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# Christian Leadership in Schools

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An initial review of evidence and current practices

## Summary Report

Ellen Spencer and Bill Lucas



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### About the Church of England's Foundation for Educational Leadership

The Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership was established in 2016 and undertakes leadership development in three workstreams – Programme, Networks and Research, working with a wide range of schools, MATs, Dioceses, local authorities and other systems leaders. Its approach is grounded in the 'Church of England Vision for Education – Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good' (2016). This document outlines the key purpose of education based on four pillars – Educating for Wisdom, Knowledge & Skills; Hope & Aspiration; Community & Living Well Together; Dignity & Respect.

The Foundation aims 'to develop inspirational leaders who are called, connected and committed to deliver the Church of England Vision for Education' and offers professional training for new and aspiring headteachers, Multi-Academy Trust Chief Executives, middle leaders, governors, clergy and diocese education teams. In addition it runs the Peer Support Network, which draws together hundreds of school leaders to collaborate on shared leadership development priorities across a wide variety of contexts. Furthermore it partners in a variety of research projects focused on the connection between school ethos and outcomes in the decision-making of educational leaders.

### About the Centre for Real-World Learning at the University of Winchester

The Centre for Real-World Learning (CRL) focuses on the development of character, building understanding about the learning dispositions which enable individuals to flourish throughout their lives, and how best these can be cultivated. CRL has undertaken ground-breaking research for the Royal Academy of Engineering, the Edge Foundation, Creativity, Culture and Education, the Mitchell Institute and for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Professor Bill Lucas and Dr Ellen Spencer have recently published two books which are helping teachers understand more about important aspects of character development, *Teaching Creative Thinking: Developing learners who generate ideas and can think critically* and *Developing Tenacity: Teaching learners how to persevere in the face of difficulty*.

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# Executive Summary

This report is a summary of a longer review, which contains an initial exploration of thinking about Christian leadership in schools. Leadership is one of the most extensively researched of all social processes. It has generated many well-evidenced frameworks and many frameworks or approaches to leadership have become global brands. The subjects of school leadership and Christian leadership have, in recent decades, also generated a considerable amount of research. Christian leadership in schools is a smaller and more recent field of study.

The Church of England's vision for education is laid out in a document of the same name (The Church of England Education Office, 2016). In order to develop thinking about the leadership that might be relevant for putting such a vision into practice, this review focuses on some fundamental questions emerging from the Church of England *Vision for Education*:

- What is Christian leadership in schools?
- What does the evidence tell us about what 'works' in Christian leadership in schools?
- How strong is the evidence base?

There is no single authoritative definition of Christian leadership in schools; a number of variables are involved and clarity is needed for each of them. Any exploration of Christian leadership in schools needs to consider what might be meant by 'Christian leaders' and also by 'Christian schools'.

This report is written with Christian leaders and with those leading Christian schools in mind. In clarifying these issues, we hope it will speak to all schools in its exploration of leadership for the four elements of the Vision: Educating for 'Wisdom, Knowledge and Skills', 'Hope and Aspiration', 'Community and Living Well Together', and 'Dignity and Respect'.

A preliminary analysis of Christian leadership in schools reveals a fragmented and diverse emerging field. Perhaps because of the inevitable tensions between biblical and secular worldviews, any consideration of Christian leadership in schools raises more fundamental questions than either the topic of leadership in the abstract, or leadership in schools – where success is typically largely defined in terms of student achievement – can answer.

We offer a typology (Figure 1, page 11) by which the many issues raised in the literature can begin to be examined.

## What works in terms of Christian leadership in schools?

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There is very little evidence of the effectiveness or otherwise of Christian leadership in schools. For, perhaps unsurprisingly, the effectiveness literature in schools is dominated by standards set by governments and their accountability bodies. In determining whether a school ‘works’. Data such as the achievement of pupils in public examinations tends to exert the largest influence.

While the degree to which an education is moral or the ways in which it develops the character of pupils is certainly acknowledged, the degree to which it is Christian is not a topic of governmental evaluation. Such summative evaluative data as there are in England can be found in reports from the Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS<sup>1</sup>), but it is not the primary job of SIAMS to analyse what works and how it does so.. Neither does SIAMS have an explicit research function.

## How strong is the evidence base?

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The evidence base for Christian leadership in schools is thin, with an inadequate theoretical base, few research-informed models for conceptualising its complexities, and almost no robust studies evaluating its impact and/or seeking to understand the mechanisms by which effects are achieved.

