



Friday 12 April 2013

Mr Tim Heasley
Chair
Fairness In Religion In Schools

Dear Mr Heasley,

I have received an email from FIRIS, requesting my professional review of the 'Religion In Life' curriculum materials produced by ACCESS Ministries. I am pleased to provide the following information.

I have reviewed:

Launch 1 and 2, Teacher and Student books
Trek 1 and 2, Teacher and Student books (Green Series)
Search 1 and 2, Teacher and Student books (Green Series)
Quest 1 and 2, Teacher and Student books (Green Series)

My review is based on my expertise:

- in theology (PhD 1992; editorial board member of the *International Journal of Public Theology*; invitations to present at theological conferences, eg invited speaker for the Centenary Conference of the Melbourne College of Divinity; invited publications in theological journals eg *International Journal of Public Theology*, *Uniting Church Studies*)
- in religion and education (Lecturer and then Senior Lecturer in Religious Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of South Australia, 1992-1996, responsible for designing and delivering courses on the theory and practice of religious education, as part of the Grad. Dip. Ed. and M.Ed. programs, to teachers of both Special Religious Education and General Religious Education in public and private schools in various States and Territories, including Victoria; holder of Australian Research Council Future Fellowship 'Religion, State and Social Inclusion: Lessons from Schools in Three Countries' 2011-2015)
- in religious studies (Senior Lecturer, then Associate Professor, Victoria University Wellington, 2000-2007; Member of American Academy of Religion; Member of Australian Association for the Study of Religions (President 1999-2000); editorial board member, *Australian Religion Studies Review* and *Religare*, publications in numerous religious studies journals; Chief Investigator for Australian Research Council Discovery Project *Religion and Political Thought* 2011-2014).



My review covered two questions:

1. Do the 'Religion in Life' materials tend to support ACCESS's often-repeated claim that their classes do not proselytise or evangelise, but instead are designed to impart information about Christian 'history, belief systems and cultural traditions' (eg Evonne Paddison, 'Religious Instruction Teaches Much More Than Faith', *Sydney Morning Herald* 3 April 2011)?
2. Do the 'Religion in Life' materials, which are designed for use in public schools, tend to support public schools' historic mission to educate children of all religious and philosophical backgrounds in an atmosphere of mutual respect (attested in the Parliamentary debates of all the colonies at the time of establishing their public school systems)?

I address these overarching questions by means of the following subquestions:

Does 'Religion in Life' material appear designed to evangelise / proselytise?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'evangelize' as '1. preach the gospel to. 2. convert (a person) to Christianity', while the *Macquarie Dictionary* gives the same two transitive meanings, along with a third, intransitive, definition: '3. to preach the gospel; act as an evangelist'. The *OED* defines 'proselytise' as 'convert (a person or people) from one belief etc. to another', and the *Macquarie* gives 'to make a proselyte of; convert'.

A high proportion of ACCESS's lesson materials goes beyond imparting knowledge of Biblical allusions or cultural references (as claimed by ACCESS) and is directed towards encouraging children to develop a personal faith. There is no difficulty in saying that this material amounts to 'preaching the gospel' to participating students. I address below the extent to which the aim of the lessons could be said to be converting children from one belief to another.

'Preaching the gospel' or teaching about 'history, belief systems and cultural traditions'?

The teachers' guides give detailed lesson plans, each lesson tied to a Purpose, Main point, Key Verse and between two and four dot-pointed Values (such as diversity, inclusion, joy, hope). The Main Points are invariably theological, and often specifically devotional. Each lesson concludes with a prayer, usually emphasising emotional attachment to God through feelings such as being sorry for having done wrong, relying on God when others hurt us, thanking God for celebrations, and so on. The curriculum materials also include songs which take the form of devotional choruses, sometimes addressed to God ('Father God/You are great/You're the king/Not just my mate'), and often emphasising individual sinfulness and dependence on God's forgiveness. The parts of the lesson likely to evoke the highest levels of student engagement are active learning activities such as coded messages, mazes leading to a secret word, and so on. These nearly always produce a devotional answer.



A fairly consistent feature of the lessons is that what might be called the cultural information is at a very low conceptual level compared to the devotional material. The disparity is so significant, and so consistent, that the devotional content would be conceptually over the heads of children who were grasping the cultural content; or else, if the children were at a stage to be able to grasp the devotional content, then the cultural content would be so basic as to be unlikely either to impart much useful information or to hold students' interest.

Is 'Religion in Life' designed to convert?

It could be argued, and the article by ACCESS CEO Canon Dr Evonne Paddison cited above suggests, that the materials do not amount to proselytization or evangelism, because they are for use in classrooms where all students are assumed to share the same faith. Dr Paddison's article says:

SRI is not about 'making converts'. Each of the faith providers teaches their own faith. It is well acknowledged that religious education encourages pupils to develop their sense of identity and belonging and to flourish within their communities.

However, the State does not expect that all children in an SRI classroom share the faith of the instructor. This was established in *Sophie Aitken & Ors v State of Victoria—Department of Education and Early Childhood Development* 2012 VCAT 1547. In the words of the Supreme Court of Victoria Court of Appeal, 'The Tribunal found that there was no obvious connection between attendance at SRI and holding a particular religious belief' (*Aitken & Ors v State of Victoria* 2013 VSCA 28, p 7).

