Educare March 2009

Raising our Children in Secular Societies

Secular societies are the norm for many of our families' passport countries. All of the traditional European, North American and Pacific "Western" sending countries are secular in their political and legal frameworks. Religion plays a very minor part in some of these countries, having been largely relegated to the private domain "for those interested in that kind of thing" in countries such as France for many years. Increasingly other countries have gone this way in a major cultural shift that has seen the weakening of Christian influence in many areas of life. Christian-run hospitals, schools probation services and more have all been taken over by the secular state and show very few signs of their original roots. There is an ongoing clash of secular and Christian values, with most Western governments strongly influenced by the politically correct movement with an equality and diversity agenda – somehow trying to unite irreconcilable groups under their "tolerance" banner.

It isn't just Western countries influenced by this though: Latin America, despite the very rapid growth of Evangelical churches in most countries, also has an undercurrent of secularism in politics and the law. Increasingly too, most Asian and African democracies are at least officially secular. There is no doubt that secularism with its ideals and goals is a major influence in some way in most of our lives and one that will probably grow stronger during the lives of our children.

There are some positive aspects to this. The ideal of equality is most definitely one that we share, and one that we should have been practising all along. There should be no barriers in our churches and organisations based on colour, appearance, education levels, social status or nationality. To the shame of some Christian groups they have practised discrimination like this in the past as they were compromised by the prevailing attitudes of the society around them. The practice of racial segregation in apartheid-era South Africa or class-based elitism (such as a reserved place in leadership for the big local landowner) in state-sponsored churches spring to mind as obvious examples. We can enthusiastically embrace much of the equality ideology and teach it to our children as part of our values.

We can also share the values of concern for the disabled and socially disadvantaged, welcoming refugees and asylum seekers, share commitment to diversity and proper concern for health and safety. None of these shared concerns compromise our own beliefs or those we pass on to our children. In fact reading the books of the Law show these as inherently Judaeo-Christian values, and also show that these values make sense whatever other life philosophy someone else may adopt.

One of the biggest advantages is that we share the ideals of freedom that most secular societies adhere to. Freedoms of religion, speech, association and from oppression are written into our laws that in principle favour no group over another. These are hard-won and precious freedoms that cannot be taken for granted and must not be given up. Societies like this allow for the peaceful co-existence of religious, political and ethnic groups and enshrine their rights to believe and practice in law. When working correctly, the society gives no favours to hostile groups of any description. We can and do value living in such societies without compromising our own beliefs.

However, it is in this area that the new "tolerance" movement makes some of its most fundamental mistakes as it seeks to silence voices that it disagrees with. There is freedom of speech, except the freedom to disagree with the tolerance advocates; theirs is a freedom that ends once someone speaks out the truth on certain issues. There is freedom of religion – as long as it is kept private and out of their way, and certainly no freedom for any claim of absolute truth. The only absolute truth in this way of thinking is that there isn't any absolute truth and that their tolerance is the only absolutely true philosophy!

This isn't an article about campaigning for change though. Its purpose is to recognise the positive aspects of living in secular societies while helping our children process and come through the negatives. So many enthusiastic Christian parents watch their children grow up in such secular societies and ultimately watch them leave churches, maybe leaving Christian faith altogether. The latest figures from the UK are a staggering example of this, as they show that well over half of these children drop out like this. Losses across almost every church are severe. We also know that many children growing up in Europe where their parents are working in mission are also being lost to secularism in this way. There are many factors in this – in some cases the behaviour of church leaders, with the child abuse scandals as the most extreme example, will be the deciding factor; sometimes hypocrisy of ordinary members in a comfortable church faced with world poverty; it could be that really passing on the faith has been neglected both by an adult-focused church and the parents; it could be a host of other reasons. One of the biggest factors though has to be the clash of values – learning Christian faith at home and in church (we hope!), and learning a different creed from the media and at school.

What is that secular creed and why is it so powerful? One of the big ideas is materialism. This doesn't just mean outright consumerism with its obsession with stocking up on material possessions; the "shop until you drop" mentality. The underlying idea is much more pervasive than that, and a good summary would be:

> "Matter is all that matters"

In this way of thinking there is still scope for religious belief of almost any description, but that belief doesn't have any real bearing on the "real" world where we are concerned with what we can experience with our senses and in which we can acquire more things to lead as comfortable a life as possible. The outcome is that the focus is completely on the here and now. It may show in pleasure seeking, activism for a better world, short-term pragmatism and expediency, indifference except to our own personal needs, utilitarian emphasis on the needs of the many at the expense of individuals, or a whole range of other possibilities. The root idea is the same though – the matter that we have now is what really matters, other things are private or secondary concerns. Humanity is at the centre of this way of thinking.