# Introduction

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The initial scan of the literature about Christian leadership in schools, of which this is a summary, involved a preliminary search of relevant academic databases and literature, as well as in-depth interviews with a small number of individuals with expertise in the area of Christian leadership in schools.

The research base on leadership, and school leadership has been described as ‘one of the most comprehensively researched social influence processes in the behavioural sciences’ (Parris & Peachey, 2013: p. 113). ‘Christian leadership’ in the context under study is that which promotes human flourishing, life in all its fullness, and the common good. These ideas need to be unpacked. Many of the concepts in the scope of this study require some introduction, particularly where there is uncertainty or debate over meanings.

This initial review is not in any way exhaustive. Instead it offers an overview of the field with some observations about its scope, both in terms of quantity and quality, identifying along the way well-documented themes and areas where there is little current research.

We have therefore concentrated upon three key questions, set out below, with a brief indication of how we have tackled each question.

### **1. What is Christian leadership in schools? What does it look like? Who are the main thinkers? How widespread is it in England?**

In answering this question we offer an overview of the literature, summarising key lines of thought and identifying key thinkers, key journals and key academic centres.

### **2. What do we know about what ‘works’ in Christian leadership?**

Here we have considered whether there is evidence that Christian leadership in schools as defined in (1) ‘works’, that is to say whether it ‘delivers’ its intended outcomes such as human flourishing, life in all its fullness and the common good or ‘character’ as defined by the Church of England (Church of England Office for Education, 2016).

### **3. How strong is the evidence base for Christian school leadership more generally, both theoretically and empirically?**

We begin by weighing the evidence base for Christian leadership in schools and then offer some evaluative comments as to its extent, its areas of focus, the quality of existing research, concluding by describing any gaps in our understanding.



# 1. What is Christian Leadership in schools?

Leadership is a multifaceted concept. To answer this question a number of terms need to be unpacked and a number of further questions need to be asked, including: What level of school leadership are we talking about? What do we mean by 'Christian schools', by 'Christian', and by 'Christian leadership' in general?

## 1.1 Leadership at what level?

Theory, research and practice into 'leadership' of Church of England schools is multi-level and could incorporate thinking on leadership by governors, headteachers and middle leaders (including subject, teacher, or year group leadership). Or it could refer to aspects of leadership related to Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), or to more abstract concepts such as pedagogic leadership, a holistic approach to aligning leadership values with what is actually taught.

## 1.2 What does leading in 'Christian schools' mean?

As we have noted, it is not straightforward to define some of our basic terms: that is true of one of the most basic – what is a Christian school? Different groups might consider a school to be 'Christian' in any of the following senses, without necessarily holding to all of them: if it has Christian foundations that have some influence how it is run; has a Christian leader; is fully staffed by Christians; holds to biblical values; explicitly teaches Christianity; or enrolls only Christian children (however defined e.g. self-identified, church attendance, membership of church e.g. through baptism, or parental membership).

This question has an importance beyond schools which are in some way overtly Christian. One reason is that the Church of England's work in the area of Christian leadership is of interest to leaders working in community and other schools without a religious foundation. It is therefore essential to be more explicit about what is meant by a 'Christian school' or else we risk making general statements that are too vague to be useful to any group.

## 1.3 What do we mean by 'Christian leaders'?

In 2006 Christianity Today International (publisher of *Leadership*) commissioned a survey of self-identified US 'Christians' to understand 'the disparity of those who call themselves Christian in America'. The journal identified five important categories:

**1. Active** – believe salvation comes through Jesus Christ, committed churchgoers, Bible-readers, accepting leadership positions, investing in personal faith development through church, feel obliged to share faith

**2. Professing** – believing salvation comes through Jesus Christ but less committed to Bible-reading, faith sharing, church attendance, or serving in church.

**3. Liturgical** – regular churchgoers with high level of spiritual activity, mostly expressed by serving in church and/or community. Recognition of the authority of the church.

**4. Private** – the largest and youngest segment, believing in God and doing good things, owning but not reading a Bible, rarely going to church, 'spiritual' but not in a church context.

**5. Cultural** – little outward religious behaviour or attitudes; God aware, but little personal involvement with God and not viewing Jesus as essential to salvation; affirming many ways to God.