My conclusion from assessing 'Religion in Life' is that the material does not contain anything as overt as an altar call or appeal for conversions. However, educators know well that students absorb information through many other channels than the most overt, including through the 'hidden curriculum'. In the case of 'Religion in Life', the message is barely-hidden: my assessment is that the material before me would clearly convey to non-Christian students that, according to the materials being presented as authoritative in a classroom context, not being a Christian is inferior to being a Christian and that they should follow the example of the people described in many of the lessons, and convert. The tone of ACCESS materials is unequivocally evangelical, not only in that it relentlessly pushes the participating students towards cultivating an individual faith but, perhaps more importantly, in that a person participating in the ACCESS program would come away with the idea that Christians believe that being (or becoming) a Christian is the only acceptable life choice.

Moreover, proselytising may occur not merely between religions but between different branches of a single religion. Despite occasional warnings in the teachers' books to have regard to Christian diversity, 'Religion in Life' continuously presents a single, evangelical, literalist version of Christianity. My conclusion is that 'Religion in Life' would, intentionally or not, have the effect of conveying to non-evangelical Christian students that their version of Christianity was inadequate and that they should abandon it and adopt the 'Religion in Life' version.



Is ‘Religion in Life’ compatible with public schools’ historic mission to foster mutual respect among students from diverse religious backgrounds?

A few lesson plans announce ‘Values’ such as ‘Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion’¹, ‘Acceptance, Tolerance, Fair Go’² or ‘Inclusion, Respect, Diversity’³. In each case, the lessons emphasise acceptance of others—as long as they are Christians. An example, from *Search*, for Years 3 and 4, is about Jesus meeting and forgiving the tax collector, Zacchaeus, who then experiences acceptance and tolerance—once he has repented. It concludes with the prayer,

*Dear God, it is not always easy to welcome others. Help me to accept other people and forgive people so that they feel welcome.*⁴

A student participating in that lesson would have to be quite a lateral thinker to reach the conclusion that it is possible to welcome an outsider without the outsider requiring ‘forgiveness’. The implications that tolerance is promoted only between Christians and that ‘difference’ *prima facie* requires ‘forgiveness’ are significantly at odds with public schools’ important values such as welcoming and valuing people regardless of their religious or other identity.

In addition, the following points concern me as a theologian and an educator:

‘Religion in Life’ downplays critical inquiry

People, including Christians, read the Bible in many different ways. The ‘Religion in Life’ materials consistently promote a literalist and harmonised reading that overlooks or denies diversity and internal inconsistency in the biblical texts, and instead promotes the idea that the Bible was directly written by God and is not open to question or critique. Research shows that this non-mainline approach can lead to significant conflicts and confusion for children, for example if the material presented to them by a CRE teacher promoting a literalist hermeneutic conflicts with the information they receive in science or social science lessons. Further, valuable class time can be consumed as professional teachers try to untangle the educational amateurs’ effects and restore students’ regard for the mandated curriculum.

‘Religion in Life’ appears to have become increasingly evangelical over subsequent editions

All the books I reviewed were published in 2010 or later, except for *Quest* (Years 5 & 6), which was published in 2006. (I note that ACCESS’s Mission and Vision Statement lists the goal to ‘develop alternative approaches for CRE for Grades 5 and 6’ ‘over the next five years’ (<http://www.accessministries.org.au/about/mission-and-vision-statement>)). Some *Quest* lesson objectives are couched in noticeably more neutral terms and less evangelical tone than the more

¹ *Launch 2*, Unit 8 ‘Moving’, ACCESS Ministries, *Launch 2 Teacher Book (Green Series)* Melbourne: Council for Christian Education in Schools (Victoria) 2009, 63

² *Search 2* Unit 6 Session 1, ACCESS Ministries, *Search 2 Teacher Book (Green Series)* Melbourne: Council for Christian Education in Schools (Victoria) 2009, 11

³ *Quest 1*, Unit 3 Session 2, ACCESS Ministries, *Quest 1 Teacher Book (Green Series)* Melbourne: Council for Christian Education in Schools (Victoria) 2006, 45

⁴ *Search 2* Unit 6 Session 1, op. cit.



recently-published books. This is consistent with the impressions of former CRE instructors, who have remarked upon ACCESS materials becoming less educational and more evangelising over time.

I agree with Dr Paddison's contention, in the article quoted above, that 'all faiths play a valuable part in shaping and forming our understanding of who we are as individuals and as members of the global village,' and that schools should introduce students to this range. The ACCESS curriculum, however, offers students only a very narrow segment of how some members of one faith form such understandings. International research repeatedly confirms that students, especially in multicultural and multifaith societies, are better served by social studies programs, taught by qualified teachers to the whole class (no faith-based segregation) as part of the normal school curriculum, which introduce them to a range of the faith and non-faith traditions that make up the 'global village'.

I hope that this assessment is helpful. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of any further assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Marion Maddox BA Hons, PhD (Theology), PhD (Philosophy)

**Professor and ARC Future Fellow
Department of Politics, Macquarie University NSW**

**Adjunct Professor, Religion in Political Life
University of Newcastle NSW**