The power behind it stems from the fact that it goes along with materially comfortable lifestyles in the developed world. People tend to be content and accept prevailing ideas if they are materially comfortable. It is also the message passed on via the media where so much is focused on the material world. From ideal homes magazines to beauty product adverts and pension security discussion programmes the message is the same; here and now is what matters. Religion may be OK if you like that kind of thing, but get on in the real world.

It is also the underlying ideal behind a lot of educational philosophy. Some of our systems allow for religion lessons, but they are segregated off from the rest of education. The important lessons of mathematics, science, humanities/social studies, mother tongue teaching and foreign languages are what children really need to study to get on in the world. By and large, these lessons come with no or minimal Christian perspective. Sometimes the values taught may even be anti-Christian.

This combination of media and educational input over the years can undo the good work done by parents and churches. If that parental input is weak in the first place, it is little wonder that so many teens and young adults leave church, as they may know the external forms of Christianity, but be secular in underlying belief and practice.

It is not all doom and gloom though. As parents we can and must do something to counter this steady effect of attrition on our children.

Faced with a prevailing philosophy and its outcomes that are contrary to our Christian beliefs we can do one of three things

1. Reject them and retreat with our children into a Christian ghetto
2. Live with the values, maybe saying that we reject certain things, but in reality accepting and compromising with them

3.   Live within the society, but not be part of its non and anti-Christian values. This is the Biblical model of being in the world, but not of it. (John 17v15&16)

The third option is the most demanding, but ultimately the most Biblical and produces the best results in our children. There are several main components to this approach with our children.

We need to deliberately plan for the development of our children's devotional lives. Fundamentally our children are our responsibility: we must bring them to faith, teach them how to pray, read their Bibles and share their faith. We also need to be part of a church that nurtures children and takes their needs seriously. If our church gives no input for children, then maybe a bare minimum requirement is to get an alternative extra source such as a Sunday school or Bible club somewhere else. It may even be necessary to rearrange priorities and move to a more child-orientated church for the sake of the children.

We need to regulate what our children read and watch, especially when they are younger, but we also need to instil the right understanding in them, so that as they get older they don't *want* to watch or read the wrong things and know why they don't want to. It isn't enough as our children get older just to ban certain things; we need to explain why they aren't allowed.

It will be worth analysing parts of a novel, magazine or TV programme with a critical eye and teaching our children how to look at these things as Christians. For example we can look for the overt or underlying message that says that happiness depends on material wealth, a well-paid job, good looks, the right husband or wife or popularity. Another area to consider would be the negative side of the equality and diversity agenda, with its message that any lifestyle or ideology is acceptable and tolerance is the highest virtue. These need to be countered with truths about the real source of joy and happiness, and Christian love being greater than minimalist tolerance on any occasion.

We need to process what they learn at school with them – this will come not just from the official curriculum and lessons, but also from friends who mostly absorb the prevailing attitudes like sponges. This involves talking the day through when they get home – although we may well need to wait until bed-time before some of the day's events come out! We also need to be aware of what they are learning, the books they are reading and any media/IT input they have. There may be significant areas such as the acceptance of questionable or wrong moral values in social education lessons, or it may just be the steady underlying assumption of teachers and classmates that the here and now is everything. There is a strong case if the school is actively promoting anti-Christian values, or if the ethos is very negative, to move the children out. In countries where home education is legal and feasible this may be the best option, especially in younger school years. In most countries though, this means finding a better school, possibly an openly Christian one if there are any in your area.

References
Chameleon or Tribe? Richard Keyes; IVP; ISBN 0 85111 5950; Keyes considers the ghetto and the compromise options, but comes up with a better alternative.
Battle For Truth; David Noebel; Harvest House publishers; ISBN 0 7369 07823; A very good summary of how Christian belief is logical when faced with alternatives such as secular humanism.
Universe Next Door; James Sire; IVP: A guide book to world views and a good justification of Christian belief and worldview

Co-operative Schools

Co-operative schools are a growing phenomenon around the mission world. This is partly because of the increasing emphasis on teams within mission and inter-mission co-operation in developing new areas of work. There are also many areas where boarding isn't a realistic option until the children are well into their teen years because of the sheer distance of travel involved. Also with the continuing growth of home education, many parents recognise the need for socialisation that a co-op school could provide while retaining their own choice of materials and programmes.