While this list has an American context, its categories may be helpful to us in England.

Another important distinction amongst Anglicans is between Anglo-Catholic<sup>2</sup>, broad church, and evangelical<sup>3</sup> (Village & Francis, 2010). The Church of England is a broad organisation and one of its

<sup>2</sup> Anglo-Catholics emphasise liturgical worship and see the celebration of the Eucharist as central. They tend to espouse a Roman Catholic view of doctrine and view church tradition as an important source of authority

<sup>3</sup> Term used to describe those who hold exclusively to the inspiration and authority of scripture in matters of doctrine. Evangelicals also believe firmly in personal conversion and evangelism.

## 1. What is Christian Leadership in schools?

hallmarks is its tolerance of tradition, such that those Anglicans emphasising Catholic tradition and those emphasising Reformed tradition can coexist.

This difference provides further complexity, however, in defining terms like Christian leader, and Christian leadership. Fundamental beliefs about, for example, the inerrancy or otherwise of scripture, are important to recognise when talking about who is leading, and what for. These distinctions (which at their core 'may relate to profound differences in the understanding of the relations of Scripture to faith' (p.78) will undoubtedly be reflected in beliefs, purposes, and practice of Christian leaders in schools.

### 1.4 What do we mean by 'Christian leadership in schools'?

In unpacking Christian leadership in schools we need to be mindful of the fact that, while Christian leadership may not be exclusive to Christian schools, it may look quite different depending on the school context. While absence of religious character does not make a school neutral in its values or its beliefs, we include secular schools here as places that nevertheless can possess a Christian presence by virtue of Christian staff. Other faith schools are considered out of scope for this review.

By 'Christian leadership in schools' there are a number of possible meanings including:

1. Leadership by active Christians leading active Christian staff – most likely in an independent Christian school
2. Leadership by active Christians in Christian schools
3. Leadership by active, or by professing Christians in all schools
4. Leadership by non-Christian leaders at various (non-headship) levels in Christian schools
5. Leadership in all schools where there is some 'Christian' element such as aspects of its ethos that claim, or contain, biblical values
6. Leadership by all leaders who claim to bring some 'Christian' element, such as an aspect of their personal values that they relate to biblical teaching

## 1. What is Christian Leadership in schools?

It may be helpful to situate these on a matrix to demonstrate the comprehensiveness of this way of looking at it. Figure 1 below is an attempt to do this.

