

TOWARDS RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH

*The Urgent Task of
Christian Education*

DAVID MERRITT



VICTORIAN COUNCIL OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

TOWARDS RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH

THE URGENT TASK OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

The Inaugural C.J. Wright Address on
Education and Ecumenism

delivered by

The Revd Dr David R. Merritt

Executive Director

The Joint Board of Christian Education
of Australia and New Zealand

at the Collins Street Uniting Church

on

26th October, 1984

Victorian Council of Christian Education
1984

MOORE THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE LIBRARY



3 2042 10083689 3

MOORE COLLEGE
LIBRARY

First published in 1984 by the
Victorian Council of Christian Education
2a Chapel Street, St Kilda, 3182

© The Revd Dr David R. Merritt 1984

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Merritt, David R.

Towards Renewal of the Church -
the urgent task of Christian Education

Delivered on 26th October 1984 at the
Inaugural C.J. Wright Address on
Education and Ecumenism of the
Victorian Council of Christian Education
ISBN 0 9590413 0 3

Printed by Bambra Press Pty Ltd
176 Bambra Road
Caulfield South, 3162

FOREWORD

Clifford J. Wright was born in Hamilton, Victoria in 1910 and attended state schools in the area before leaving to become a rural worker for three years. A strong call into the ministry of the Methodist Church resulted in training at Queens College, Melbourne University from which he graduated with an Arts Degree in 1935.

Further study opportunities opened up after his ordination in 1938 at Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, England and in 1951-53 at Union Seminary and Columbia University, New York from which he took Masters and Doctoral degrees in education.

Appointed to the then Methodist Young People's Department as Associated Director in 1946, Cliff was to become Director of the renamed Methodist Department of Christian Education of Victoria and Tasmania. He held this position from 1953 to 1966.

In 1966 he became secretary of the Australian Council of Churches' Commission on Christian Education and the Victorian Council of Christian Education, a position he held until his retirement in 1976. Since his retirement he has taken up ecumenical work on special assignment investigating the relationship between faith and culture in the Pacific Islands. Before marrying June Simpson in 1942 Cliff had parish appointments at Derby, Tasmania, 1936-37, and Eltham, Victoria, 1937-39. Later parish appointments included Toorak, 1942-46, and Jersey City, U.S.A., 1951-53. The Wrights have four children.

A significant influence on the ministry of Cliff Wright was his attendance at world ecumenical gatherings. These included the World Conference of Christian Youth, Amsterdam, 1939, World Council of Christian Education Conferences in 1962, 1967, 1971, the 4th World Council of Churches Assembly at Uppsala, 1968, as well as participation in many Pacific Conference of Churches and Christian Conference of Asia assemblies.

His publications reflect his wide ranging interests pursued with enormous energy and enthusiasm. These include works on the Christian faith, marriage guidance, adult education, the role of youth, as well as Melanesian culture and Christian faith.

The work of Christian education in Australia and beyond has been significantly influenced by his work and vision. It was said of him often that he was ahead of his time and many pioneering ventures in educational ministry can be traced to his initiative such as the seminars and public meetings held with Paulo Freire in Australia during the Seventies. A keen sportsman and bush walker, with a commitment to political life and social change, Cliff Wright has held together personal and social dimensions of the Christian faith with passion and integrity. His commitment to the Gospel flowed out in his concern for

the need to educate people in the faith once delivered to the saints at every stage of their pilgrimage. If his enthusiasm sometimes lacked restraint or driving energy a proper acknowledgement of the pace of others around him it was a fault that rose from a sense of urgency that being Christian aroused in him. For him the true meaning of that faith was service and joy.

It is to acknowledge the dedication of his faithful ministry to Ecumenism and Education that the C.J. Wright Address has been established by the Victorian Council of Christian Education to the end that Christ's church be strengthened and its mission encouraged.

Recently I read a new version of an old story:

Once upon a time there were two pigs who were faced with the problem of protecting themselves from a wolf. There used to be a third one but he had gone into church work and disappeared.

