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**The Contribution of the Anglican Church to the State Maintained System of Education  
in England and Wales – A reflection on the work of the National Society**

**Abstract**

National debates about the role of religion in the public sphere of education tend to focus on the attitude and role of the state and to assume that the state is able to make any change necessary or appropriate to its understanding of the needs of the present. In reflecting on the work undertaken by or with the support of the National Society in England and Wales since its foundation in 1811 this paper will seek to explore how a nation's history in the field impacts on the way decisions can be made in the present and for the future and will seek to explore how such an understanding could influence the focus of the debates in the future.

## Introduction

The National Society (Church of England) for Promoting Religious Education was founded by the Church of England to develop a system of elementary schooling based on each parish having a school or schools to provide education for the children of the 'poor and manufacturing classes' (Burgess & Welsby, 1961). It received a Royal Charter in 1811 and as the first national society for any purpose to do so also received the privilege of being known as 'The National Society' (Burgess, 1958). It worked on behalf of the Anglican Church in parallel with and sometimes in competition with the British and Foreign Schools Society, a body set up by the 'Free' churches in England and Wales. The initial target set by the founders of the Society was that every Anglican parish should have its own school. As these schools would be associated with the Society which was working within the Church of England, Religious Education and worship within the school were both understood to be key parts of the educational experience being provided for the pupils. From 1837 both societies were receiving government grants to assist them in the establishment of new schools. By 1850 the Roman Catholic Church was also benefiting from government grants to create schools. The state only became involved in the provision of schools following an act of parliament in 1870. This Act created local School Boards to provide elementary schools in those places where the churches were unable or unwilling to do so. At this time the National Society had managed to found or support 6,724 schools and the other denominations 2,074. (Burgess and Welsby, 1961). The stimulus of the 1870 act, created a new energy within the Society and over a 1,000 new schools were created in the next few years, leaving the School Boards with fewer gaps to fill although in the expanding suburbs of the growing industrial towns there were many places where the new 'Board Schools' were needed. In 1902 Local Education Authorities replaced the School Boards and were given power to manage the provision of schooling in their locality including the responsibility closing schools that were no longer needed and for ensuring that new schools were established to meet developing needs. In 1920 the Anglican Church ceased to be the 'established' or state church in Wales and as a result the nature of the relationship between the Church in Wales and those responsible for the governance of Wales began to change. For the Church in Wales engagement with education changed very little as all legislation on education was still enacted through the UK Parliament in Westminster and The National Society continued to represent interests of the Church in Wales alongside those of the Church of England in negotiations with government on the law and its administration.

The Education Act 1944 established the 'Dual system' of church and 'county' schools within the 'maintained system' as well as establishing secondary education as a distinct stage for all pupils throughout England and Wales. It was this act of parliament that confirmed common practice by requiring that each pupil in any state maintained school should participate in an act of worship every day, unless their parents withdrew them on conscience grounds and also required that all children attending school have Religious Education as part of their school curriculum. Provision was made for the syllabus for Religious Education to be determined within each Local Education Authority and to achieve this each Local Education Authority had to create a Conference of interested parties. In England the Church of England forms one of the four key groups on this conference (the other three being the Local Education Authority, the teachers and the other Christian denominations and faith groups) in Wales there was no separate provision for the Church in Wales and the church became one of the members of the group covering all Christian denominations and other faith groups.

Subsequent education law continues to enshrine the principle of partnership implicit in the 'dual system' created within the Education Act 1944.

In 1988 the Education Reform Act introduced the concept of a 'National Curriculum' into the education system of England and Wales. Representation by the churches about the position of Religious Education alongside the National Curriculum led to the concept of the 'Basic Curriculum' which is defined as being 'Religious Education and those subjects that form the National Curriculum'. It is the basic curriculum which is the entitlement of every child being educated in a school in England and Wales.

