

**Special Character Review**

2-4 December, 2020

**Preamble:** At the request of the Principal, Mr Kent Favel, and the school’s Board of Governors, we had the privilege of entering into the life of St Mark’s School for three days interviewing staff, the chaplain, students and board members to understand how the Christian dimension of the school’s philosophy was being lived out. We attended two chapel services, visited Religious Education classes and enjoyed socialising with academic and administrative staff. We came away with the deepest respect for the work that is being done at the school in terms of its special character. The aim of what follows is to give substance to that very positive assessment.

It is to be noted that the changes to the School’s Constitution mean that there are now far superior opportunities for operating as a 21st Century Independent Anglican School. Leaving behind a past history of confusion over roles, strange avenues of authority and the School being a source of income for the parish (now disestablished) means that the Board can move forward with confidence, albeit in the shadow of the current challenges faced by COVID-19. The ‘new’ relationship between the School, the Diocesan Trust Board and the Diocesan Manager is working effectively and well.

The roll sits at around fifty pupils in the preschool and 235 in the primary school. There is room for expansion in the latter, but the current situation does afford the luxury of small classes, generally in the mid to late teens number-wise.

**First impressions:** These do matter and we would applaud the warmth of our welcome: a Year 8 haka as part of the school’s greeting us onto the site; the two enthusiastic-for-their-school students who took us on a tour of the campus; the manner in which our meeting space was set up with all that we might, including a full set of documents relating to the school with helpful markers to relevant pages; some delectable treats; and pupils who were well-mannered and smartly attired.

**Abiding impressions**: all of the above, plus: staff who relate well and meaningfully to students; a principal who exudes warmth; a deputy principal with oversight of RE who clearly knows and is passionate about her work and role; a chaplain who is liked and respected; an efficient administrative presence; chapel services that were impressive in content and delivery; students who were able to converse with a ‘quiet confidence.’ There was, overall, an obvious focus on things of the Christian faith pervading all aspects of school life, which is not something that can simply be ‘turned-on’ for a review. We were impressed with the strong emphasis on enquiry learning: there was very little “chalk-and-talk” as we experienced lessons. The positive environment in the school is such that only one staff member has left in two years and that was due to maternity leave. A stable staff reinforces the positive work environment. The school is fortunate to have many staff who are Christian. We were impressed.

**The Analysis**

With reviews such as this we choose to use, as some way of assessing the School’s Special Character, the Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Church as set by the world-wide Anglican Consultative Council. There are currently five stated as:

The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

The first two are the foundation from which 3-5 grow, so will be given more weight in this review.

**Mark 1: To Proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom**

This is primarily achieved through vibrant chapel services that pupils and staff comment very favourably upon. They reflected on services that are topical, relate well to the pupils’ world and the issues that the students are facing, couched within the ‘Anglican-esque’ nature of the service. We heard many staff, and particularly the students, comment enthusiastically about Rev Digby Wilkinson’s leading of these community gatherings, including his chapel addresses which reportedly ‘hit the mark’. His pastoral care of one student in particular was also mentioned.

The students spoke effusively about the music and singing, expressing how much they enjoy singing and engagement in the choirs. We were impressed by the quality of what was offered musically considering the ages of the children. The school is fortunate indeed to have a musical director of the calibre they do, who is not only expert in her field but also able to understand the faith dimension of the music. We would encourage some consideration of the wording of hymns/songs both in terms of the intelligibility of the wording and the use of non-gender specific terms e.g. *man* replaced by *people/we*. The musical ability of the school is strengthened through a close association with the Cathedral of St Paul, which involves some choristers being engaged in two evening practices a week and singing with the cathedral choir one Sunday a month.

Chapel is held each Wednesday from 1.30-2.40pm, with Eucharists occurring about twice a year. Special services are held in Advent (for Christmas), a Gift-giving event in support of the City Mission’s work and an Ash Wednesday offering in Lent. Students are involved as flag bearers, crucifers, acolytes and readers or performing drama, as we observed. When we asked one group of students what they would like to see change in chapel services we were clearly told that they liked it just as it is!

Our conversation with the part-time chaplain, Rev Digby Wilkinson, reinforced his obvious enthusiasm for the School and his role within it. He is aware that some liturgies need rewriting to better meet the cognitive abilities of the pupils. He aims his addresses at the higher end of the school (Y5-8). Digby stressed the positive association with the Cathedral community, the regular engagement of the diocesan bishops with the school, the service component of the school which draws on the diocesan focus to the ‘last, lost and least,’ and he values the Jesus-focus of St Mark’s. We were pleased to hear of his liturgical blessings of the classrooms, his desire to stay in the role of chaplain, and a hope to assist/engage with teaching of/engagement with Years 7 & 8 next year, offering a more formally trained theological presence on the staff. The use of the chapel now by the Ethiopian Coptic Church is rendering any use of that facility over weekends an impossibility, sadly.

