

Like most Christians, I find myself increasingly challenged to live and work in a world that seems to pay less and less attention to the God to whom I am committed. Recently, I came across an old book, *Celebration of discipline: A path to spiritual growth*, by Richard Foster. I remembered enjoying reading it some years ago and found that I was quickly challenged by its contents. I thought it might be my challenge to relate of the issues raised in this book to us as Christian teachers and educators.

Part 1 Simplicity

The world we live in is based on an economics that focuses on the consumer and hence materialism. While it is true that Australia has been able to sustain economic prosperity by thumbing its nose at world economics and just kept spending, much of this economic growth has been on credit and a recession could still lead to much hardship for many. Savings also provide for investment and can be a stronger long-term predictor of economic prosperity. Currently per capita saving is as low as it has ever been.

Do we live in an age of *eat, drink and be merry etc?* How are we as Christians dealing with today's economics and what are we modelling to students in our classes by the content we chose to study, the discussions we have and the lifestyle we model.

In these matters the Bible is clear. Jesus' words *seek first his kingdom and his righteousness* (Matt 6:33) provide the perspective and the following words *do not worry about tomorrow* (34) are complementary. We need to continually challenge ourselves about seeking the kingdom of God first and what it means in 2003, particularly if we are worrying about money. What are we teaching our students about money, consumerism and financial responsibility?

Currently, I am involved in producing some materials for primary schools in the area of financial literacy and we are using a definition from Scotland that builds on the knowledge and skills to include how individual decisions affect others and the environment. This acknowledgement of the social, ethical and environmental impacts of financial decisions relates

to Biblical principles of being concerned for others and God's world. Some recent reports on financial literacy in Australia and schools have used a definition focussing only on knowledge and skills. Such definitions are subject to criticisms about educating students to fulfil self-interest, possibly at the expense of others, the community and the environment.

When we teach personal skills and knowledge to students do we raise the ethical, community and environmental issues? Helping students to think of others, their communities and the environment will help them to be less focused on themselves and more open to seeking first God's kingdom.

The greater challenge for teachers is to be themselves what they want their students to become. Teaching about conservation, the importance of democratic practices, acceptance of difference and care for others is negated if these are not demonstrated features in our teaching and classroom environment. When it comes to these matters what do students observe? For instance, do students perceive any difference in us as Christian teachers in our attitude to spending, wealth accumulation and possessions?

These are difficult questions because some Christians seeking first God's kingdom will be wealthy and some will not. Wealth is not a product of faith and nowhere in the New Testament does it suggest that the Christian life will be anything but difficult. There will always be rich Christians and poor Christians. It is the recognition that whatever we have is God's and that our role is one of a steward that frees up our thinking, and our giving, in these matters.

Irrespective of our financial circumstances, Foster provides some interesting insights to the Christian discipline of simplicity. They challenge my thinking and actions and I thought you might like to share the challenge. I have stated the principle and asked some questions for us as Christians and as teachers. There is nothing right or wrong about the illustrations and the question, they are there to help reflection.

1. Buy things for their usefulness not their status.

Are there implications for buying designer labels, brand names, the latest technology, the new mobile phone and the new (four wheel drive) car? What do Christian teachers model about the status of possessions?

2. Reject anything that produces an addiction.
Where does one start/finish? What takes up our time? Reading newspapers, listening to the news, watching a television soapie, watching television, coffee, tea, chocolate, food, the gym.....
Unsure? Then ask your family and friends.
3. Develop the habit of giving away.
Next time someone admires something in your home, give it to them. It will test whether your security is in this world or the next. More importantly, generosity can be demonstrated by teachers giving students time, comfort and help, often giving up their own time?
4. Enjoy things without owning them.
Teachers can develop students' appreciation of free public utilities, parks, national parks, public areas and facilities.
5. Develop a deeper appreciation of nature.
Can students spend more time appreciating God's creation in the garden, in the park, in the city rather than paying big dollars to be entertained?
6. Refuse the propaganda on renewal.
You just don't need a new one if the old one works. Can you promote recycling in your teaching?
7. Develop a healthy scepticism to free gifts.
Buy now-pay later, interest-free have a catch. You can teach students to say "NO" in many different contexts.
8. Use plain and honest speech.
Can this be a key area for Christian teachers to model?
9. Reject oppression of others.
Can we try to make sure that investments and giving do not contribute to the misery of others?

Shun whatever distracts you from seeking first God's kingdom.