One pig was an old hand at this wolf protection business and saw what he had to do straight away - just build a house strong enough to stand up to the kind of huffing and puffing the wolf had done in the past. So the first pig built his wolf-resistant house out of genuine reliable timber and plaster.

The second pig was new at the wolf protection business but she was thoughtful. She decided that she would carefully analyse the problem that the wolf presented. She sat down and drew up a matrix (which of course is pig latin for a big blank sheet of paper) and listed problems presented by various possible wolf strategies, assessed the strengths and weaknesses of possible responses and eventually arrived at a list of desirable features for a wolf-proof house. With a great deal of effort she built her house and waited to see how well it worked.

During this display of energetic activity the old-timer pig was laughing at the planner pig and refusing to have anything to do with this kind of folly. He had built wolf-proof houses before and he had lived and prospered hadn't he? He told the planner pig 'If you know what you are doing you don't have to go to all of that trouble.'

In spite of the criticism the second pig stuck to her system and designed her house for possible developments and predicted contingencies.

One day the mean old wolf passed by the houses and thought that a pig dinner was just what he wanted. He walked up to the first pig's house, uttered a warning to the old-timer which was roundly rejected in the usual pattern. At this point the

wolf instead of huffing and puffing pulled out a sledge hammer, knocked the door down and ate the old-timer for dinner.

Still not feeling fully satisfied the wolf walked up to the planner pig's house and repeated his act. Just as he was about to swing the sledge hammer at the door a trap door in front of the house opened and the wolf dropped into a deep dark pit never to be heard from again.

In the version of the story that I read there were three 'morals' attached to the story. Now I realise I could be entering a mine field here as in such an audience of educators it is likely that some of you will hold the theory that experience is to be encouraged but that interpretations of experience are to be avoided. Partly on the grounds that such a theory is, to say the least, dubious and partly on the grounds that if I can encourage you to benevolent tolerance at this point it will stand me in good stead throughout the rest of the Address, I will nevertheless tell you the three morals of the pig story. They were:

1. They are not making wolves like they used to.
2. It's hard to teach old pigs new tricks.
3. If you want to keep the wolf away from your door you had better plan ahead.

The basic thesis of this Address is that there are substantial changes taking place around us; the rate of learning new tricks is pretty slow; and it is appropriate to take a look ahead at what those of us concerned with the educational dimension of the church's life can contribute to the church and its mission. By the end of the Address I want to have suggested some starting points for some different strategies for Christian education to those that are rather commonly practised, or held to be important and not practised, in our churches at the present time. In the present company of people who are involved in such a variety of Christian education activities

that is a formidable task. I hope I am not quite in the position of the preacher on stewardship whose congregation correctly predicts his conclusion, armours themselves against it, and hopes fervently that the predictable route to the unacceptable conclusion will be mercifully brief.

WHERE WE ARE IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Looking back over what has happened in the educational part of the life of congregations in Australia in the decades of the '50s, '60s and '70s, it is easy to identify a considerable number of changes - many of them clearly for the better:

- * Extensive efforts in curriculum development have provided teachers and pupils with a great deal of encouragement and assistance with teaching and learning.
- * Considerable variety of learning methods have been described and encouraged.
- * The ideas and language used in education resources have been more carefully related to the capacities of learners at various age levels.
- * Content of learning experiences has reflected both teachings of the Bible and the life experience of learners.
- * The attractiveness of resources and their capacity to motivate, stimulate and inform have improved immeasurably.
- * There has been an increase in learning experiences for all ages together.
- * There have been substantial attempts to relate both the structure and content of learning programs to the worship of the church, particularly the structure of the Christian year and the lectionary which guides selection of Bible readings for worship.
- * There have been attempts to interpret the formative role of parents as the child's first teachers and to involve families in the Christian education of children.