We have invited Deanna to contribute in this edition as she has been involved in setting up and developing two different co-op schools as she needed to educate her own children.

Q How many people were involved in the co-op schools you were part of?
A In the first one we initially had a dozen or so families, now the school has grown to nearly 200 students. In the second one it was 4 families to start with and grew to 8 at the most.

Q What were your roles within the co-ops?
A In the first I was a founding board member, led different committees and I did some substitute teaching. In the second I was again a founding board member, and functioned as the principal with a different title, mainly planning out the curriculum and supervising teachers.

Q How formally were the co-op schools structured? Did you have an agreed "constitution" with written job descriptions?
A The first one gradually developed to have a fairly formal structure because of its growth in size. The second remained small with a maximum of 16 students so we never had a formal constitution, but we did have job descriptions and a school handbook, eventually we produced a staff handbook.

Q What were the advantages to you as a family of being part of the co-op? Do you see any other advantages in general from other co-op schools?
A The first one was a stabilizing influence in our kids' lives during some turbulent years in our ministry. It was helpful while I had two younger children at home to be relieved of home schooling responsibilities for the older two. Being involved in the early stages, we were able to have significant input into the philosophy, finances and running of the school. For example, we wanted to keep the costs very low and while the co-op was small, we succeeded.
The second one provided influential Christian teachers and friends during our kids' middle/high school years. We were living in a more isolated location where they did not have had local friends who were believers and there was no strong church and no youth group.

Q What sort of challenges did you face that you overcame reasonably successfully?
A The amount of time that we needed to invest in the start up and running of the school: During the start up period, the co-op required a sizable amount of my time. But with four children, we knew that this would be similar for any of our educational options. We had to weigh the time to commute to school and cost versus the effects of our location on our ministry. As our boys got older they were able to take local transportation to school which not only saved money, but cultivated independence and confidence which they enjoyed.

Q What were any disadvantages for you? Have you seen any other disadvantages elsewhere that didn't affect you?
A There is an issue of lack of integration into the local culture. At the time we started the co-op school, we did not have a residence permit so our kids could not attend local school. Once we got a residence permit, we switched to local schools and we had a much better reception among our local middle class neighbours. Our kids learned the local language and adapted better to the local culture once they were in local school, which in turn created plenty of other challenges.
Generally, in my 18 years' experience, we've seen most students perform really well when they went on to higher education. We've also seen a smaller number of students flounder academically in our school - mainly because the academic standards were maybe just too demanding for them. It's interesting that these same students have gone on to perform above average in local schools back in their passport countries. I'm not sure how to deal with this in our desire to help our kids do their best, but it is a concern that there should be flexibility and a place for students of average academic abilities.
Eventually as the school grew larger and felt the need for legal status, tuition costs increased. We would not have been able to send our children at the present cost of tuition.

As both schools grew and included more non-native English speaking parents, responsibility for the school was not as equally shared. The English speakers had to accept more of the work load for teaching, recruiting and leading due to language limitations.

Initially we created two smaller localized school sites over one larger site, which was later discontinued, mainly for financial reasons. I think if we were starting a school now we would explore options to encourage the spread of workers as much as possible.

Q How are your co-op schools doing now?
A The first is still growing, and increasing what they can offer students. The second has closed as the families involved moved out of the area. Some families preferred to home school individually.

Q A lot of families whose mother tongue isn't English want to send their children to a co-op school to learn in English, as they see this as the education language needed for the future. They also want the social side of school as many of them are from countries where home-ed is illegal or very marginal. How would you accommodate the children for whom English isn't the mother tongue, and what kind of role can the parents have in such a co-op?
A We tried employing some of the English speaking teens in offering a summer English class for younger kids who needed to learn some English in order to attend the co-op. We tried to find out parents' particular skills and interests to get them involved. Some non-native English speakers felt intimidated about getting involved in the school and sometimes disenfranchised from the decision making as a result. Some helped in the library, serving as teachers' assistants in the younger classes, teaching music, art and foreign languages and hosting special events like sports day, graduation, the Christmas programme and others.

