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Israel Folau and religious freedom: Implications for Christian education

In recent months, Israel Folau has been blamed for most of the world's problems - the demise of the Waratahs, the undermining of the Wallabies, the destruction of the Australian Rugby Union, the suicide of young gays, the disillusionment of young Australians and the promotion of a Christian sect outside of mainstream Christianity. Claiming religious freedom from a Biblical basis, he posted on his Facebook page messages about some groups of people, including homosexuals, stating that if they did not repent and turn to Jesus they would go to hell. It is not clear if Folau believes homosexuals go to hell because they are homosexual or because of their homosexual activities or both.

In response, the Australian Rugby Union announced that he would be sacked because this post broke their code of conduct. It then set up a process that found a high-level breach of this code and terminated his contract. The argument has been about freedom to express religious viewpoints and the enforceability of employment contracts. Only in the courts will this matter be resolved one way or the other and the loser will not stop their fight for "justice". And its all been complicated by the fact that everyone thinks Folau is a great guy, sincere and caring of all those around him.

Religious freedom: Real or illusionary?

Since losing the gay marriage debate and census in 2018, many Christians are having difficulty in accepting the result and want exemptions made. Encouraged by the recommendations of the Report of Ruddock Committee *Religious Freedom Review* they have sought to pressure the government into legislating for greater religious freedom. Their concerns became an issue in the last election, which saw an unexpected swing to the Coalition, because these matters were resonating among people of faith, and not only Christians. The Coalition was seen to be more likely to take up the Ruddock recommendations and protect religious freedom.

Few would disagree that Australia is a country in which Christians can practice their religion without fear. But in recent years growing secularism and an anti-religion lobby have affected the status quo. Supported by some media and media commentators, Christians have been feeling ignored in their bid to have their views represented in the public square. Christian schools have been feeling the pressure of criticism of enrolment and employment policies and the provision of special religious education (SRE) in public schools has come under increasing scrutiny and complicated administratively by the addition of classes in ethics and the loss of the long-standing battle about SRE on the enrolment form.

Another significant issue is the lack of inclusion of teaching about religion in the Australian curriculum and the curriculum of NSW where avoidance of the issue, and lack of any constructive engagement, have left the NSW curriculum supporting religious illiteracy. And where is religious freedom mentioned in the curriculum?

So, there is a conundrum that freedom to practice religion remains strong but inclusion of religion into public life is being resisted at the same time that secular laws, particularly related to discrimination, are being imposed on religious institutions. The Folau case has become a test in which there is great interest to see how far religious freedom, or the right to express religious views actually extends when these views are in conflict with the employer's values or those of their sponsors.

Religious freedom and the scriptures

The current desire by many Christians to protect religious freedom, or rights to express their religious beliefs, is hard to find in the scriptures. In the early church under Rome, Christians faced persecution and Paul's judicial appeals based on his rights were as a Roman citizen. 1Peter2 outlines an approach by early Christians to be submissive to their Roman overlords as a way of being distinctive in their society and honouring to God. While this approach is understood in an autocracy, it does not translate automatically to a democracy in which there are many voices, some of which are Christian. If Christians are to be the salt and light of the world, they will need to engage their communities to bear that witness. How much of that engagement is about standing up for their religious freedom, interpreted as rights, is open to debate.

Much of the New Testament is about Christians being servants to others by following the example of Christ who came to serve not to be served. A committed approach to the needs of the poor and the spread of the Gospel might be more in keeping with Christ's command to love God and others, than Christians campaigning for more religious freedom rights. While acknowledging that Christians must be prepared to stand up for their faith and thereby influence the society in which they live, I am not sure how these demands for greater religious freedom or protection of religious rights can be justified.

In this regard, I am not sure I understand support groups like the Australian Christian Lobby in supporting Israel Folau's case. What outcome do they want and how will it strengthen the church's mission? No matter what the court outcome, both sides of the debate will attempt to strengthen their positions through legislation. The church in Australia is still recovering from the child abuse scandals and now entering the public square seeking legislative privilege to maintain or allow what the world perceives as their discriminatory rules, protocols and actions. This is not going to help the mission of the church in the world.

What is the mission?

