

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students

This month, *TCF News* comments on some recent controversy related to a desire by some schools to show a movie during school time titled *Gayby baby* and to widespread criticism within the Christian community of the Australian government's *Safe Schools* program for promoting LGBT lifestyles. Both controversies focus on sexual relationships and rather than getting bogged down in the theological arguments and the informed and uninformed criticism, the article focuses on LGBT students in schools and asks the question about how are they coping in terms of discrimination, bullying and widespread homophobia. Most importantly, it draws attention to the evidence for the discrimination of LGBT students in schools and asks what schools, including Christian schools, should be doing to act as Christians towards these students. LGBT students pose a challenge to some deeply held beliefs amongst Christians and the article may pose a challenge for some TCF members.

In addition, this month there is an article promoting a web site that provides resources to support teaching about Australia's Christian heritage and some important information about the 2016 conference and Notice of the 2016 AGM.

John Gore

The challenges of LGBT students

Last year, an incident at Burwood Girls High sparked a decision from the Minister of Education that a film *Gayby baby* could not be shown in school hours (SMH 27/8/2015). Up to 50 schools nationally had agreed to premier the film simultaneously as part of *Wear it purple* day, an activity to highlight sexual inclusion in schools. The issue for government was not so much the film content, but that all students were required to attend its showing. Without having viewed the film, but noting the advertising, some parents were uneasy about the possible content which would raise issues of sexuality.

Having viewed the film, it was probably an appropriate decision because, as a parent, I would have wanted to know the content of the film and been able to discuss the issues raised in it with my children. Although it did not tackle directly the sexual identity of the students involved, it raised a growing concern in me about how LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) students with supportive families are coping in schools where homophobia might be widespread, including in Christian/church and other religious schools.

Then, recently there has been a concerted push, mainly from Christian groups, including the ACL (Australian Christian Lobby), against the *Safe Schools* program introduced by the Australian government and strongly supported by the Victorian state government. This program can be voluntarily adopted by schools and to date around 5% of Australian schools have signed up. Its aim is to *create safe and inclusive school environments for same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students, staff and families.* (Safe schools coalition website) It acknowledges that *schools value the health and wellbeing of students and agree that bullying of any kind is harmful and should not be accepted.*

These matters led me to think about what an appropriate Christian response might be to these students, irrespective of the type of school in which they might be enrolled, and how that response might affect school practices. My first hurdle was to accept that *an LGBT person's sexual orientation or gender identity is not a choice but a variant that arises biologically within the human population.* (Joldersma 2016 P. 35). From a literature search, this position can be accepted generally, but it may not be true in every case. However, this debate is not the focus of this article nor is the ongoing Biblical debate about homosexuality and same sex marriage. The focus is how schools include LGBT students.

Just as students with disabilities are not part of the majority, LGBT students are a minority and are vulnerable to discrimination including bullying and I would argue, from a number of studies, that sexual difference heightens vulnerability and that LGBT students are at greater risk of bullying and harm resulting in their marginalisation within schools and society.

The evidence

In the US, a national organisation GLSEN conducts a periodic online national survey and in 2014 surveyed 8,000 LGBT youth from Grades 6-12. (Kosciw et. al. 2014). Over half the respondents felt unsafe at school, one third avoided gender specific spaces such as change rooms and toilets and two thirds avoided school functions and extra curricula activities. It reported that three quarters were verbally harassed and over one third physically assaulted in school. Similar results were reported for Canada. (Peter et al 2015)

These reports also drew attention to discriminatory policies and practices within schools, for example, LGBT students not being able to express themselves in terms of their sexuality (gender), identity (hairstyle, clothing), being disciplined differently to non-LGBT students for public displays of affection, being prohibited from writing about LGBT issues and being prohibited from taking a same sex partner to a school function. The reports also highlight the inability, sometimes unwillingness, of schools to address these issues and the resultant bullying of LGBT students.

