, it need not be a disaster if we have laid good foundations and if our children can be anchored into an ecclesia. Think of Daniel.

Many of our young people grow very well in their faith and spiritual experience while away at university.

Conclusion

We have ranged over a number of issues in this article. The fundamental thesis is that we have to do everything by our example, conversation and behaviour to encourage our children to see the Truth as the centre of their lives and the priority in all things. For this reason, academic success or failure will be less important to us than the development of a positive attitude to the Truth and a living faith. If we "seek . . . first the kingdom of God" in all aspects of our family lives, we have a ready source of Divine guidance to help us make wise choices. If we do this, our children will gain from their educational opportunities, using the knowledge, understanding and skills they gain to good advantage in the service of the Lord, as they mature and assume full responsibility for their lives. They need our love and support. The best we can give is that founded on the rocklike values of the Kingdom of God.

Home schooling— what, how and why?

Home schooling has been popular in North America and Canada for some time, and also has its advocates in Australia. In the UK it is still very much a minority alternative to the standard educational system, but one which does seem to be growing in popularity, both in the Brotherhood and outside. John and Sarah Marshall (Halifax Balmoral Place, UK) provide an introduction to the subject.

WHEN FIRST confronted with the idea of home schooling, I felt quite overwhelmed. This was not the case for Sarah, as she had been investigating this opportunity for a while, as our concern for our daughter Abigail's education was growing. I can almost hear myself now: "Wait a minute, you can't do that—can you? What about . . .?". Then there was a surge of questions that engulfed me as I tried to come to terms with this new idea.

Sarah had answers to a good many of them, but I admit I was fairly sceptical as to whether this would be good for the children and the family as a whole. However, six years on, and the questions and doubts have been replaced—completely—as we watch our children develop day by day as they are educated at home.

Is it legal?

There have been a surprisingly large number of brothers and sisters and friends who have asked, "Is it legal? Are you sure you are allowed to do this? I thought that the law stated you had to send your children to school; how come you don't?", etc. One thing many parents appear to be oblivious to is the fact that *they* (as parents) are responsible for ensuring that their children are educated; sending them to school is only part of what the law says.