Q Did you bring in outside teachers as well as parents? If you did, what advantages and challenges did this bring?
A We brought in outside teachers and even non-teacher college students, whom we trained. This required a big initial investment of time, but several of those college students returned as long term staff, so we felt it was worth it.

It was an ongoing challenge every year to cultivate a positive atmosphere in the school, especially among the staff and toward the local culture and language. This required parents' involvement in orientation, conflict resolution and pastoral care of teachers (as well as with struggling students). We also tried to allow staff the time and flexibility for them to do some language study and be involved locally. Naturally, the teachers who connected better with locals tended to be the ones who returned as long term workers (not necessarily with the school though).

With the first co-op, as the need for more teachers and specialized teachers increased, we were forced to provide more financial benefits in order to meet the needs of the school.

Q How did you work out which kind of curriculum to work to? Was it by individual decision with varied choices, was it by consensus, did any families feel pressure to conform to choices made by others? Have you seen influential families choose maverick (or even poor) curricula and affect others' choices?
A Initially curriculum decisions were made by consensus of the board or curriculum committee, but eventually the teachers wanted and needed to have more of a voice in those decisions. They generally had more training and experience than the parents, but of course frequent turnover of teachers also meant they frequently had different ideas from previous teachers. We learned by making some poor choices of curriculum materials, which we eventually had to correct at our own expense.

Q What advice would you have for any new groups of families looking at a co-op?
A We try to encourage new families to explore local school options first if possible, especially during elementary school. Now that our children are in university we're convinced their education did not suffer, but rather benefited from their years in local language schools. Each family has to decide what issues are most important for them and how those fit in with the others who are considering forming a co-op.

Q Do you see any value in possible satellite arrangements with a bigger school? Would it be useful at all to model the curriculum on that of the bigger school and gear children up to be able to transfer if appropriate?
A We explored that possibility but the bigger schools in our country didn't feel like they had the manpower to offer us much help beyond some documentation. We could have followed their curriculum and perhaps avoided some mistakes we made, but we would have lost flexibility and it would have increased costs.
Finding "host families" to house high school students in the capital city has helped some to continue ministry in isolated areas.

Q Any other advice or comments about co-op schooling?
A In our experience, guarding the unity among the families was a major issue and I think our spiritual unity had more impact on our co-op's success than the particular teachers, the curriculum or finances. You will always have different expectations, you will probably have some less than wonderful teachers, and you will always make mistakes and have conflicts. But we spent a fair amount of time praying together and got to know each other well enough that when we had differences or problems, we were able to work together to solve them. I guess that required a team approach - seeing ourselves as working together toward a common vision or goal. Even though we didn't appoint a leader at first, someone naturally emerged who was able and willing to lead, and the others appreciated and supported that person. Running a co-op required a lot of communication, especially among different nationalities to understand each others' values.

Resources

For some years now the book "Raising Resilient MKs" has been a standard addition to our libraries both at home and in our agencies. This is with good reason given the breadth of issues covered and the input from so many concerned for the education and welfare of our MKs. The book is now out of print, BUT it is available for free download at the following webpage
http://www.missionarycare.com/ebook.htm#resilient_mks
If you haven't read it yet, get it, it has a wealth of information in the magazine articles it compiles together.
For those who prefer the hard copy, there are still some in stock at WEC Canada. These are available at cost price (21 Canadian dollars) plus postage from Teresa Howe at 37 Aberdeen Avenue, Hamilton, Ontario, ON L8P 2N6, Canada. Tel 905 529 0166 E-mail info@wec-canada.org

Upcoming conferences

Another **Eurotck** conference is being planned. It will be from the 28th March to the 1st April at Peñiscola in Spain. This will directly follow the European Member Care Conference (EMCC) at the same centre and will concern many of the same people.
The goals are similar to Eurotck 2007, but we hope to move on with the themes discussed there and bring us all up to date with the latest developments. The planning committee will release more details over the coming months on the website that was launched for the 2007 conference.
www.eurotck.net
Plan this into your diary now; it should be another great opportunity to learn and to network together.

Also don't forget **IMKEC**. This year it will be in Colorado Springs again from the 14th to 17th September. Details on the ACSI website at www.acsi.org