Forbidden territory?: Looking again at student- teacher relationships.

In this edition of *TCFNews*, Pages 6 and 7, there is a *Blast from the past* article *Caring as the basis of teacher-pupil relationships* by Norman Amundsen written in 1978. It provides a focus for reviewing the changing nature of student-teacher relationships in schools.

In 2004, teachers are expressing concern about the effect that child protection legislation is having on their relationships with students. This is a very difficult and complex question and Amundsen makes a number of fundamental points for Christians to consider.

His comments about self-love are very important. For Christian teachers who are certain about their relationship with God in Christ, they also know and experience the love of God. It is because God loves them that they are individuals of worth not because of any merit in themselves or by personal achievements. Secure in the love of God they are able to love themselves because God imputes value to them. Christians who know and experience this love are not likely to "isolate themselves because of feelings of inferiority, resort to biting criticism designed to magnify the faults of others" or boast to magnify their own importance. Feelings of personal adequacy are important in forming relationships with students. Christian teachers need to be conscious of their own needs and self-concept. When student-teacher relationships form and teachers looks to get something out of the relationship to meet their own needs then abuse, at least emotional. Is not far behind.

For the Christian teacher, student-teacher relationships are about giving love, reflecting the care and concern that has its origin in God to the student. The relationship will always be unequal, a power relationship, where despite the teacher's friendship, or need for friendship, the teacher remains the teacher, even outside of school as some legal cases have demonstrated.

Child protection legislation was brought in to protect students from a range of relationships that were, or could lead to abuse. But as Christians, we know the law is not perfect, otherwise Jesus would
not have needed to come. Sometimes, innocent behaviours can be misunderstood by students who know their rights and have different expectations about teacher behaviour than would have been the case twenty years ago. Older teachers know that many of the practices of the past are no longer acceptable and the concern has been, that to avoid criticism and misunderstanding, that teachers should keep their distance from students and not only physically.

Andersen reminds us that our role as Christian teachers requires us to model our saviour Jesus Christ, to love God and to love others as we love ourselves. Teachers, including Christian teachers, who feel a sense of inadequacy need to be very careful in forming student-teacher relationships and ensure that they are meeting appropriately the needs of students and not their own needs. But Amundsen reminds us that teaching is about the whole person physical, social, cognitive, affective and spiritual. It is neither natural nor possible to teach the whole student by ignoring any of these dimensions and for Christian teachers opportunities abound to meet also the spiritual needs of students within both government and non-government schools.

Amundsen's reminder that just as humanists and secularists present their world-view to students, so the Christian teacher can do the same when an opinion is

appropriate. This point is clear in the Department's *Controversial issues in school* guidelines, where teachers are reminded that their personal view should not dominate but that they can include their person opinion within rational discourse.

Child protection legislation has brought new and much need protection to students and for Christian teachers it is a reminder to carefully examine one's own motives and needs when forming relationships with students and to exercise common sense in relation to community expectations when teaching the whole student.

John Gore