**To the Board of Trustees of the Primary School**

**RE: RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL**

Dear Board of Trustees,

We are writing to express our concern regarding the religious instruction programme currently offered to years 2-6 at the Primary School, under the name “Christian Values Programme” (“Life focus”), informally called “Bible class”.

We are all parents of Y2 and Y3 students and have come across the issue of religious instruction in the school recently. Yet informal conversations with parents of children in older years have revealed that there is widespread disapproval and/or confusion with regard to the content of the class; the background of class instructors; the reasons for the school offering the class; opt-in/opt-out format; and the relationship of the class with the school curriculum.

For this reason, we have composed this letter so that, in the first part, it summarizes information on the background, content and format of religious instruction in NZ state schools, and then, in Part II, the specifics of RI in our school. This is the kind of information that we believe that, should the BoT choose to continue RI, all the parents and caregivers in our school should receive before the start of the Y2. Without such information they will not be able to make informed consent.

While our intent is to present the information in a balanced, objective analysis, we acknowledge that we come from a particular perspective. We are parents who, regardless of our own, diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, believe that religious instruction has no place in NZ state schools. So in the second part of our letter, we are making an argument that religious instruction should not be offered to the children in our school.

Note on terminology used:

We use the term “**religious instruction**” to designate instruction in a particular faith with the purpose of inculcation of children into religious belief. Religious instruction generally includes religious observances such as prayers and worship songs. In contrast, “**religious education**” and “**religious studies**” is the education/study about (world) religions and beliefs, usually organized in a comparative manner.

**PART I. SUMMARY OF INFORMATION ABOUT RI IN NZ STATE SCHOLS AND IN OPS**

**Brief summary of religion in New Zealand state primary schools[[1]](#footnote-1)**

The Education Act of 1877, Clause 84 established that teaching in state-funded primary schools would be “entirely of a secular character.” Informally, however, from the late 19th century and starting in the Nelson region church volunteers began going into primary schools to teach religious instruction classes during the school day. This, so-called “Nelson system” was made legal by the **Education Act of 1964**, which in **section** **78** stated that (determined by the principal and the board of trustees)

Any class or classes at the school, or the school as a whole may be closed (…) for a period not exceeding thirty minutes for any class in any week for the purposes of religious instruction given by voluntary instructors (…) and of religious observances.

A 1983 amendment to Section 78 made the provision for **up to one hour** but not exceeding 20 hours a year.

**Section 79** further stated that attendance must be optional and that the parent must request in writing for its child to ‘opt out’. The decision whether **to host religious instruction or not was placed with the board of trustees of the school.**

Throughout the period the religious instruction was delivered by volunteer instructors from various Christian denominations. In 1973, Churches Education Commission (CEC), an umbrella organization of Christian denominations, succeeded the earlier NZ Council for Christian Education as the provider of religious instruction programmes in state schools. CEC recruits and trains instructors as well as prepares the curricula and teaching materials.[[2]](#footnote-2) There are different programmes in different schools, depending e.g. on the class size (“Life focus”, “Life choices”, “Champions”). All of these programmes claim to teach ‘values’, from Christian perspective but in a ‘non-judgmental’ manner acceptable to non-Christians.

**Challenges with continuing this historical legacy in 2017**

In 2012, CEC reported that 712 or over 40% of New Zealand’s secular state primary schools were running some sort of religious instruction programme: there is, however, a very wide range, from 11% of state schools in Auckland to 66% in Southland.[[3]](#footnote-3) While the legal framework established by the 1964 Education Act remains unchanged, especially through the 1980s and 1990s New Zealand the introduction of a series of legislative acts ensuring the equal rights of its citizens.[[4]](#footnote-4) The development of human rights legislation reflected the changing ethical position regarding human rights, in developed Western countries. But it also reflects demographic and cultural changes in New Zealand. Once a country with overwhelmingly Christian population, in New Zealand today less than half population describes themselves as Christians, with more than a third not seeing themselves as affiliated to any religion and 6% (10% in Auckland) to other religions.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This discrepancy between the recognition of the right to the freedom of religion and belief and increased diversity on one side and the implicitly endorsed Christian instruction in the schools on the other side, has resulted in increasingly numerous and intense efforts to repeal the instruction. While Ministry of Education said that there were “no plans to amend the legislation”,[[6]](#footnote-6) by 2009 there had been enough complaints, largely by concerned parents or secular groups, and publicity for the Human Rights Commission to acknowledge that “the place of religion in New Zealand schools has been a complex issue that provides the source for a steady stream of enquiries and complaints to the HRC” and prepare a guide for schools and parents.[[7]](#footnote-7) In spite of that, the complaints have not stopped and resulted in recent court cases, attracting much media attention.[[8]](#footnote-8) Professor Paul Morris, who holds UNESCO Chair of Inter-religious Understanding and Relations at Victoria University in Wellington, assessed two of the CEC programmes and stated that they teach religion; use prayers to God and Jesus “inappropriate and likely objectionable” to secular, non-Christian and non-evangelical families, with CEC programmes “not suitable for state schools”.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Most recently, a 2001 document by the Ministry of Education released to a campaigner against religious instruction classes (in 2016) revealed that the Ministry’s own legal team thought that a challenge to religious instruction in state schools on the grounds of direct discrimination could not be legally defended.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**PART II. RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION IN OUR PRIMARY SCHOOL**

