

## The last word

# Storm in a tea cup?

COFFEE

**STEVE HOLDEN LOOKS AT THE FURORE OVER RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN STATE SCHOOLS, WHICH SEEMS TO HAVE TURNED INTO MORE THAN A STORM IN A COFFEE CUP.**

What happens when you're the head of an organisation that provides religious education programs in schools and you say something like, 'We need to go and make disciples'?

Access Ministries Chief Executive Officer Evonne Paddison found out when a recording of a speech she made at the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion national conference in Melbourne in 2008 mysteriously found its way to Victoria's Minister for Education Martin Dixon and Commonwealth Minister for Schools Peter Garrett last month.

'Our federal and state governments allow us to take the Christian faith into schools and share it,' Paddison said in the recording. 'We need to go and make disciples.'

According to Victoria's *Education and Training Reform Act (2006)*, 'Special religious instruction may be given in a government school' but 'not (to) promote any particular religious practice, denomination or sect.' Dixon's response? 'We will be talking to Access Ministries and seeking an assurance from them that their instructors abide by this requirement.'

The guidelines of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations National School Chaplaincy Program stipulate that 'a chap-

lain should not take advantage of his or her privileged position to proselytise for that denomination or religious belief.' Garrett said any instances of proselytising would be investigated.

So far so predictable, but predictable hardly describes what followed. First, Melbourne Grammar School Chaplain Reverend Ron Noone wrote in the school's newsletter, 'The state school classroom is not the place for conversion or proselytising, and while Access Ministries would claim that's not what they do, I'm afraid that is their default position, and when challenged they will revert to that stance.'

Speaking to the *Age's* Jewel Topsfield, a somewhat cross Reverend Denise Nicholls, Director of Christian Education Services at Access Ministries, countered, 'As Mr Noone is a senior school chaplain at a private school, I must ask how he is able to judge the content of Access Ministries' Christian religious education (CRE) courses. Has he ever taught them? Has he ever considered the courses in their entirety? Or did he take a cursory flip through the Access website on his coffee break?'

She wasn't the only one to react sharply. The President of Melbourne Grammar's school council, the Most Reverend Dr Philip Freier – who happens to be the, um, Angli-

can Archbishop of Melbourne – weighed in, through a spokesperson for the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, presumably not on a coffee break, to explain that most CRE teachers don't proselytise, and that, 'The Archbishop does not see the need for a review of the current arrangements.'

Most news stories are a bit like a cappuccino: the froth and bubble dies down after a while, but this one kept on going, after the Reverend Dr Craig D'Alton from St Mary's Anglican Church in North Melbourne and one-time CRE instructor admitted he had taught CRE in a school under false pretences. 'I was climbing into the sheepfold over the fence rather than walking through the gate,' he said.

D'Alton, who taught CRE lessons accredited by Access Ministries several times at North Melbourne Primary School last year, told the *Age's* Jill Stark he could no longer do it, because the requirement not to proselytise left him conflicted on the basis that those who held a church office were obliged by their vows to proselytise. 'In a real sense we are there under false pretences, and it's time we admit it,' he told Stark.

The interested reader, if there is one, may remember that students in 10 primary schools north of the Murray last year piloted a new ethics course from the St James Ethics Centre as an alternative to CRE – it's called special religious education in New South Wales. Despite pressure to close the program down, the NSW parliament amended the *Education Act (1990)* in December last year allowing, 'Special education in ethics... as a secular alternative to SRE at government schools.' According to Teresa Russell, who was the Ethics in Schools Project Coordinator for the St James Ethics Centre and is now Project Manager for the Board of Primary Ethics, the ethics in schools program has taken off across NSW. **T**

*This month's Last Word was written by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher, while drinking a cappuccino. His latest book is Somebody to Love published by University of Queensland Press.*