In 1992 the Education (Schools) Act introduced a new regime for the regular inspection of all schools within the state maintained system in England and Wales. This act included provision for the inspection of those aspects of schools owned by churches or other religious bodies which relate specifically to the schools foundation to be inspected on behalf of the governors and the founding churches. These areas include the provision for Religious Education and school worship. This legislation was amended in 1993 to clarify some details and again in 2005 to reflect changes in schools that had taken place in the meantime.

In 1998 a new government introduced a new structure for schools and in the course of this legislation's passage through parliament the concept of 'schools having a religious character' was developed in order to clarify the precise status of the schools that were part of the state maintained system but which were owned by religious groups and operated by them. This was needed because successive governments were creating changes in the types of school within the maintained system and school governing bodies were being given the freedom to choose the type of status that was most appropriate to their school's situation.

Subsequent education acts (for example in 2002 and 2005) have continued this process of which the most recent is the Schools Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2012. It is worth noting that this piece of legislation was entirely a matter for the Welsh government not the UK parliament.

### **The Role of the National Society**

In 2011 the National Society celebrated its bicentenary with a Service of Thanksgiving in Westminster Abbey, a major academic conference and the publication of a selection of the papers given at this conference under the title *Anglican Church School Education – Moving beyond the first two hundred years* (Worsley, 2013). Throughout this two hundred year period the National Society has been active in the sphere of education founding, promoting and resourcing Church of England and Church in Wales schools and colleges and promoting good quality Religious Education in all schools. At that time there were 4,973 Anglican schools (21.9% of all schools) in England and Wales providing education for approximately 1,000,000 children within the state maintained system of education.

(Lankshear, 2002). Around 34% of all schools in England had a 'Religious Character'<sup>1</sup> that is they were identified formally with one of the Christian churches or with another faith group of which the majority were Church of England and the next largest group were Roman Catholic. In Wales 15% of all schools have a 'Religious Character' with the two providers being the Roman Catholic Church and the Church in Wales (Data collated from Worsley,

2013). While retaining its key role of resourcing Anglican schools and Religious Education in all schools, since the 1960s the National Society has worked in Partnership with the Church of England Board of Education on policy matters in England and with the Church in Wales on policy matters in Wales. In effect this collaboration between the Society and the two separate parts of the Anglican Communion was reasonably straight forward until 1997 when powers began to be devolved from the Westminster parliament to the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff.

In founding and maintaining Church of England and Church in Wales schools the National Society has raised funds from charitable donors and (since the 1830s, and has administered government grants to schools in order to assist with the costs involved in providing and maintaining church school buildings. In more recent times these grants have been made direct to schools but the National Society has continued to train and support the diocesan staff who support the school governors.

The National Society founded a number of colleges whose purpose was originally to educate teachers to work in church schools. The colleges that have survived re-organisations and changes in government policies have all become Universities or constituent parts of universities which provide for a wide range of students. The assets of those Colleges that failed to survive have been used to create charitable trusts which have used their grant making powers to fund a significant amount of research and development work in the field of Religious Education and School Worship.

Until quite recently the National Society published a range of material to support the work of Anglican schools and also to resource the Anglican Church's contribution to Religious Education in all schools. While its publications on Religious Education were largely intended for serving teachers they also had the effect of resourcing and informing those people who represented the Anglican church on the Local Education Authority conferences that created or adopted the local Syllabuses for Religious Education. At national level the National Society was active in the initiatives to provide resource material and frameworks for these conferences. It still maintains this thread of its work through resources that are made available on its web site.

For many years the National Society conducted regular inspections of Anglican schools, but the practice was discontinued during the 1960s due in part to lack of resources and partly to questions being raised about the effectiveness of the patterns of inspection being used. Following the passage of the Education (Schools) Act in 1992, the National Society revived its role in school inspection and laid the foundation for the re-establishment of the inspection by trained inspectors of the religious aspects of Anglican schools on a regular basis. The patterns adopted at this time by the National Society have provided a model for other providers of schools with a 'religious character'.