Students spoke confidently of the value of prayer, were effusive about the ministry of Digby Wilkinson[[1]](#footnote-1), expressed how much they enjoy singing (The sung Lord’s Prayer and Once in Royal David’s City getting a mention), the lighting of candles at times of prayer, the Christian stories being told by teachers, puppet shows to give them life and writing haiku poems to express belief and thought. But beyond this were telling comments by students that ‘God gives me courage’, ‘Praying makes me happy’, ‘If I don’t have time in our prayer room at home my day doesn’t go as well’, ‘I used to sit on my own and braid grass, now I have friends’, ‘teachers know me personally and I feel special’, ‘I pray in chapel for my mum and that helps me.’ ‘I praise God through singing’, and ‘Music is my way of praying and thinking about God.” These are the sorts of comments we, as reviewers, long to hear more often!

**Mark 2 – to teach, baptise and nurture new believers**

The key way in which students are educated in the Christian faith is through the Religious Education classes. Over the two days we visited three different classes:

Year 1. This was a very full-on class with mixed ability, high energy students engaged in three activities over the 40 minute duration of the lesson. The Christmas story was read wonderfully, using a book that had been a student prize and was followed by activities of creating the manger scene in playdoh, or using Lego, or by constructing a small booklet of the story. The clapping-out of words like Nazareth and the making connections with their little fingers to parts of the story show a use of the many senses. This was followed by the decorating of two pavlovas for the staff morning tea. If God gave us the gift of Jesus, then the class would give the staff a gift! Excellent.

Year 3. There were 11 in this class and the teacher was assisted by two teacher aids to support those with learning difficulties. This was a well-structured lesson beginning with prayer and offering the students opportunities to reflect in different modes on the virtue being covered over the two week period, namely ‘love’. The teacher’s quiet, but firm approach set a good tone for the lesson and reinforced the virtue being learnt. She is clearly a master of what she does with a deep enthusiasm for the students and her subject. There was also an opportunity to join another class briefly who were making clay crosses, many with a virtue named on them carved or moulded in clay. By the time we got there they were off to be dried. High student engagement was obvious.

Year 8 were reaching the end of a Middle School Theology unit. Given that this is the age in which students often develop a degree of cynicism toward RE, the complete lack of such an attitude among these students was worth noting. They engaged naturally and enthusiastically with the lesson and were able to bring enquiring minds and thoughtful responses to the issues raised. The lesson began with a number of volunteers to open in prayer, and the student who was chosen prayed with no self-consciousness. The students were clearly accustomed to including thanksgiving, repentance and requests in prayer. These are all evidence that the students have gone through a number of years of quality RE teaching.

One person interviewed saw a place for a single RE teacher across the school as some teaching RE were either agnostic or atheist and the person saw this as an area that needed attention. On the other side, the benefit of a range of teachers bringing their own approaches to RE was also noted. It is possible that a compromise could be reached where one or two teachers have responsibility for RE across the school, but Christian class teachers can opt to take their own classes.

We were impressed with the manner in which the students we interviewed could articulate faith issues in honest and clear ways. They told us that both RE classes and chapel had helped their faith to grow. Again and again we heard of the ‘teaspoon prayer’ of *thank-you, sorry and please* being the three foci of their learned prayer pattern.

Central to the delivery of the Special Character of the School is the use of virtues. These are the outworking of the values of the community. Over the course of the year 20 virtues are covered, one per fortnight. These are taught in class and affirmed in chapel services and assemblies. One staff member believed the school’s strongest value was that of celebrating family/whanau, thus accepting differences and being a caring community. “SMCS is a place where we ‘honour the small things’,” she said.

The deputy principal and principal have put an enormous amount of work into reviewing and assessing their values programme. They have drawn on ideas and comments from across the school family, which has naturally resulted in a wide range of values which people believe are important. During our discussion, we looked at ways in which the programme could be simplified or clarified, perhaps down to 4 key values which others can build from, or even one key concept (such as “Shalom”) from which foundation the varying aspects of school life could grow. We have every confidence that the final scheme will be workable and God-centred, and look forward to seeing the form it will take.

