



David Hines
Public Relations Officer
Secular Education Network
Westmere
Auckland 1022

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Review of Christian Education Commission teaching materials

Dear David,

I have examined the two books that you sent (*Launch 1*, and *Life Choices*), both in their student and teacher versions (*Launch 1* (The Council for Christian Education in Schools/Access Ministries, Melbourne); *Launch 1: Teacher Book* (The Council for Christian Education in Schools/Access Ministries, Melbourne); and, *Life Choices: Junior Student Workbook - Christian Values for Based Education for Kiwi Kids* (Churches Education Commission, Auckland, 2014); *Life Choices: Teacher's Manual - Christian Values for Based Education for Kiwi Kids* (Churches Education Commission, Auckland, 2014).

My report focuses on the content, context and the contention made that these materials are suitable for both Christian and non-Christian students in the religiously diverse environment of contemporary New Zealand. This is the claim made in CEC materials for parents, school trustees and publicly.

The usual distinction made by academics and trained teachers of religious studies is between “teaching religion” (formation, or religious instruction, within a particular faith community) and “teaching about religion” (religious studies). Religious studies is the teaching” about” the belief and practices of different religious communities, using description and clearly distinguishing insider from outsider perspectives. This is the norm in most religious education and religious studies syllabuses used across the UK. The purpose of religious studies is to increase awareness of religious diversity, this often includes exploring non-religious viewpoints as well, in order to promote positive relationships between different communities and groups in contemporary society based on informed, unbiased and objective

knowledge of different religious beliefs and practise. While priority is usually given to the majority faith traditions syllabuses normally include minority community faiths as well.

My view is a knowledge of the Christian traditions and churches in New Zealand is essential for appreciating our artistic, musical, legal, moral and political traditions. Equally important in today's world is a knowledge of different religions that will enhance our understanding of geo-politics; the Asia-Pacific region of our closest neighbours and trading partners; and, closer to home, the increasing number of non-Christian New Zealanders. We simply cannot make sense of the world we live in without understanding something of its religious dynamics, and, as such, religious studies should indeed be a vital part of our education as contemporary global citizens.

Formation, on the other hand, is a more normative enterprise focusing on becoming part of a religious community by learning how to express a personal faith that reflects the adult norms of that community and involves the young being inducted into faith through identification of themselves and their community in orienting narratives and the learning of specific religious practices that acknowledge the authoritative beliefs and behavioural norms of that community. Formation is a necessary part of the perpetuation of any religious community.

Launch 1 is an induction to Christian education for young students in their first year of school (4 to 6 year olds). It is expressly designed for Christian students as an introductory course in Christian formation. It is centred on students making connections between their own experiences and biblical narratives. The *Teacher Book* explains that the course is to learn the "foundational truths of the Christian faith" ("that there is a God, that God loves and cares for them ... that they are able to talk to God", and that "Jesus is God's son"). The aims include being made aware that "their lives can be changed through meeting Jesus". Teachers are encouraged "to pray with the students" and prayers are suggested to end each session.

The materials in *Launch 1* include much familiar material that has been recycled from earlier Christian educational resources. My view is that the materials are generally undemanding for students with many yes/no or fixed response answers that do not stretch students or create opportunities for them to take responsibility for their own learning. In this sense they appear rather old fashioned and not particularly student responsive.

Central to the programmes of study are the retelling of bible stories, particularly those involving miracles, that often take considerable liberties with the text adding details and omitting others in a way that fails to clearly distinguish between what is actually biblical and the embellished and loose retelling of narratives. Biblical stories are utilised to provide lessons for everyday life and for central religious practices including the group recitation of the "Words of Wisdom", such as Proverbs 3:6 ("Remember the Lord in everything you do and he will show you the right way to live"). Teachers are to reinforce particular messages such as that students should "please and obey God" and "think about God in everything they do". *Launch 1* includes lessons on a sensible diet, the environment and the importance of water.

Turning now to *Life Choices* a three year programme mainly for intermediate students (Years 2-6), unlike *Launch 1* which is imported from Australia, this course while drawing on some Australian materials is expressly designed for use in New Zealand. In fact, the rationale and justification for *Life Choices: Christian Values Based Education for Kiwi Kids* is the

substantial claim made by the Churches Education Commission (CEC) that this Christian Religious Education (CRE) material reflects and supports the New Zealand Curriculum, particularly in relation to the Curriculum's "values" and "competencies" and that its value is in large part due to its compatibility with the other subjects and approaches taken at New Zealand schools. Is this so?

The New Zealand Curriculum acknowledges the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and the bicultural foundations of Aotearoa New Zealand and maintains that the curriculum reflects New Zealand's cultural diversity and values the histories and traditions of all its peoples. It includes a number of core values and competencies that interact with each other in a number of combinations and ways to create a framework for assessable learning and development. The eight values are given as: [1] excellence (by aiming high and by persevering in the face of difficulties); [2] innovation (inquiry, and curiosity, by thinking critically, creatively, and reflectively); [3] diversity (as found in our different cultures, languages, and heritages); [4] equity (through fairness and social justice); [5] community (and participation for the common good); [6] ecological sustainability (which includes care for the environment); [7] integrity (which involves being honest, responsible, and accountable and acting ethically); and, [8] respect (themselves, others, and human rights).

The Curriculum intends that through their learning experiences, students will learn about: [a] their own values and those of others; [b] different kinds of values, such as moral, social, cultural, aesthetic, and economic values; [c] the values on which New Zealand's cultural and institutional traditions are based; [d] the values of other groups and cultures. And, that through their learning experiences, students will develop their ability to: [a] express their own values; [b] explore, with empathy, the values of others; [c] critically analyse values and actions based on them; [d] discuss disagreements that arise from differences in values and negotiate solutions; and, [d] make ethical decisions and act on them.

