

# Putting children, young people and families at the heart of our mission -

A challenge for the Church



By Professor Sir Al Aynsley-Green, Chair of Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education

There has been ferocious media criticism of children, young people and families recently. The riots and shocking images of young children out of parental control are used by those arguing that Britain is broken. Yet zealous commentators claim that religious 'indoctrination' of children somehow undermines society and its cohesion. Of concern to Anglicans is the equating of 'faith schools' and 'church schools' to be synonymous despite 200 years of inclusively educating children from families of faith as well as those of no faith.

Our several thousand church schools are a precious asset. We should stand up and say so and seize the opportunities for exploiting the political turmoil in education. New freedoms of funding, locally relevant curriculums, 'Free' Schools, Academies, and 'clusters' and 'umbrella trusts' should bring us back to our historical roots in providing education for the most needy in our parishes. To capitalise on these opportunities, however, demands tough talking on some fundamental issues.

To persuade the sceptics of the value of church school-based education, we must be clear of what it is that is distinctive, what our ethos gives children, and above all whether we do any good. It's no good saying we're doing a great job if we don't have the facts to support the assertion. We haven't been assiduous enough in defining our success criteria let alone documenting the outcomes for our children. Rigorous, credible academic research is needed urgently to define not just educational attainment, but indicators of the well being and resilience of young people coupled with hard data on their later outcomes. We can then use these facts to be less supine and more proactive than we have been in proclaiming the benefits and arguing for expansion of our schools.

Most Anglican schools are primary schools. Young children experience a caring, respectful and value-driven education alongside the opening of their minds to their innate spirituality. Yet, we are betraying many of them when the time comes for their transition to secondary school. Most move from caring church primary schools to large secular secondary environments, often with no continuity of the ethos they have lived with since starting school. Listening to children and their families confronting this transition exposes their fears and frustrations, these being compounded by the intellectual bunkers and silos between primary and secondary education itself.

We should develop 'all-through education' with children moving seamlessly from church primary to secondary school, ideally on the same campus in an 'education village'. But we should do more. We should look 'upstream' to provide church nursery and pre-school education. Our Church's future depends upon engaging with young parents and their babies and infants. They are crying out for nursery care, and this, when linked directly to church primary schools could provide a means of support through educating parents and children in the skills of parenting as happens in Canada through the 'Roots of Empathy' programme. The concept is simple. A new mother in a neighbourhood agrees to bring her newly born infant to a defined class in a local school once every month for the first year of the baby's

life; children witness at first hand early human development; a facilitator continually teaches them fundamental aspects of good parenting, and the children learn to understand 'empathy' - the feelings of others - by working with a baby who cannot talk. This university research-validated concept should be piloted in church schools here.

The best interests of children, young people and families should be central to strategic planning in national Synod, the National Society, the Children's Society, dioceses and parishes. Strategies should be action-centred, evidence-based and capable of rigorous evaluation and continuous improvement. 'Going for Growth' must be translated into actions that are informed by the views and participation of children and young people themselves and made understandable to them and the ordinary woman or man. This demands a culture shift in how we engage with our young and communicate and celebrate our aspirations. Adequately resourced Diocesan Boards of Education should be the natural focal points for putting children, young people and families at the heart of our mission and their horizon need to be broadened to support not only their church schools, but developing child and family friendly communities.

Effective, engaged leadership from our Bishops and senior staff coupled with political astuteness is vital. In parishes many churches and clergy are excellent examples of commitment to our young through working with their schools. But sadly there are many which are not. We must listen to the views of teachers and head teachers on the engagement or lack of it of local clergy and churches. The training and performance management of clergy should include their ability to relate to youngsters and their support for local schools, and children and schools should be engaged in the selection process for parish clergy.

There is an unprecedented opportunity for the Church to take a long, hard look about putting children young people and families at the heart of our mission. We must have the courage to seize the day and to find the resources and competencies at every level to do so.

Children are the living messages to a time we will not see. We cannot afford to fail them.

Copyright: Aynsley-Green Consulting 2011

#### **Notes**

Sir AI was University Lecturer in Paediatrics and Fellow of Green College in Oxford, Professor of Child Health and Head of the School of Clinical Medical Sciences, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, and Professor of Child Health and Director for Clinical R&D at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children and the Institute of Child Health, University College London

He was then Chair of the first NHS Children's Task Force, National Clinical Director for Children in government and first Children's Commissioner for England. He is now Professor Emeritus of Child Health, University College London, and Founder and Director, Aynsley-Green Consulting working with governments and organisations internationally on children, child health and childhood. He is Chair of the Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education, and was knighted for his services to children and young people by HM the Queen in 2006.

#### **Originally posted at**

<http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=660>