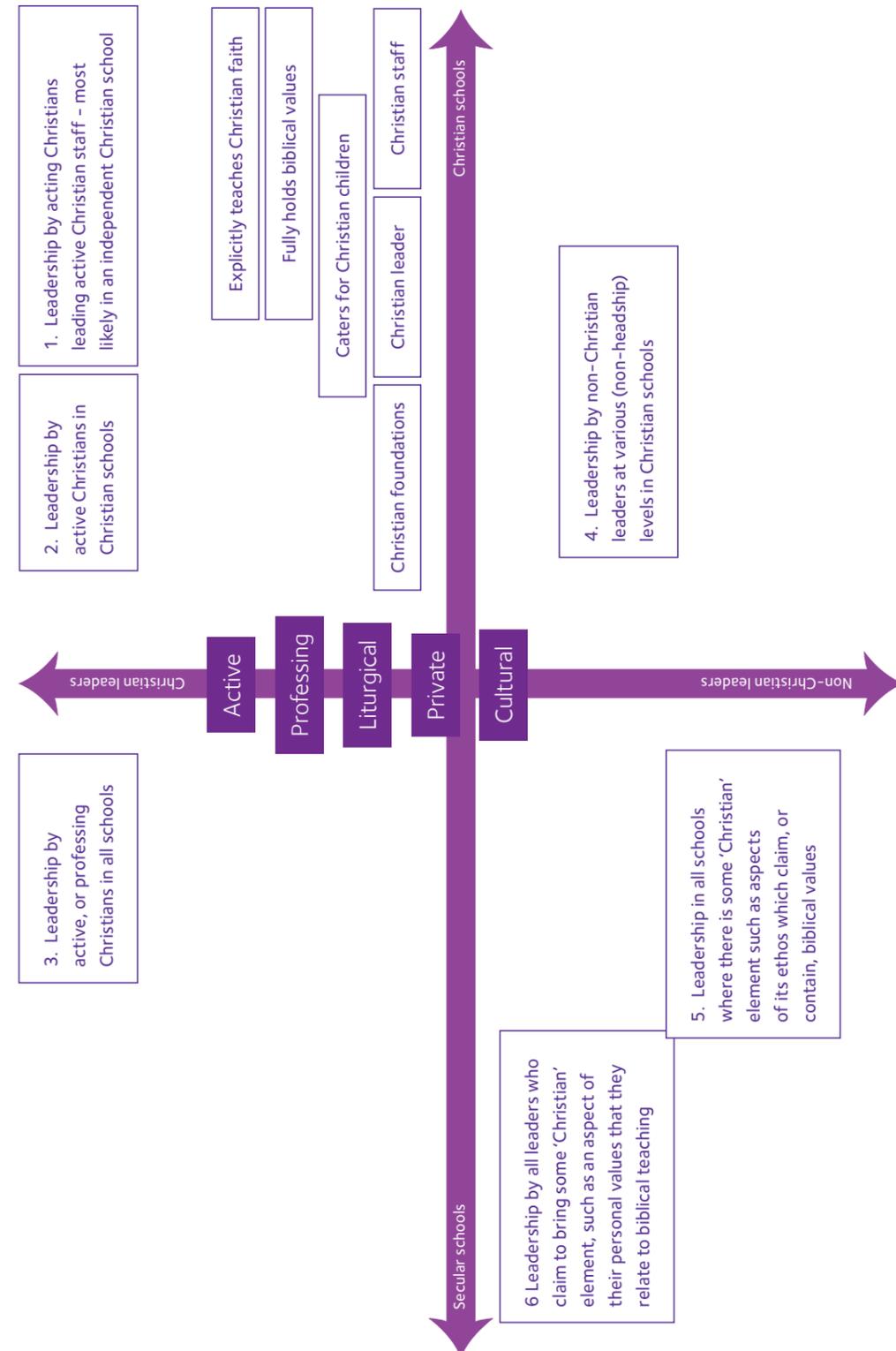


Figure 1 Centre for Real-World Learning's Framework of types of Christian leadership in schools

This brief overview of the broad literature focuses largely on point 2, and particularly on Church of England schools. While recognising that headteachers in Church of England schools differ in their approaches to their own faith, they will likely find themselves leading mixed teams: some of their leadership teams will be Christian; some not. Point 2 speaks to the way headteachers lead in all these situations.

For the purposes of this review, however, the higher up the preceding list, the more clearly the literature is likely to have relevance for the issue (or perhaps by its absence speak to what is yet unknown).

### 1.5 Tension: Inclusivity versus truth claims

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Church of England schools are places of education that serve children of any and no religion. Lord Dearing's (2001) report to the Archbishop's Council *The Way Ahead: Church of England schools in the new millennium* noted that the Church should seek to serve all children; that Church schools 'stand well in the regard of many parents of all faiths and no faith' (p.17); that Church schools (and colleges) are, nonetheless, 'Christian institutions which offer a Christian influence to all staff and students' (p.67) and have 'a well-grounded basis for its values and moral standards' that those they serve are looking for. The report recommended that 'Church schools must be distinctively Christian' (p. xi).

The Church of England's vision writing group moved from using the language of a 'distinctively Christian' ethos to a 'deeply Christian vision of education' that centralises the notion of 'human flourishing for all', based on John 10:10. This sets excellence and academic rigour in a 'wider framework': one that allows children and their teachers to 'pursue the big questions of meaning' (Church of England Vision, p. 4), and seeks to speak to all schools, whether Church of England or not.

Jesus promise of 'life in all its fullness' is recorded in the Gospel of John in the context of Jesus talking about his identity as the 'good shepherd' who is the only way to know God the father, with whom he claims to be one: "I and the Father are one." (John 10:30). A challenge for Christian leaders in schools is reflected in the Church of England's statement that we must find a way forward where 'we can be true to the depths of our faith and others can be similarly true to their deep commitments' (The Church of England Education Office, 2016: p. 5).

#### 1.5.1 Leading with Christian 'ethos' or 'values'

The separation of Christian ethos or values from a biblical framework creates a definitional challenge in any attempt to work out what good leadership practice, or its outcomes might look like. Many schools without a Christian affiliation adopt an ethos whose underpinning values they may or may not recognise as Christian, but which may be Christian in origin. Schools may be led by those who wish to steer very clear of so-called Christian values, adopting a more humanist stance. Although we exist in a culture profoundly influenced by Judeo-Christian thinking, the values themselves do not make the culture Christian in such a way that might enable us to develop clarity of thinking about what Christian leadership is, and how it can be exercised.

