



If we're going to continue to make an impact in schools, we're going to have to make some changes

says Chris Curtis

I have a dream. I know Martin Luther King got there first, but better late than never. It's a dream for a bolder, bigger kind of Christian work in schools. Reimagined to fit the education system of today, but connected more than ever to our calling as missionaries to be salt and light.

I have nightmares too. Not about ghosts or even spinach (don't ask), but the status quo. About Christian schools work that stays where it is and, I suspect, finds the space in school ever smaller and less welcoming to faith. But enough of nightmares, it's time to dream.

Thomas John is the kind of man you might describe as a force of nature. Small round glasses lend an air of studiousness, but behind them there's a fierce intensity in his eyes that's matched by well combed but slightly flyaway hair and longer than average side burns. 'This is a man who has fire in his belly' is somehow the message you get before he's even opened his mouth. And you'd be right. Finding faith at sixteen after a stormy and unhappy childhood, where his reputation was as an argumentative troublemaker, Thomas quickly became passionate about sharing his faith with young people. On one evening in particular, he met a teenager hanging out on the streets, Jim Jarvis, whose tragic story of family breakdown and failed schooling had a huge impact on him. Visiting schools in the following weeks, Thomas began to talk to young people about his new-found faith, but it quickly became clear that bigger vision was burning inside. By the time he reached twenty-five, he'd started his own school, where the values and ideals he was so passionate about could be enshrined into the curriculum and life of the place. And it wasn't just about lessons, or even Christian input, it was practical too: breakfast and dinner were served everyday for young people who might otherwise be living on unhealthy scraps or worse. Numerous other schools and projects followed, often started with more faith than funds. Thomas was unstoppable when it came to a vision not just to share his faith, but to shape and change the way education worked for the benefit of young people.

It's over a hundred years since Thomas John Barnado died. He left behind an organisation that still exists and impacts over one hundred thousand children and young people every year. What I find powerful in his story is not just his heart to reach young people - that's something a lot of us share - but the down-right audacity of his vision. He dreamed about changing schools as well as students. It started me thinking, if Thomas was a youth worker in a local church today, in 2010, what exactly would he get up to?

I think he'd love our heart for teenagers, but be pretty unimpressed by the smallness of our vision. Getting the odd assembly or RE lesson in the local school would never have been enough for Barnado. He'd want to challenge and change the whole system, not pop in and visit it from time to time. As much as I value the chance to help the school's pastoral work with mentoring, lesson support or counselling, we've missed it if we give up on engaging students with the spiritual side of life more explicitly.



When did we settle for so little? How did we stand and watch the space for faith drain from the curriculum and from school life? It's not enough to take the occasional assembly or help run the Christian Union group.

We need a bigger vision...

It wasn't that long ago that most children didn't go to school and education was the preserve of the elite. It took two very different forces to change this. The first was the industrial revolution. The transformation from a farming-based economy to an industrial one meant more people needed to read and write and do arithmetic. Hey presto, you need schools for more than just the aristocracy. The 1800's saw an explosion in education as a result.

But the other factor was the church. Christians in the Victorian era had a vision to change society and make an impact on the biggest issues of the day. Slavery had been successfully repealed by Wilberforce; poverty, disease and lack of education now became the next targets. As a result it was the church who founded thousands of schools everywhere from villages in the countryside to the slums of East London. Thomas Barnado was actually just one of many Christians with this kind of dream. Their vision wasn't simply to equip young people for work, it was to prepare them for life, and they saw the spiritual dimension as an essential element.

Those two very different motives for education had an uneasy relationship right from the start. If school is about preparing young people to work, then you soon get a pecking order of subjects according to how well they serve that aim. Maths and English are top of the tree, followed by science, whilst drama and dance lie somewhere at the bottom (probably why there's not enough dancing in offices these days). And Religious Education? Down there too, I'm afraid. What did you think back at school when you saw the next lesson in your timetable was double RE? I know what went through my mind as a fourteen year old.

At least the Christian heritage of education meant that, for many years, there was space for the spiritual too. Aside from RE, those daily assemblies, admittedly often no more than a school hymn and a prayer, were what most of us grew up with. It may not have been revival... in fact, as I remember, it may not have been that relevant either, but at least it acknowledged there was a spiritual dimension to life.

Nowadays things have changed. Whatever the requirements of government and OFSTED, you'd be hard pressed to find a secondary school that has a clear agenda for spiritual development, let alone a member of staff who will take responsibility for it. Primary education is better, but it's changing too. As a visiting youth worker, in some places at least, you are the spiritual development programme!

To provoke and inspire schools...

There's a sprawling secondary school not far from where I live. Everyday hundreds of teenagers converge on it, streaming through the gates and on inside to its rather square and drab classroom blocks. Pass by the school at the right moment and you can hear a wonderful soundscape of screams and laughs that fills the playground at breaks.



