

“Religious Education - yes or no”

The Victorian Labor Government have made a decision to no longer allow class time for Special Religious Instruction (SRI) in State Primary Schools. Apparently, they had promised not to change that before the election and now they have reneged on that promise. (Nothing new under the sun.) So from 2016, no more set class time but only lunchtime, before, or after school time will be allowed for SRI.

SRI in Victorian schools has a number of providers including Jewish, Catholic, Christian, Islam, and Baha'i and so on. Access Ministries conduct Christian religious instruction for SRI. Access Ministries, although concerned that the government did not consult them before making the decision, applauded the content of the proposed alternative, 'Respectful Relationships program.' This program "aims to support students to learn how to build healthy relationships, understand global cultures, ethics and traditions, and to prevent family violence." It will begin in 2016 from Prep through to Year 10.

The Greens have applauded the decision, saying the government did not go far enough, and the Liberal opposition has called on the government to reverse the decision. A number of Christian parents have also expressed concern, and some Christian organisations are encouraging Christian churches and individuals to write in protest to the Victorian Labor Government, asking them to reverse their decision.

In some ways, this is a sad decision for our country has been built on Christian morals and ethics, and for that to no longer be taught, is disappointing. However, should we expect any different? The Victorian government (whether it is Labor or Liberal – does not really matter) are secular governments and whether we like it or not, run secular schools.

It would also be rather difficult for a Principal of a State Primary or Secondary school to set aside class time for SRI for several different religious groups every week as well as having normal classes, even if they occurred simultaneously. Furthermore, what happens to the students who do not attend a particular religious' instruction group, or for that matter any of the groups doing SRI? That could well mean several hours of valuable class time missed for them every week.

It is also rather strange that 'religious' groups would expect secular schools to set aside class time so that they can teach their particular faith, values and morals. In the past, Christians have seen SRI as an opportunity to do 'missions' amongst children in their formative years. Perhaps Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Jewish and other religious groups involved in SRI have a similar goal as well as other motives.

I am not suggesting that Christian SRI would not be valuable to the secular students. It would be very worthwhile if it is done well. However, if it is not compulsory for students to attend, then those attending Christian SRI would probably already come from Christian families who either, cannot afford to send their children to Christian Schools or have chosen for other reasons to support local public schools. Most Christian families realize that Christian education begins at home (Deut 6:1-9). Further, if families cannot afford to send their children to a Christian school, we as individuals and churches should consider ways to make it more affordable, through either grants or subsidies.

As Christians, we also acknowledge that every square inch of this universe belongs to Christ, so it would be remiss of us not to exhaust various ways of bringing the Christian message to our secular schools. One way we can still do that is supporting Christian Chaplains who work in secular schools and another way is to support those conducting Christian SRI classes in our Public Schools, even when it is odd hours.

Finally, it is not all bad. We can be thankful that the Lord still uses secular governments to support the funding of many private schools, including Christian schools, where children from non-Christian families also attend and have opportunity to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. JZ.