There is no reason to think that the experience of these students in Australian schools is markedly different. They are a highly vulnerable group likely to be experiencing a high level of discrimination and bullying resulting in greater absenteeism, greater incidents of depression, suicidal thoughts and homelessness (Joldersma 2016 P30).

Religious schools

But before considering how schools might include these students, there is a further consideration about how some religious schools may add to the issues above by actually making the situation worse for LGBT students. A policy of exclusion is an obvious one, but other examples may be more subtle where religious schools, including Christian schools particularly within an evangelical-reformed tradition, that express beliefs about sexual orientation and gender that lead to negative practices. Attempting to address the sexuality of these students with negative teaching, threats, coercion, ridicule or even Biblical teaching that emphasises a strong judgemental and intransigent position can result in them losing their identity and their faith. (Wood and Conley 2014). LGBT students with faith often experience high incidences of depression, low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness (Barton 2010). It is one thing to have a well considered Biblical position on homosexuality and another to use it judgementally towards LGBT students.

The classic Christian argument of love the person and hate the sin may not be a sufficient Christian response where that love does not include justice represented

by practices of acceptance, safety and non-discrimination. For some Christians, renewed theological study of broader Biblical themes is needed to establish an appropriate Biblical position about how Christians should address the challenges of LGBT students and LGBT people in general.

Throughout the Bible and the history of Christianity, from the Fall in Genesis to the New Earth of Revelation, God works his purposes. Jesus' acceptance of people with all sorts of backgrounds (for example, the Samaritan woman in John 4), his redefinition of who is our neighbour (Luke 10) and his universal offer of salvation (John 3:14-15) show the very nature of God and LGBT students need to know and experience him through love, acceptance and justice. They have a right to feel safe, accepted and cared for in whatever school they attend, and especially schools that purport to be reflecting the nature of God. To this end, schools need to evaluate how attitudes, policies and practices which discriminate against LGBT students could lead to bullying and to amend them. These students have a right to be full members of the school community - a safe place where verbal harassment, physical assault and intimidation are effectively addressed. To not protect them in these ways would be unjust as well as uncaring.

School practices

To improve the situation for LGBT students, there needs to be whole school program to address actual, possible and perceived injustice. Joldersma (2016) suggests:

1. *including the specific language of sexual orientation and gender expression in the school's non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies*
2. *providing professional development for teachers and other staff members on effective intervention strategies*
3. *recognising that the professional staff and official school policies need help from the students themselves*
4. *including LGBT issues in school curricula and library resources.*

However, the essence of any successful program is that teachers address issues of bullying and discrimination on a daily basis as they occur whether such issues apply to LGBT students or other students who face discrimination because they are different.

Schools could redraft their existing school anti-bullying programs to incorporate the points listed above. Some schools have decided to use the *Safe schools* program designed especially to address the rights of LGBT students. Where there is concern about the *Safe Schools* program promoting LGBT lifestyles, schools can selectively draw appropriate ideas and resources from this program. With the *Safe schools* program under review, it might be expected that concerns will be addressed to ensure its wider use.

A feature of Christianity has always been that Christians have loved and championed the rights of the marginalised people in our society to ensure justice. LGBT students need to know that their rights are a concern of Christians today. Doing nothing is a denial of justice, schools must act.

John Gore

References

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- Barton B C (2010) *"Abomination" - Life as a Bible Belt* Gay Journal of Homosexuality 57(4) P. 465-484

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Kosciw J G, Greytak E A, Palmer N A and Boesen M J (2014) *The 2013 National Schools Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York: Gay Lesbian Straight Educational Network - GLSEN.

Peter T, Taylor C and Chamberland L (2015) *A queer day in Canada: Examining Canadian high School students' experiences with school-based homophobia in two large-scale studies* Journal of Homosexuality 62(2): P. 186-206.

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Wood A W and Conley AH (2014) *Loss of religious or spiritual identities among the LGBT population* Counselling and values 59(1): P. 95-111.

The Christian Connection: Support for the Australian school curriculum

Australia's Christian heritage' will be taught for the first time, in lessons on 'how Australia is a secular nation and a multi-faith society former Minister for Education Christopher Pyne.