However, it is also easy to identify problems that have either persisted across those decades or which have emerged more recently:

- * Christian education programs in local churches have remained predominantly activities for children and younger youth. The interest of adults in educational opportunities has not been strongly aroused and a much smaller percentage of the adults in congregations has been involved in educational activity than would be the case for children and younger teenagers.
- * There have been substantial ups and downs in the level of enthusiasm, motivation and sense of purpose of the adults in congregations who are responsible for planning and teaching in education programs.
- * Christian education activities in most parishes have continued to be largely peripheral to the structure and enthusiasms of the key leadership of churches. This applies to both lay and ministerial leaders.
- * Between 1963 and approximately 1980 the numbers of people involved in Christian education activities in congregations have declined at a greater rate than would be caused solely by demographic factors. There is some evidence of at least a levelling out and in some cases an increase in numbers in the last two to four years.
- * The capacity of denominations to provide guidance, support and training to local churches for their educational activity has declined due to budget pressures, decrease in the number of staff, and diversification of the tasks assigned to staff so that the distinctively educational role of denominational staff has been significantly reduced.

By the end of the 1970s it became clear to most denomination educational planners that the point of diminishing returns had been reached for efforts simply to improve the educational quality of the 'school part' of the church's life - Sunday schools, Bible classes and other study groups. The big issues that needed attention were seen to relate much more to aspects

of the total life of a church and how people were motivated to be enthusiastic communicators of a faith that made a difference to their lives.

At the same time new theories came to the front of the world scene in Christian education to explain how people learned values and attitudes and how faith is communicated. Such theories pointed primarily not to what happens in classes but to what happens in communities.

As a result of reflections on what was happening in churches and influenced by the new conceptual tools to interpret learning in light of the educative influence of the church as community of faith, professional Christian educators in Australia, along with their counterparts in other parts of the world in the first couple of years of this decade, developed fresh ways of thinking about the task of Christian education which for the first time in a decade led to an increase in enthusiasm and energy directed to planning for Christian education in churches.

It may be that three or four years is a very short time in which to expect a new way of thinking about Christian education to spread among people in congregations. The blunt fact remains that it has been difficult to get this idea across in a way that has led to enthusiasm at local church level at all comparable to the enthusiasm engendered among professional Christian educators. What has happened in practice has often been that parts of the new approach have been taken and used in old structures and influenced by old sets of assumptions. There is a natural tendency to cut the big idea down to fit into existing organisational patterns. Thus the Sunday school has tended to dominate the application of the new understanding of Christian education in spite of the fact that its central affirmation was that it is the faith of people expressed in the way their community is organised and that community's rituals, actions and enthusiasms that communicates faith.

It is probably inevitable that if one has only hammer and nails and feels competent using a hammer any building job will be seen to offer lots of opportunities for hammering. An expert welder with a good supply of angle iron would see the construction task rather differently.

The point we have reached in Christian education, therefore, is that the theory which enthuses most of us has not yet become a source of enthusiasm nor a powerful influence on action in our churches where it really matters, that is, in congregational life.

STIRRINGS IN THE CHURCH

The last two decades have seen important changes in the position of churches in Australian society and in the characteristics of the activities and attitudes of people in churches. Australian churches generally have continued a fairly steady decline in numerical strength and influence on society. Both numbers of nominal members and numbers of active participants in churches have reduced in the '60s and '70s. Churches receive little media attention. Few church leaders have a clear public voice. It is hard to identify a significant social or political issue on which the churches have effectively exerted influence. The age level of people involved in the churches is heavily skewed towards the over-50's. This last fact remains true even though in some denominations there has been a very recent upsurge in youth involvement in the church. It remains to be seen how extensive this recent increase in youth participation becomes.

In spite of, or perhaps in part because of, these somewhat discouraging changes in the situation of the churches in Australian society, there has been a sharpening of the churches' sense of mission. The issues at the top of most denominations' agendas at the beginning of the 1980s are evangelism, spirituality

(finding a Christian lifestyle, a personal experience of being Christian today) and worship. The congregation is affirmed as essential and basic to the mission of the church. This is a far cry from the pessimism of the 1950s and '60s where both the imminent death of congregations and of God were confidently announced. The general morale of ministers and their sense of purpose is very much higher than in the 1960s. That is not to say that the particular and special role of ministers is necessarily clear, particularly in relation to attempts to re-think the role of lay leaders and to work towards increased mutuality between ordained and lay leaders in the church.