**The content of religious instruction**

The Primary School offers “Life Focus” programme, which is one of the programmes developed by the CEC for classroom setting.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The Primary School The booklet describing the content of the course (see attachment “Life Focus”) opens with the statement that the programme

‘enhances the values of the New Zealand Curriculum Framework and particularly links with the underlying concepts, strands and processes of the Health and Social Studies curricula. (..) provides State School teachers and Boards of Trustees in their task of delivering the NZ curriculum, by providing an outside voice that can reinforce the essential skills, knowledge and understandings laid out in the Curriculum”.

This statement (further developed in the remainder of the booklet) seems uncontroversial and acceptable, although it begs the question why the voices of parents, family and friends are not sufficient to support the Curriculum.

The short discussion of the Curriculum starting from p. 9 indicates, however that rather than being a study of values from the Christian perspective and potentially suitable for non-Christian, the class is really a study of Christian religion. For example, the first unit starts with the topic “What is God?”. Page 12 then explicitly states that “These values are presented from a Christian perspective using Biblical stories as resource material in about two thirds of the lessons.”

“Teachers guides” (for “Life Choices” programme; seems that “Life Focus” and “Life Choices” are interchangeable) are much more explicit regarding the purpose and content of these classes. On p. 3 it says that “The aim of the Life Choices curriculum is to be acceptable to New Zealand state schools while maintaining the biblical basis of Christian religious education.” Each unit is structured so it includes prayer. While values from the NZ curriculum are mentioned, they are here only as a prop, a way of making the true core of the class—study of the Bible—acceptable. And while the text of the “Guide” occasionally reminds the teacher that the class should be acceptable to children of secular parents (so the children should not be asked to sing/say statements of personal belief e.g. “I believe in Jesus”) there is no attempt to, for example, include examples from other religions and their sacred texts.

Finally, reports from children give a strong reason to suspect that the class is not at all suitable for everyone. We’ve heard that the instructors are telling children that “God created everything”. This does not only conflict with what is taught at homes but also with NZ curriculum, which the programme supposedly “enhances”!

In conclusion, children coming from non-Christian (and possibly some Christian) households, are likely to experience a conflict between statements and beliefs taught in the class and those taught at home. It does not seem that the religious instruction “enhances the curriculum”: values are included in the NZ curriculum anyway and also they cannot be easily separated from the religious content within which they are taught. In our view, the class is potentially harmful or, at best, redundant.

**Delivery of an “Opt out” policy**

The Primary School currently operates an “opt out” policy (in line with section 79 of the 1964 Education Act), requiring the parents to submit a written request to withdraw their child from RI. In theory, this option seems fair, but in practice it creates numerous problems. The list below was created from the material collected in informal conversations with school parents; for many, more than one of the points apply:

* Some parents are under impression that the school is organizing the instruction and, although they understand that it is optional, feel implicitly pressured to allow the children to attend. Allowing religious instruction to take place **in the classrooms** gives RI a stamp of official approval.
* Some parents may miss the notice in the newsletter about the class and the requirement to opt out, only to discover later on that the child is attending the class. They may then believe that it is too late to withdraw the child from the class; they or their children may feel embarrassed; they may not want to attract attention.
* Some parents have doubts about the programme, but, lacking information about the content and the goal of the programme, assume that the class is religious education (i.e. about religion, using historical/cultural/comparative approach) rather than RI, an opportunity to gain some knowledge about “world religions”, “reasons why we celebrate Christmas and Easter”, and “our shared culture”. They also may take the statements that the class is “appropriate for non-Christians” and “teaching values” at face value.
* Some parents and/or children may choose to attend the class because they’re worried that, by opting out, the children will find themselves a minority, judged and isolated from their peers. Children may insist on going because their friends are going.
* There have been reports (in previous years) of the instructors of RI giving lollies to children; it is possible for children to hear that and insist on attending the class.
* Parents may also feel coerced to participate in the class (or not to object to the class) because they feel that their withdrawal and criticism may be interpreted as a criticism of the Christian faith of other parents in the school community.

Of course, there may be parents who genuinely want children to receive Christian religious instruction. But without conducting a detailed, carefully constructed questionnaire, we cannot say what the reasons are. Even then, the experiences of other schools have indicated that the response rate may not be sufficient to give us clear insight.