We note that there have been no baptism programmes running in the school in recent years and believe this could be considered as an important part of the mission of the school within its Special Character gambit. At present this is left to the parish/church setting that pupils may be in, but does not give opportunity for those with no Church affiliation to explore this avenue during their important primary school years. Baptisms in the School chapel could be a wonderful way to support encourage and honour new believers in their Christian journey and, done well (which we know it will be!) can be a huge witness to others. Some vicars are reluctant to baptise students in a school chapel rather than a “parish”, but for many staff and students the school *is* their church, their faith community, and so baptism in this context is quite appropriate. It would also do no harm to invite the Cathedral congregation to come to the school for a baptism service! We as a Christian church are reaching out to these students and should be willing to come to where they are rather than expect them to come to “us”.

With that one recommendation noted, we believe that the school is fulfilling this mark of mission well.

**Mark 3 and 4 – To respond to human need through loving service; To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation**

All interviewed on the topic of service were able to outline the many and varied ways in which ‘service’ is fostered in the school. The school has a service club and the activities SMCS is engaged in include: a green-bin for clothes recycling, Fair trade association, a multi-coloured painted bench for those who need to chat to someone, and students visiting rest homes often reading to residents. Within the school, service is also seen as the older students go to the preschool to assist from time to time, primarily with reading, and other senior classes “buddy up” with junior ones in order to help on rainy days. Overall there was a strong sense of students helping each other, including those in their own classes who struggle academically.

We asked students about the “bad news” for their generation. Normally when we ask this question the answers are about social media and parental pressure or climate change – in other words, things which affect them directly. When we asked St Mark’s students they talked about pollution, poverty, homelessness, building back the economy and the current challenges faced by the tourism industry. They also spoke about bullying, including cyber bullying and the journey this can put (other) people on to suicide. On a good-news note they expressed pleasure that a vaccine, or two, had now been developed. These concerns showed an impressive awareness of, and compassion towards, people in their own country and beyond who are less fortunate. Their responses also amazed us with their outward-looking nature. These are students with the increasingly rare quality of not thinking everything is about themselves! We realise some credit for this goes to the excellent IB programme, but it would not have become so deeply ingrained if it was not also lived out in the general school life and ethos.

As with many Anglican schools, the Forty Hour Famine programme is undertaken by St Mark’s, but instead of abstaining from food over the period, the students do a walk, with many of the pre-schoolers getting piggy-backed. The sum of $20,000 that was raised is again a positive indicator of the school’s focus on serving others in need.

Justice is a challenging topic for students in this age group. But the caring environment and the ‘nice teachers’ that Year 4 students talked about all help to create an environment of ensuring that just processes are in place.

The Board is aware of the relative privilege of schools such as SMCS and is aiming to support refugee families through what are called ‘community grants’, which can be up to 100% of the school fees. Additionally, amidst COVID-19 there is assistance given to parents struggling with the ‘injustice’ of a pandemic on their business/livelihoods. All this sits amidst the school’s own challenges in the wake of the virus, with a probable loss of many who were to start at the school in 2021, but now unable to do so.

One could say that the new school constitution is also a more just structure!

**Mark 5 - To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth**

Students can engage in a group called ‘Eco-ninjas’. The activities initiated/run by the group include organising trash-free days and compost bins in the classrooms. The school is an International Baccalaureate institution following that curriculum and so there is engagement with the Sustainable Goals. In 2020 the Year 8 exhibition had the topic ‘Sharing the Planet’, with a focus on local problems requiring local solutions. We were impressed to hear of the learning that occurred as 3-4 students were associated with a mentor as they worked on the project. Foci varied from gender equality to the ecology of life under water. Students also talked of tree-planting that they had participated in and a beach clean-up. Vicki Zadimus spoke of the hope to extend the action dimension of the programmes in 2021.

**Summary**

It has been a pleasure and privilege to engage with the School community over the course of three days. The school is in wonderful heart with high levels of trust within and between all levels of the school community and this is due to a combination of a superb, Christ-focussed senior management team, a vastly improved governance structure, highly dedicated staff, a much-respected chaplain, quality chapel services, excellent music input, small classes, the IB-ethos, the enquiry model of learning and well-cared-for classrooms. We have offered some minor recommendations amidst this document, but were we to grade the school we would happily offer an A+ in terms of the realisation of its special character, the focus of this review. Well done to all!

Anne van Gend

Tony Gerritsen

**ANGLICAN SCHOOLS’ OFFICE**

1. Student comments: ‘He makes thing intelligible’, ‘he’s relevant’, ‘he tells funny stories’, [↑](#footnote-ref-1)