The concept of renewal points not just to keeping things going or to looking good or to polishing up the image advised by PR people but to relating the life of the church to a deep understanding of God and the needs and potential of people.

A tongue-in-cheek story has it that before Moses decided to cross the Red Sea he called his advisors together and said 'I am going to tell you what I plan to do, but first, I want to seek your advice'.

Noting that the Egyptian army was approaching he told his advisors that he planned to cross the Red Sea at just the time when God would part the waters with a mighty wind. Then, he said, the wind would recede and the heavy artillery of the Egyptian army would be bogged in the mire as the waters turned.

He called upon his staff members for their advice. First he turned to the head of the engineering division who said to him, 'Moses, you must be out of your head. All the laws of hydro-dynamics speak against it. There is no way in which you can raise those waters and have them divide while we march through '

Then he called upon his vice-president of medical affairs who said to him, 'Moses, that is a terrible idea. At the bottom

of the sea are many snails which carry the larvae of schistosomiasis. As we march through the entire nation will be infected and we will have it for generations to come.'

Then he called upon his legal advisor who said to him, 'I think that is a terrible idea. You know there are such things as land and water rights. You have to think of the people to the north and to the south of us. We will be up to our ears in law suits for generations.'

Then he called upon his chief educational advisor who said to him, 'Moses, I haven't had time to think of that but if you could let me form an ad hoc committee, I think within six to twelve months I can give you an answer.'

So Moses turned in desperation to the person upon whom he depended most of all anyway - his Director of Public Relations. He thought about it for a moment and then he said, 'Moses, I really don't know, but if you carry it off, I'll get you three pages in the Old Testament.' (David B. Watermulder in the Princeton Seminary Bulletin 1983)

The concept of renewal raises questions of what kind of a church we want to have around now and in the future. Some attempts to keep things going as they are seem to have a fairly low level of expectation about what human communities can become. The rich promise of the church does not come from its organisational efficiency (fortunately!) but from its Gospel, its vision of new life and its source of power to transform this life. It is the idea which the English poet, James Elroy Flecker was expressing in terms which may be somewhat unconventional for traditional theology when he wrote to a poet a thousand years in the future:

'I care not if you bridge the seas
Nor ride secure the cruel sky
Or build consummate palaces
Of metal or of masonry

But have you wine and music still
And statues and a bright eyed love
And foolish thoughts of good and ill
And prayers to them that sit above.'
(Quoted by W.J. Milligan in The New Nomads
W.C.C., Geneva, 1984, page 104)

The concept of renewal takes the present world seriously but recognises the disturbing aspect of faith that is part of the Gospel and that disrupts our understanding of the present world. That is, it keeps alive the prophetic and unsettling dimension of faith. 'Faith, wherever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart in man. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world...' (Jurgen Moltmann)

EDUCATION AND RENEWAL

It would be a very sad case of megalomania if Christian educators thought that renewal of the church was in some way specially dependent on them. However, it would seem to me equally sad if Christian educators missed the challenge and the opportunity that the stirrings towards renewal in the church offer to contemporary Christian education. The point we have reached in Christian education in the church focuses our attention on the quality of life in the community of faith. The position that has been reached in the church makes the quality of that life a top agenda issue for our churches. What I am suggesting is that the time is ripe for Christian educators to draw on their experience, knowledge and skills to assess what they can contribute to the church and to look around with enthusiasm for others with similar visions - to be ready in a new way to form coalitions with other parts of the church to contribute towards renewal. The title of this Address in that sense has

been carefully chosen. It is not that Christian education can bring about renewal of the church - in the deepest sense that is the work of God the Spirit. But, there is a great deal that those involved in educational ministry can and must contribute to the church in the movement towards renewal. That is an urgent task for the church in this decade.