For that reason, while our argument and recommendation is to discontinue the delivery of the religious instruction, the minimum first step should be to move from opt-out to opt-in policy. That move would then easily distinguish the families that are genuinely interested in the religious instruction from those who are participating for wrong reasons: fear, misunderstanding or inertia.

**Delivery of alternative programme (opt out)**

The Section 78 requires the school (or part of the school) to formally close for instruction during the religious instruction class. What the schools are supposed to do with children who opt-out is less clear. For instance, the Human Rights Commission guide, on p. 13, states that “a school still has a duty of care for its students before and after school and during normal hours. Schools need to ensure that appropriate supervision and instruction is provided for children when the school is closed for religious purposes.” But if the school is closed, how is “appropriate supervision and instruction” provided?

This lack of clarity and consistency is evident in the case of our school, where parents are told that the children “spend time in library” while in reality during the first two weeks of the RI this year, Y2 children who opted out were added to a Y1 class where the children watched a video and did colouring in.

Even worse, it appears that no one checks whether the children who are on the “opt-out” list have actually joined the alternative programme. In the case of one of our children, religious instruction took place in her classroom; the teacher forgot to remind her to leave; the six-year old child thought that because the teacher did not remind her, she should stay in her classroom and join the class. She come back home singing religious songs.

In conclusion, the “alternative programme” lacks quality and appears to be creating challenges to deliver consistently in line with communicated expectations to parents. Children should simply continue with their learning under the existing curriculum. The delivery of religious instruction creates disruption to the delivery of the curriculum, the need to physically segregate children, and design a new curriculum that has to be outside of the core curriculum. While we argue in favour of discontinuing religious instruction altogether, should the BoT decide to continue it, we recommend moving it to lunchtime (like the creative class on Tuesdays), where it does not conflict with the regular curriculum. It should also take place outside the classrooms.

**PART III: FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION IN THE SCHOOL**

In our view, the currently offered Christian Values Programme should not be offered in our school for the following reasons:

1. Christian religious instruction in New Zealand state primary schools goes against the reality of modern, diverse New Zealand, where right to belief is guaranteed by law and where less than half of population describes themselves as Christians.
2. In spite of the claims, the content of the programme is not suitable for non-Christians and it does not enhance the curriculum and it may even conflict with it.
3. Requirement to formally ‘opt-out’ places the onus onto the non-participating parents, who for variety of reasons (lack of knowledge, fear, embarrassment, pressure, inertia) may leave the children the children in the programme albeit disagreeing with it.
4. The alternative programme appears an afterthought, lacking quality and consistency.

In summary, we argue for discontinuing religious instruction programme altogether.

Should the BoT, however, recommend to keep it, we would insist on moving from opt-out to opt-in requirement and the classes from 2.15 pm to lunchtime, and from classrooms into school hall or some other space that is not associated with normal school curriculum.

One of the wonderful things about a secular state school system is the ability to bring balance, fairness and a sense of inclusion for all people.  These principles should be reinforced for our children, who are most sensitive to influence.

 **Attached**

1. **Professor Paul Morris’s review of CEC religious instruction programmes for state primary schools.**
2. **Human Rights Commission guide: Religion in New Zealand Schools, questions and concerns, 2009.**
1. Much of the information in this and following section from Helen Bradstock, “Let’s Talk about Something Else.” Religion and Governmentality in New Zealand State Primary Schools. PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://cec.org.nz/Who-We-Are/Our-Story [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Figures from Bradstock, p. 15 (Table 3). She bases her figures on data obtained from Statistics New Zealand. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Here especially relevant the UN Contention of the Rights of the Child of 1989 (of which New Zealand is a signatory) states guarantees “the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.” Furthermore the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990, section 13, states “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief, including the right to adopt and to hold opinions without interference.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. These figures are from Bradstock, 2016, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/education/7159949/Christians-target-schools-in-mission [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://www.hrc.co.nz/files/9414/2387/8011/HRC-Religion-in-NZ-Schools-for-web.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/education/79213586/Bible-lessons-in-schools-case-thrown-out-of-High-Court-after-missed-deadline>; <http://www.educationreview.co.nz/magazine/april-2016/values-and-beliefs/#.WL3JB3ofR6w>; [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/education/69771955/Professor-Paul-Morris-gives-scathing-review-of-Bible-in-Schools-material [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11639331>. (to add the document) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In earlier versions the “Life Focus” booklet stated that “Thee Churches Education Commission is the interchurch agency recognized and endorsed by the Ministry of Education and the School of Trustees Assocation as the overseer of Religious Education and Chaplaincy in State Schools).” This claim was the object of a complaint to the Advertising Standards Complaints Board in 2007 and the Ministry of Education requested a change (“The MoE recognizes the CEC as the major provider of Christian religious education in state schools as made possible by the Education Acts of 1964 and 1989”. See ASA-Decision-Churches-Education-Commission-07033-1. pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-11)