Whatever the outcome, there will be implications for Christian education both in the way Christian and church schools operate and in how religious education is included in the curriculum and how it operates in public schools. The public education battles are for me much more important than a focus on rights that have the potential to weaken our mission rather than strengthen it. If as much energy was put into promoting Christian education as is being put into protecting religious freedom rights, then the spread of the Gospel may well be more advanced.

John Gore

TCF President's Report

Highlights for TCF from the last year must include our submission to the review of the NSW Education Curriculum, the publishing of a number of practical classroom resources and our fantastic night with Eddie Woo. Eddie's enthusiastic personality has made him an educational hit on YouTube and that was obvious on the night of our dinner, but Eddie also seeks to use his "five minutes" of fame to God's glory. We were delighted with his presentation and those who attended, with being able to snap some selfies.

In our submission to the Curriculum Review Taskforce we highlighted practical issues such as the over-crowded curriculum, but also strongly promoted the support of a Christian philosophy of education *that values the whole curriculum as a way of students knowing God and not just knowing about him*. We said that *TCFNSW members believe that education is more than an array of subjects. It is a way of living, a way of thinking, feeling, doing, creating, reacting in social relationships, in response to a Person* (Dr A Hogg, Journal of Christian Education Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 18) and *that one expression of Christian education is the seeking of truth because truth lies in the character of God*. A special thank you must be given to John Gore for his deep thinking on the issues of the curriculum in the preparation of our submission.

We were able to launch a great booklet, *A Practical Guide to Classroom Discipline*, addressing an everyday issue faced by even the most experienced teacher. Another resource, *Helpful Ideas for High School Scripture Teachers*, was also prepared, coming from a request and the input of Karen Davies, one of our retired members. We have also released Grammar resources presenting sequential activities that could be used in the classroom tomorrow. They include definitions and examples, covering each of the teaching points for Early Stage 1, Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the *NSW Education Standards Authority English Syllabus* as of July 2018. Each of these resources is available from our office.

Through the year we have also updated the TCF membership brochure and can now print-off copies as needed. We have maintained a presence on *Facebook*, rapidly addressing current educational issues as well as promoting Christian responses to the daily challenges of teachers. Face-to-face meetings with members were promoted through the weekend *Get Away*, Heathcote bushwalk and canoe outing, which were enjoyed by all. (The canoeing didn't need you to be an athlete to join in.)

The challenge remains in getting new Christian teachers to see the value of the Fellowship and then join-up as members. In our contact with other Christian Graduate organisations we

found that this issue is the same for them. If the Fellowship is to continue supporting Christian teachers in schools and influence the education debate, we may have to change our model of membership and funding or link up with other Christian teacher organisations to continue on. The need for TCF is still the same. The choice to be just like the world remains all too real. We need the support, thinking and prodding of other Christians in schools to help us be faithful followers of light, applying the Word and our love of God, to our profession.

Harley Mills

Secretary's Report for 2018

Resources and Communication

Two resources were produced in 2018: *A Practical Guide to Classroom Discipline* written by John Gore was published and distributed in early 2019. A pamphlet *Helpful Ideas for High School Scripture Teachers*, based on ideas from Karen Davies and written by Harley Mills, was sent to all members.

Comments are posted on *TCF Facebook*. The possibility of using *Twitter* and *Instagram* are being investigated. These would give TCF greater exposure. John Gore has suggested older articles on TCF website be removed and current articles be added.

There is a need to find someone to keep the website up to date as Colin McKay is teaching overseas in his retirement. Colin is prepared to continue this task until someone else is available. Thank you, Colin.

Throughout the year members have expressed their appreciation for articles in *TCF News*. John Gore faithfully continues as editor. Contributions have also been made by members, which are always welcomed.

In November, TCF made a submission to the NSW Curriculum Review Taskforce, encouraging change to be embraced for the future of education in NSW.

Activities

Bushwalk: Waterfall to Heathcote on 24 February. Two walkers braved the distance and the heat.

Seminar: *Grasping Grammar* on 16 May was cancelled due to insufficient numbers. Harley has undertaken the mammoth task of writing a K - 6 Grammar resource outlining each stage's objectives and content plus practical ideas and tips. Early Stage 1, Stage 1 and Stage 2 are now ready for distribution. Stage 3 will be available later this year.

Illawarra Local Group: held a dinner on 30 June with 7 attending.