It is axiomatic for most Christian educators in Australia that there are two things that those with educational expertise can do to assist the church:

- * We can describe many of the ways in which people learn faith - this focuses attention on the ways in which the faith of the church is expressed in what people do individually and corporately.
- * We can plan some particular programs which give people an opportunity to explore meanings - by acquiring knowledge, relating it to their own experience, interpreting the significance of the experience of what is important in the lives of the people around them.

The former activity uses the insights of education, but is not itself education, that is, it is not a matter of deliberate planning of events for the purpose of bringing about changes in peoples' understanding - the heart of education. The second is education, that is, it is something that we do (deliberate, purposeful, intentional activity) to encourage understanding.

Both of these contributions of educators in the church need careful thought. Ironically, it may be that some naivety about the first role of educators has contributed to a weakening of the contribution that education can make to the life of the church. If one holds that faith is communicated by the church through its communal life and adds that this is sufficient to equip people for being Christian in the world today, you must conclude that no further particular educational activity is needed in or by the church. The church can manage pretty well without anything in particular called education. If, the

common assertion 'everything the church is and does teaches' is regarded as a sufficient statement of education in congregations, one does not need to plan any special teaching function.

There has been a lot of fuzzy thinking and careless talk by people involved in Christian education that has contributed to a lowering of motivation to undertake specific educational activity. We are now seeing a church that is weaker because of this with a decline in the capacity of young people and adults to hold or express beliefs adequate to their own experience and to the world in which they live, and ill-equipped to engage competently in the tasks that are necessary for living as Christians in today's world. Of the three essential dimensions of Christian faith as lived reality (believing, trusting and doing), inadequate attention to the first and third is now proving a handicap to the people of our churches.

Without losing our recent and important discovery of the powerfully educative influence of the Christian community (the church) we need to clarify the important and quite distinctive contribution that Christian education can make to that community. In brief, Christian education is:

- * what we do (that is, a deliberate intentional activity)
- * to help people find meaning (that is, it is distinctively to encourage understanding)
- * in the community (that is, the setting is the church both as the place where the learning activity occurs and as the place where from the Bible, worship and experience of the Spirit of God we have the reference points for linking Gospel to contemporary life)
- * that is on its way to God's new future (that is, it is an ordinary group of people realistically grounded in life now but with a vision that comes from beyond it and that keeps it looking to what is not yet).

Let us consider some examples of such an educational contribution to the life of the church conceived much more broadly than as

study group activity.

WORSHIP

In many of our churches there is a great surge of interest in the liturgical life of the church. This is particularly so in the Uniting Church, with the opportunity, indeed, the need created by the movement away from three denominational patterns of worship which lay behind the new church to identify new patterns of worship. Both ministers and lay people are asking questions about the kind of worship that is appropriate for us in Australia in the 1980s. The very substantial stimulus to liturgical change that is coming from the Uniting Church Assembly Commission on Liturgy is not likely to bring about substantial changes in the church unless people are able through new words and actions to understand something of the rich meaning of those actions for their own lives. My own observation is that there is a fairly low level of enthusiasm among many lay people, particularly amongst those in younger age brackets, for the words, actions and musical patterns that are frequently taken for granted by ministers. We are a long way from agreeing on what range of possibilities is desirable for participation in worship. There is something at least odd in the monological wordiness of our worship when what we are celebrating in that worship is the decision of God to express himself not in words but in the word made flesh. The lament of the English poet, Edwin Muir, for the flat wordiness of worship is fortunately too strong to be fair to apply to many of our churches, but the issue it raises is nevertheless a real one:

'How could our race betray
The Image, and the Incarnate One unmake
Who chose this form and fashion for our sake?
The Word made flesh here is made word again.
A Word made word ...'
(Edwin Muir, 'The Incarnate One')

Liturgical change creates an opportunity and necessity for educational activity through which people can actively pursue meaning in new words and new acts.