From 1811 until the end of the Second World War the National Society spoke on behalf of the Anglican Church in England and Wales on matters of government policy, legislation and administration. At that point there was a move to clarify the decision-making process so that the links between what was being done in the name of the Church in education was clearly and openly related to the wider policy of the Church's national structures. This led to a concordat by which it was agreed that the work on these policy issues would be conducted by the Church of England Board of Education and the Church in Wales Division of Education (until the 1990s). The National Society continued to resource those undertaking this work and

this was achieved, in part, through the appointment of a number of ‘joint posts’ mostly at a senior level between the National Society and the Church of England Board of Education. Those holding these joint appointments frequently found themselves working in the name of the Board of Education in England and the National Society in Wales.

In 2001 the Church of England published the results of a review of its engagement with the education system (Dearing, 2001). Amongst its key recommendations were the expansion of the number Church of England secondary schools, the development of support for the Christian Vocation to teach and the development of the quality of education in Church of England schools

In the following years the Church in Wales became increasingly aware that the Church of England’s review did not fit precisely the needs of the Church in Wales. Two major reasons for this were clear. First the Church of England’s focus on the expansion of its secondary provision was not seen as appropriate in Wales where the opportunities for such an expansion were limited and secondly the Church in Wales was wrestling with the ways it should be responding to the policy, legislative and administrative issues that arose from the devolution of powers from the government in Westminster to the Assembly in Cardiff. Therefore the Church in Wales decided that it needed to conduct its own review process. From the first this review was resourced by research undertaken on its behalf. Among the results of this research published through the Church in Wales website was an account of the proportion of the working week that Anglican clergy allocate to work in schools of all types, not just those schools identified as Church in Wales schools.

The results of this review were published by Lankshear (2009). In the same year the Governing Body of the Church in Wales adopted the reviews recommendations. These focussed on the same issues as the English report with the exception of the expansion of secondary schooling, but also put in place a means whereby the Church in Wales could equip itself with a robust structure for creating policy on education and responding to policy initiatives from the Welsh Assembly Government. These structures were justified during the passage of the Schools Standards and Organisation (Wales) Bill in 2011-2012 when the Church in Wales had to negotiate with the Welsh government on the implications of the proposals in the bill for Church in Wales schools and the Church in Wales commitment to education more generally. The report also paved the way for a redefinition of the relationship between the Church in Wales and the National Society.

In recent years the national governments of England and Wales have both publically affirmed their commitment to the dual system by producing publications jointly with the partner churches and faith groups reflecting the commitment of all parties to work together for the benefit of schools and the education of the children and young people within them (DCFS, 2007; DES,2011).

## **Reflection**

This paper has taken one example of a country’s education system and briefly presented an overview of the historical involvement of the Anglican Church in that system. The history of education in England and Wales has the effect of locking some of the churches and faith groups into relationship with national and local government through the ownership of schools in the system. However much the appropriateness of such an arrangement might be debated in some quarters, in practice it is very unlikely to change, because of two inescapable facts.

1. The churches began the system
2. The churches and faith groups own the buildings of the schools that they operate and if they were to withdraw or to be excluded the consequences would be that around a third of all school buildings would have to be replaced or purchased by the government.

While this arrangement commits the government to working with the churches it also commits the churches to working with the government. In focussing on the work undertaken by the National Society over the last two hundred years it will be apparent that for a church to undertake a major role in the provision of education requires it to commit time, energy and resource to the work and to be able to undertake it with a level of professional expertise. In addition the church must be able to change and adapt as governments and the needs of society change.

It can be argued that England and Wales have benefitted greatly from the contribution of the Anglican Church to the education system. This contribution has come at a cost to the church in terms of the time and resources that it has committed to the work.

A church that is not prepared to commit such time and resource to the work should not seek to engage with its national education system. Those governments that seek to exclude the contribution that faith groups can make to the education system presumably do so in the full knowledge of the additional resource that could be available to the system if they sought to be inclusive rather than exclusive.

#### **Notes**

1. For a definition of this phrase see School Standards and Framework Act 1998

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## **Education Acts**

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Education (Schools) Act 1992

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Schools Standards and Organisation (Wales ) Act 2012