The big question is: What will you and I do with this 'new' incredible opportunity?

In 2006, some concerned Christians met with the then Federal Minister for Education, Julie Bishop. They discussed the upcoming national school curriculum and pointed out how Christianity through various people and organisations had significantly contributed to the development and well-being of this great nation.

The Minister's response was: *What exquisite timing! Please have your submissions to me as soon as possible*. Within six weeks they were in her hands and subsequently these submissions were accepted.

With the change of government in 2007, two colleagues were invited to sit on some of the advisory panels. However, the Australian school curriculum that was later released had very little to say about our Christian heritage or our Western culture.

With the return of the Coalition Government in 2013, the Australian schools curriculum was revisited. The then Federal Minister for Education Mr Christopher Pyne engaged appointed two reviewers of Ken Wiltshire and Kevin Donnelly.

Ken Wiltshire is a professor of Public Administration at the University of Queensland Business School and Kevin Donnelly is also a senior research fellow at the Australian Catholic University and regular commentator on education matters.

Federal Education Minister Christopher Pyne said the changes would resolve "overcrowding" in the primary school curriculum, boost the teaching of phonics and strengthen references to Western influences in Australia's history

Australia's "Christian heritage" will be taught for the first time, in lessons on "how Australia is a secular nation and a multi-faith society". 'Mr Pyne said he was

“absolutely delighted” the states and territories had backed the reforms, which have been driven by the federal and NSW governments. (The Australian, 19 September, 2015)

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) chief executive Robert Randall said the new curriculum would give teachers more time to teach the basics of maths, literacy, science and history in primary school. Mr Randall said the new curriculum had a greater focus on Western civilisation. *Historically, the influence of the Christian church has been important*, he told the Australian.

Teachers have free access to these stories that tell of our Christian Heritage at www.diduno.info where, with the many other Australian teachers, clergy, Chaplains and parents, you can also receive a free monthly Christian heritage story and distribute it widely to friends and colleagues.

Schools and churches are encouraged to use their social media contacts to distribute these stories far and wide. Teachers across Australia can have discussions about the studies. Parents and students alike will see how Jesus and his teachings have benefited our society. Children will be inspired by some of the great Christians of the past and encouraged to embrace a similar lifestyle for the wellbeing of each other and our society.

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Notice of Annual General Meeting
Saturday 14th May 2016 at 1.30pm
at Redeemer Baptist School 2 Masons Dr, North Parramatta.

Agenda

1. Welcome.
2. Apology.
3. Minutes of Annual General Meeting held 16th May 2015 to be accepted.
4. Matters arising.
5. Reports from Committee.
6. Appointment of Auditor.
7. Appointment of Public Officer.
8. Election of Committee - President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer and three other members.
9. General Business.
10. Closing Prayer.

Nomination and proxy forms are available on request from the office.

TCF Seminar - 14th May 2016

Strategies for teachers to use with students experiencing learning difficulties K-12.

2.5 hrs of QTC Registered Professional Development in association with ACU National Centre for Teacher Quality and Leadership.

Speaker: Louise Yarham

Louise is a paediatric occupational therapist with over 20 years experience. She works in private practice with students from Preschool to Year 12. She has worked in many schools with individual students and within the classroom. Louise has a passion for assisting students using a collaborative approach with teachers and parents.

Venue: Redeemer Baptist School, 2 Masons Dr, North Parramatta.

Time: 9am to 12pm.

Cost: \$30 for TCF members, \$50 for non-members. (Morning tea included).

Closing date: Wednesday 4th May.

**Application forms available from the office or
on the website: tcfofnsw.org.au**

Don't miss TCF Get Away: 15th-17th July 2016

Come for a relaxing weekend of Bible input, fellowship, prayer, support and sightseeing at Kihilla in the beautiful Blue Mountains. No cooking or washing up!!!

Directions on how to get there and what to bring will be sent on receipt of application.

\$150 for all included weekend. Closing date: 4th July 2016

Get you application today from the office!