#### 1.5.2 Independent Christian schools

There is a body of literature about independent Christian education that contributes to the Church of England's thinking about issues like worldview, or integration of theology, biblical values, and classroom teaching, or the inculcation of particular values in children, or the bringing about of particular desired outcomes of schooling. Leslie Francis and colleagues (Francis, ap Siôn, & Village, 2014) in the *Journal of Research on Christian Education* looked at the background to the Independent Christian School movement in England and Wales and identified the purposes of schools within this movement as quality of education, Christian and moral nurture, quality of relationships and preparation for life.

These are similar, yet not identical to the Church of England's values of wisdom, hope, community, and dignity. In terms of what independent Christian schools want to know, there is a mission-practice 'gap' and leaders and teachers need help turning the former into the latter.

Boerema's (2011) study provides some thoughts on why Christian schools can look so similar to their secular counterparts. He finds answers in the literature on 'organizations and the economics of production'. Organisation studies and the scientific management literature explain why organisations tend to adopt the same form and structure, and how professionalisation contributes to this.

#### 1.5.3 What sets Church of England schools apart?

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Helen Jelfs (2013) argues that what sets church schools apart is 'a commitment to Christian values, a focus on interpersonal relationships, promoting links with the church and local community, personal Christian commitment and professional leadership.' In the same article, Jelfs tells us that although 'school leaders and staff [in Church of England schools] are committed to the Christian faith and seek to establish an ethos informed by Christian beliefs and practices, they are less able to articulate a distinctive philosophy of education particularly with respect to teaching, learning and the curriculum' (p. 52). She tells us that 'the relationship between the Anglican tradition and its schools is a relatively undeveloped area of research in England' (p. 52).

As Jelfs says: 'In view of the ongoing contested role of religious based schools within a publicly funded education system, critical reflection on what Christian distinctiveness is and what it means to be a Church of England school today remains an essential task.' Her study revealed a significant 'gap' in thinking about undergirding practice with a clear philosophy of education; what we might call 'worldview'. She found 'little evidence to suggest that Church schools were engaged in a critique of the ideological commitments of the dominant educational agenda, or attempting to develop a more distinctive philosophy of education informed by the Christian faith tradition' (p. 72-3).

### 1.6 Tension: Biblical versus secular 'world view'.

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In thinking about developing a body of knowledge on Christian leadership, it is important to recognise the underpinning influence of one's philosophy of Christian education, or theology of education. It may not be feasible to develop a coherent position on Christian leadership without articulating this.

#### 1.6.1 Education as a moral project

Education is, of course, a moral activity (Claxton & Lucas, 2013). The Church of England publication *The Fruit of the Spirit*, (2015: p. 3) notes that: 'There is no such thing as neutral education. As soon as we begin

to teach something to someone else, we are inevitably making value judgements about what we are teaching, how we are teaching it and why we are teaching it.'

The Church of England's *Vision for Education* recognises the biblical mandate for educating our children. It recognises the inherent worth of education as a wonderful privilege and the duty that we have to educate the next generation about the world God has made. The Church of England's historic position – 'a complex and generous model' (p. 4) – is an approach that allows for a variety of views and helps it to sit relatively comfortably in a position of positive influence within a country of diverse population.

Stakeholders to this current initial evidence review raised a range of questions, but a common view was a need to focus on pedagogy and purpose. A common theme was the need for theological literacy; not just literacy in terms of some general familiarity with basic theological ideas and language, but the integrity that comes about from having a coherent approach to school leadership.

#### 1.6.2 Faith and learning

The integration of faith and learning has been discussed at length in the literature. Lawrence et al. (2005: p. 18) tell us that it has been the subject of 'dozens, perhaps hundreds, of books and journal articles during recent decades'. Other terms for it are 'thinking Christianly, having a Christian worldview' etc. What has received 'little attention' are the questions:

Is integration really occurring as part of the student's learning process? Is the integration of faith and learning something that teachers do or something that students do? (p. 18).