Getaway: 5-7 October at Stanwell Tops. The eight who attended enjoyed the new location and warmer time of year. Thanks to Harley for organising the music and discussion topics.

TCF Promotion

Other graduate groups were contacted to ascertain how they make contact with new members. Military Christian Fellowship replied suggesting we contact AFES. Christian Medical and Dental Fellowship have functioning student groups but are struggling to get new members. Had no reply from NSW Nurses' Christian Fellowship. Harley has contact with the leader of the Education Christian Union at Wollongong University.

Membership

In 2018 there were five resignations and two new members. John Dowe, member since 1952, was called home to be with his Lord and Saviour. There were no missionary members. Total membership as at 31st December 2018 was 78.

Office

In July the office landline phone and fax were discontinued. A mobile phone was purchased with the pre-paid option. This has greatly reduced costs. The office continues in the same location thanks to the generosity of John and Elizabeth Gore.

Committee

There were ten Committee meetings held in 2018. The following show the number attended.

Harley Mills (President)	10	Lyn Searle	9
Dianne Young (Treasurer)	9	Karen Allsopp	6
Pam Griffin (Secretary)	10	Ken Silvester	9

Thankyou

Thanks goes to those who work faithfully behind the scenes to keep TCF going - John and Elizabeth Gore, Colin McKay, Harley Mills, Ken and Bronwyn Silvester, Dianne Young, Karen Allsopp and Lyn Searle, Thanks too, to the many members who faithfully pray for TCF and Christian teachers in NSW.

Pam Griffin

Treasurer's Report

The accounts of the fellowship have been audited. This is an abridged summary and the full accounts are available from the office on request.

Statement of Receipts and Payments for year ended 31 December 2018

RECEIPTS

Subscriptions	2,325
Donations	1,855
Conference fees	0
Getaway fees	1,1700
Interest and other	<u>435</u>
	<u>5,785</u>

PAYMENTS

Salaries	4,489
Office costs	638
Stationery, printing and postage	786
Marketing and promotion	0
Fees	444
Conference meeting Costs	24
Getaway	1,160
Missionary Support	0
Gifts	<u>250</u>
	<u>7,769</u>
Deficit	<u>1,984</u>
Net worth as at 31 December 2018	23,596

Where two or three are gathered

I wonder how many TCFers have enjoyed the opportunity of having prayer fellowship with members of their staff in government schools?

From my teaching career in Broken Hill High School in 1950 till I finished at Katoomba High in 1987, I had the privilege of prayer fellowship in many schools with other Christian teachers. Some had small numbers and larger numbers in other schools

We always found lots to pray for: other teachers, students in the school, ISCF ministry and specifically “difficult” students.

Why don't you try meeting with others, even if only one or two, to pray for the school you are teaching in and /or for local schools in your area.

Peter Kidd

Disclaimer: The views expressed in articles and letters published in *TCF News* are not necessarily those of TCFNSW.

TCFNSW
 PO Box 3813 Marsfield NSW 2122
 Ph 0490 148 249.
 Email: tcfofnsw@exemail.com.au
 Web www.tcfofnsw.org.au

TCF Getaway 2019 11 - 13 October 2019

The Retreat Cottage at 51 Bendena Gardens, Stanwell Tops.

Come for a refreshing weekend away in a peaceful bushland setting overlooking Illawarra's northern coastline with magnificent views. Enjoy a relaxing time of fun, Bible input, fellowship, prayer, support and sightseeing.

\$130 (plus bring a yummy plate of something for morning tea and a willingness to help with meal preparation). Registrations close on 26th September 2019. An application form is enclosed For more details: 0490 148 249 or tcfofnew@exemail.com.au

TCF Getaway Application Form

Name _____

Address _____

Phone (H) _____ mobile _____

E-mail _____

Special dietary needs _____

Enclosed is payment of \$130 by:

cheque (made payable to TCF NSW).

credit card - mastercard / visa (please circle which one).

Card No _____

Expiry Date ____ / ____ Amount _____

Name as on card (please print) _____

Signature _____

direct deposit: Westpac BSB: 032-373 Account no. 128812 (put surname as reference).

Closing date: 26th September 2019

OFFICE USE ONLY:

\$ _____ DATE _____ REC NO. _____