THE BIBLE

Similarly, how can people hear the Bible read so that it is not just more words in a life overwhelmed with trivial and manipulative words but the Word? People need opportunities to relate reading and hearing to their own experience - to discover ways of reading and hearing that are touched by the mystery, the light and dark, of their own lives. A tired weekly trip through the valley of dry bones is no substitute for the biblical invitation to new life. Without opportunities to be actively involved in the search for meaning, adults are unlikely to turn to the Bible with ears to hear its message.

'To read the Bible is to try to read the expressions on their faces. To listen to the words of the Bible is to try to catch the sound of the queer, dangerous and compelling word they seem to bear. Abraham and Sarah, with shrieks of incredulous laughter running down their ancient cheeks when God tells them that he is going to keep his promise and give them the son they have always wanted. King David, all but naked as the day he was born, dancing for joy in front of the Ark. Paul struck dumb on the road to Damascus. Jesus of Nazareth stretched out between two crooks with dried Roman spit on his face. They are all of them looking up. And listening.'
(Frederick Buechner)

SPIRITUALITY

If the contemporary hunger of men and women for spiritual reality is to be met, our congregations need to become places where adolescents and adults can explore the deep parts of their inner lives. The activity of organisational life necessary to sustain the community must not be mistaken for the source of the renewal of the Spirit. There is a learning to pray, to be people in relation to God and to each other, that is at the heart of the mission of the church. The hunger for such renewed vitality in our churches is real. Fortunately, the possibility of doing something about that hunger is also real.

'The resources available to our generation make possible a devotional life which is more sensuous in its appreciation of our physical bodies, more social in the intensity of human interaction, more activist in the range of its practical concern, more analytical in the details of its investigation, more emotional than our normal inhibitions, and more awesome in its exposures to the mystery of God.' (Explorations in Meditations and Contemplation, The Upper Room, Nashville, page 17)

The issues facing contemporary Christians in their lives as individuals, members of families and participants in community and in national political and social life are so complex and puzzling that a range of educational opportunities need attention if we are to find ways in our churches to equip appropriately reluctant and hesitant people to be partners in God's plan to make a new world in which there is wholeness, justice and peace.

SERMONS

Is it possible to envisage new meeting points between ministers and lay people in which preaching is explored afresh to make possible meeting points between the essential specialist role of the minister as trained bearer of the tradition and lay people as contemporary explorers of the uncharted territory of being Christian in Australia? It seems sad that at a time when the need for richer discoveries of the nature of biblical teaching and the significance of the Gospel confront the church, preaching should be at such a low ebb.

SACRAMENTS

Some of you will know that I am particularly enthusiastic about the educational opportunities that are offered in our churches by the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. In these acts, the nature of the Gospel is powerfully expressed. Unfortunately, too many of our people have not had an opportunity to discover the rich meaning of the words and the symbolic actions. The sacraments are the Word of God made visible and place Jesus Christ at the centre of all the church does and witnesses to.

When a parent seeks the baptism of a child, when a young person or adult comes to baptism on profession of faith, when bread is broken and wine poured so that we might remember him, when a congregation gathers to act out in word and deed what it most deeply believes and the Gospel which invites this people to new life and renewed faith in God, the purpose is not educational - it is renewed relation to God. However, the very nature of those words and acts cry out for people to understand something of their significance, that is to become actively engaged in the search for the meaning which is there potentially for them. For a church to provide deliberate and purposeful opportunities for people to engage in such search for meaning

can contribute enormously to the renewal of the worship life of our churches.

What we most urgently need for the renewal of worship is not mistaken attempts to invent new symbols but gently imaginative opportunities for people - particularly young people and adults - to bring their experience of the depth of their own life into relation with these ancient symbols so that the Word incarnate (made flesh, expressed) can be freshly heard and responded to with faith.

BUDGETS

When the people of our churches plan their budgets they are writing in dollars and cents statements of what is most important to them and thus expressing their faith. Opportunities to explore the meaning of the church's financial activities and commitments is a potentially valuable activity, one which could contribute to a fresh sense of purpose in the church's mission.