The CRE in *Life Choices* includes seven values but these are not taken directly from the National Curriculum at all but modified for their own purposes. So that, they list (1) inquiry; (2) curiosity; (3) respect; (4) excellence; (5) integrity; (6) equity; and, (7) participation. As we can see they have disaggregated inquiry and curiosity to take one of the New Zealand Curriculum values (Number 2, above) to create two discrete CRE values (1 and 2, above). The National Curriculum key values of ecological sustainability, and diversity have been jettisoned, although it is important to note that both *Launch 1* and *Life Choices* do reflect broad environmental concerns. The excision of diversity is much more problematic in that this might well entail that the CRE views of the Bible are but part of a diverse array of beliefs and claims all entitled to respect and understanding. Is Christianity but one heritage among many? But diversity as a value (cosmopolitan value) perhaps requires a very different approach from that of the CRE particularly in honestly and accurately reflecting the diversity and religious demography of New Zealand.

The New Zealand Curriculum identifies five key competencies: (1) thinking; (2) using language, symbols, and texts; (3) managing self; (4) relating to others; (5) participating and contributing. In *Life Choices*, the CRE acknowledges only four (1) thinking; (2) managing self; (3) relating to others; (4) participating and contributing. It is important to note that they have excluded "Using language, symbols, and texts". This competency is "about working with and making meaning of the codes in which knowledge is expressed. Languages and

symbols are systems for representing and communicating information, experiences, and ideas. People use languages and symbols to produce texts of all kinds: written, oral/aural, and visual; informative and imaginative; informal and formal; mathematical, scientific, and technological”. That is, it intends students to become aware of the ways in which language and texts use metaphors and symbols and persuasive words and phrases to determine the ways in which people understand and respond to language and text. This learning of critical discursive strategies might well entail looking at how the Bible persuades and how it conveys meaning and the metaphors and symbols that it uses. The use of the Bible in the *Life Choices* sessions is uncritical and may even be said to subvert this essential competency and at the very least promotes an unsophisticated, literalist, overly harmonised, and uncritical reading of scripture as text. It is important to note that this type of scriptural reading is that of a growing minority even in conservative Christian circles. Again, *Life Choices* appears to have little systematic assessment of what might have been learned and there are simple factual errors such as the report on page 16 of the *Teacher’s Manual* that Tanzania is a landlocked country with no access to the sea.

Turning to the important question of the suitability of these two CRE courses for non-Christian students, it is my considered and professional conclusion that collective Christian prayer to God and Jesus is inappropriate and likely objectionable to secular, non-Christian, and non-evangelical, conservative Christian parents and students. The normative Christian elements of the courses whereby views, scriptures, stories, heroes and practices identified explicitly as Christian are given prominence and priority as desirable norms are not at all suitable for non-Christian students. Parents and trustees are assured that the teaching is appropriate for a multicultural and multi-religious context (e.g. *Launch 1, Teacher Book*, page 4; *Life Choice, Teacher’s Manual*, page 3, “while all sessions are unashamedly Christian the teaching is open, non-judgemental and very appropriate for non-Christian children in a school environment”.) but a review of the texts and teachers’ manuals makes it clear that this is not so. So for example, while I agree that it is important for both Christian and non-Christian students to understand Easter and Christmas there are alternative ways of doing this than by focusing almost exclusively on the religious dimensions without duly contextualising the social and historical context of these celebrations and the reality that they are now both religious and “national” holidays. There are excellent overseas resources that do teach about Christianity in ways that are suitable for non-Christian students in a school context but merely claiming that these materials are suitable does not make it so.

While the CRE teachers’ guides warn again proselytising and conversion of students (*Life Choices, Teacher’s Manual*, p. 6) and this may well be followed, the normative programme of Christian formation is at odds with the diverse religious demography of our country where nationally a minority are Christian and an even smaller minority are conservative evangelical Christians. CRE Students are encouraged to bring Jesus and their experiences and learnings into their daily lives, families, and self-awareness in ways that are both potentially compatible and conducive to subsequent conversion.

In conclusion: (a) I do not consider that the CEC’s CRE teaching materials that I have examined are at all suitable for non-Christian, non-evangelical students; (b) I do not consider that the assurances to parents and trustees are sufficient to make the content clear or honestly reflect their minority viewpoints; and, (c) I do not view the CEC’s selectivity in relation to the New Zealand curriculum’s competencies and values to validate the claim that *Life*

Choices does support the National Curriculum and it might well be at odds with it, particularly by excluding diversity and critical textual learning.

My experience and expertise include fourteen years at Lancaster University, UK, where I taught students training to be Religious Studies teachers, I was also appointed as member of the Lancashire County Council SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education) and acted as a consultant for the Lancashire Religious Education syllabus; I am currently Professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, where I hold the UNESCO Chair in Interreligious Understanding and Relations in New Zealand and the Pacific. I am the author of *Religion in New Zealand Schools: Questions and Concerns* (Auckland, Human Rights Commission, 2009); and, “Secularity and Spirituality in New Zealand Schools”, *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 4/1 (2013), 6-24 (Academic Publishing, USA), and on the editorial or advisory boards of the following academic journals: *Beliefs and Values, Implicit Religion, Social Cohesion*, and *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts*.

Paul Morris

Professor of Religious Studies

UNESCO Chair in Interreligious Understanding and Relations in New Zealand and the Pacific

Victoria University of Wellington

paul.morris@vuw.ac.nz