From time to time I get to walk through the entrance myself and stand up in front of a year group to take a morning assembly. It's still a terrifying experience, facing all those teenagers with just a few moments to say something that's both entertaining and meaningful.

As I head out into the sunlight after the assembly however, I'm struck again by how easily we've settled for such a shrinking space for the spiritual. Of course I want to help out with other parts of school life, and of course I know everything is spiritual in the truest sense of the word. But it feels like we're in danger of allowing the principle of education as preparation for the workplace to finally snuff out that bigger brighter vision of preparing young people for life. What would Thomas Barnado and the hundreds of other visionaries of the Victorian era have made of that? And what would they have made of us?

My challenge to myself - and to you - is to provoke and inspire schools to see the value of spiritual development, and of faith, within the life of the school. Instead of arguing over scraps from the table, we should be confronting what's on the menu in the first place.

I'm not talking about standing with a placard outside the school gates, or writing one of those grumbling letters to the local paper. Nor am I talking about campaigning for a return to daily acts of worship with prayers read out from books that sound less inspiring than the shipping forecast. No, I'm talking about a new bigger better kind of Christian schools work that wins over staff and students alike by its sheer creativity and impact. I want nothing less than for schools to consider the spiritual as important than maths, and a good deal more interesting. And I want Religious Education to be something more than a way of contributing to community cohesion by teaching about other faiths.

By the way, RE is inadequate in one in five secondary schools according to an OFSTED report in June, and the study suggested many teachers were unsure of what they were trying to achieve in the subject. If that isn't an opportunity to make a difference, I don't know what is.

Of course, some Christians have already taken up this challenge in ways Thomas Barnado would surely have approved. Many of the new academies have been started by Christian organisations who are having to figure out what 'Christian education' looks like in our multifaith and complex society. All power to them I say, but there are only two hundred academies in total, so the rest of us have to work out what that looks like in the thousands of other schools and colleges.

Back in school, and this time I'm standing waiting for the bell to go and breaktime to begin. In a few minutes this empty corridor will fill with young people. It's like the stampede scene from the beginning of 'The Lion King'. Where's Mufasa when you need him? I'm looking at an incredible series of pictures our team has put up on the corridor walls. It's part of a project to get young people exploring the Christian faith and asking some of the big questions of life. Using the pretty drab walls of a school corridor is a new idea for us, but it turns out to be a huge hit with staff and students alike. It's one of a bunch of things we're working on to make spiritual development come alive. If Christian input in schools is going to grow, we need another twenty good ideas like this.



The art exhibits are a reminder that, if we're going to change the value schools put on the spiritual, we're going to have to be a lot more creative and engaging. Let's face it, we're going to have to be better than we are. 'Good' and 'ok' isn't going to be enough when we take an assembly. There was a time - probably somewhere back in history when I was a pupil myself - when just having a visiting speaker to assembly was exciting enough, even if they just told a simple story and said a prayer. Much more is needed now. We have to offer something that's rich and compelling. If we're taking an RE lesson, we have to deliver sixty minutes that not only fits the curriculum, but which leaves the class bubbling with questions and ideas and thoughts. Showing a film clip doesn't make it a gripping lesson anymore - if it ever did. Schools are all equipped with smartboards these days and even the most boring teachers use video and interactive content from the web... how many of us are fully trained in using smartboards, by the way? It's pretty much essential if you're going to be in a classroom in 2010.

That leads me to another point. Time was when you only had to be in your twenties and considered 'trendy' by the vicar to be declared the youth worker. Now there are courses and training available and it's becoming the norm to have a degree if you're planning to be a youth worker full time. As long as we don't forget that character, calling and commitment are needed too, I think that's a good thing. But there's still not enough in the way of training for working in a school where extra skills and knowledge are essential. Planning and delivering an RE lesson that is truly awesome doesn't just happen by accident, we need more training to be better at schools work. I'd like to see in-depth schools work training as a compulsory element in every youth work degree - surely you can't work full time with teenagers in a church and not be interested in working where they spend most of their time? I'd like to see courses and training to help us understand how young people learn, how to plan a superb lesson or assembly and how to deliver it on the day in front of a bolshy group of fifteen year olds.

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So here's my dream. It's that the thousands of us who are youth workers across the UK stop settling for the scrap thrown to us: an assembly here or the chance to help with a bit of mentoring there. Instead I pray we'll find growing within us a bigger ideal, the kind that would have fanned the fire in Thomas Barnado. We have to make a compelling and passionate case for schools to make space for the spiritual, and within that the specifically Christian. We have to convince Head Teachers and staff that we have something to offer students that is just as vital as good GCSE grades. We have to deliver it with the professionalism and skill to match anything else available. And we have to do it before it's too late.

If, in five years time, most Christian work in schools is supporting mentoring programmes and helping with after school sports clubs, we'll have lost something the schools can't afford to be without. We'll have watched as the spiritual ebbed away from the curriculum before our very eyes. Not if I have anything to do with it. We need a new generation of Thomas Barnado's. I'm up for the challenge. Are you?