LEADERSHIP

Our churches have enormous undeveloped potential in the leadership that lay people offer to God through their church. To consider leadership or to undertake a leadership role is to be open to questions about the purpose of the church. To be effectively a leader is to find ways of making a contribution to a community of people - ways that open up new possibilities for others rather than closing them off. Sensitive people invited to leadership need opportunities to reflect on meaning and engage in a personal search for meaning that will work for them in the roles they undertake.

EDUCATIONAL DIMENSION

One could go on with many further examples. The above are sufficient to make the point that concern for the renewal of the church provides a way of thinking about educational planning and creates a need for educational activity that could give a sense of direction to Christian education in the years immediately ahead.

Some of the educational opportunities referred to above may be arranged through ongoing study groups. Others may take place in groups created specifically to reflect on particular issues. But most of the educational opportunities referred to above will come as a specific educational dimension of some other activity in the church - meetings between a minister and parents bringing a child for baptism, a time in an Elder's Council to think through the significance of an aspect of the life of the church, a congregational meeting wrestling with budget priorities, a part of the service in which a sacrament is explained. It is not the purpose of this Address to develop a program or even to identify priority strategies. What is being pointed to is a way of thinking about the task of education in local churches that affirms the powerful influence of the church's corporate life and argues within that for a very specific and deliberate education activity.

We encounter the Christian faith both as interpretation of our lives and as invitation to new possibilities for our lives. The grace of God includes us unconditionally and addresses a question to us which makes possible the response of faith. The Gospel includes the church and ourselves as part of the church and requires the church and ourselves to change - to look for, to accept and to want renewal by the Spirit of God.

These are very old and very urgent agenda items for the church. Unless those concerned with Christian education address them in a fresh way in our day, what we offer the church will not

be very important. Unless there is an educational contribution to these issues, I believe that our churches will be less likely to become the kind of communities they could be.

For those of you who think that talk of renewal is unwarranted optimism or unfounded idealism, I can only say that I think the whole of the New Testament shows an understanding of the strong case you could make for your contention, but over against that simply insists, 'He is risen. Go and tell people the good news.'

Some of you will know the delightful story of the caterpillar looking up at the butterfly and saying, 'You'll never catch me flying in one of those crazy things!' The poignancy of the story is that, unlike the caterpillar, we know that it has no other destiny than to fly and that there are forces bigger than it that will one day give it wings.

In the final analysis the possibility of renewal of the church and enthusiasm for education as opportunities to search for meaning rest on a very basic truth - that there is a gracious reality inviting us to new possibilities together. And so I finish by affirming that the heart of the Christian faith is that God has made this known to us through Jesus. In the words of John's Gospel and W.H. Auden:

He is the Way.

Follow him through the land of unlikeness:

You will see rare beasts

And have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.

Seek him in the kingdom of anxiety:

You will come to a great city

That has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.

Love him in the world of the flesh:

And at your marriage all its occasions

Shall dance for joy.

The Revd Dr David Merritt is a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia and is Executive Director of The Joint Board of Christian Education of Australia and New Zealand, the national education agency and publishing house of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Dr Merritt, who was ordained in 1960, studied at Melbourne University from 1952 to 1956 and completed degrees in Arts, Education and Divinity, as well as a Diploma in Religious Education. In 1958 he began studies at Hartford Seminary Foundation U.S.A. from which he graduated M.A. and Ed.R.D.

A pioneer in adventure camping for youth, Dr Merritt has been involved in a significant range of community organisations at State and Federal levels. It was for this work that he was awarded an O.B.E. in 1977. Currently he is Moderator of the World Council of Churches working group on Education.

Dr Merritt and his wife, Joy, have four children and live in an outer suburb of Melbourne.

The first of these is the fact that the
the first of these is the fact that the
the first of these is the fact that the

the first of these is the fact that the
the first of these is the fact that the
the first of these is the fact that the

the first of these is the fact that the
the first of these is the fact that the
the first of these is the fact that the

the first of these is the fact that the
the first of these is the fact that the
the first of these is the fact that the