#### 1.6.3 The significance of worldview

Worldview is 'a conceptual framework of our view of the world, a belief that guides individual behaviour' (Esqueda, 2014: p. 93). Christian thinkers (and thinking Christians) come to recognise the clash of worldviews between Christianity and secularism. Pearcey categorises modern philosophy into two conflicting traditions: modernism, stemming from the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, and treating 'facts' as the primary reality (empiricism, rationalism, materialism, naturalism, for example); and postmodernism, stemming

from the 'Romantic' reaction to the Enlightenment, and treating the mind as the ultimate source of reality and authority. Thinkers in this tradition focused on 'values', like justice, morals, freedom, meaning (idealism, Marxism, existentialism, postmodernism).

Pearcey writes that 'If nature does not reveal God's will, then it is a morally neutral realm where humans may impose their will... And because the human body is part of nature, it too is demoted to the level of an amoral mechanism...' (p. 22). This is to say that in a worldview that takes God out of the equation, the goal of knowledge is no longer to fulfil God's design and purpose, but to serve individual human needs and purposes.

### 1.6.4 What is a Biblical worldview?

A biblical or Christian worldview acknowledges 'essential meanings of the faith, as summarized in such forms as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed' (Grauf-Grounds et al. 2009: p. 3). The Church of England recognises these two creeds as important statements of 'what the whole Church believes about the great doctrines of the Christian faith'<sup>4</sup>.

Kanitz makes a point about the assumption that 'there is "the" Christian worldview' agreed on by all Christians everywhere. While there are fundamental tenets of Christianity that are shared by all Christians and '[m]ost of the scholarly work on Christian worldview focuses on this common ground...' (p. 100), this is not to say that all Christians hold to the same views on pneumatology, soteriology, ecclesiology, the kingdom of God etc (i.e. the Holy Spirit, salvation, the church).

This emphasis on theological difference risks being overstated, however, because Christians agree about more than they disagree on. The overarching narrative of the Bible as reflected in the Apostles Creed – a creator God creating a perfect world, the arrival of sin, redemption through Jesus, and ultimately a restoration to God's perfect plan through a new creation – is so at odds with a secular worldview, that the similarities far outweigh the differences when it comes to how Christians think about issues such as the origin and value of life, and the meaning of a 'good' life.

At a time where corporate worship is still expected by the government but rarely practised, biblical literacy among the general population is at an all-time low. Behind us are the days when Bible stories

were familiar and young people would possess a knowledge of them as a foundation, however tucked away, to come to light at some point in adulthood.

Christian leaders recognising the weight of the disjunction between a secular and a biblical worldview may wish to consider their role in communicating what they understand to be the truth to children in their care. This might include developing theological and biblical literacy, and the ability to recognise and question worldviews. Standalone Bible stories are, arguably, not enough. If schools are truly to embrace 'the spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, moral and social development of children and young people' (The Church of England Education Office, 2016) they will need to consider how they nourish Biblical literacy as well as being able to 'offer a vision of human flourishing for all, one that embraces excellence and academic rigour, but sets them in a wider framework' of 'life in all its fullness'.

### 1.6.5 Paideia

The concept of paideia occurred in a number of places in this initial literature scan. For Van der Walt and Zecha, paideia refers to 'well-rounded educatedness' (p. 178). Peter Hodgson's (1999) *God's Wisdom: Towards a theology of education* discusses theology and education, attempting to fuse the two together through the concept of paideia, which he understands by reference to Ephesians 6:4: Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (NIV). The idea that theology and education 'might have a common bond is interesting, but tricky to defend in light of secularist discourse in education', which, argues Long (2000: p. 131), does not hold the same nurturing aims.

### 1.6.6 Leading with, and for, a Biblical worldview

The *Vision for Education* is for all schools, not just church schools. It is for Christian leaders of all schools and its ideas are intended to be inclusive of all leaders of all schools. Nevertheless, Christian leaders have certain beliefs that cannot be distilled into a set of values alone. For many, those values are based on biblical truth claims, and are brought to bear on their understanding – to some degree – of all areas of leadership, study, and education. Leading with biblical worldview in mind – as well as for a biblical worldview forms part of the body of literature on Christian leadership in schools.

Schultz and Swezey (2013: p. 227) tell us that a 'Biblical

definition of worldview is a challenge since Scripture does not use the term, but various writers have defined the term with language that is Biblically relevant'. They notice an increase in the prominence of the worldview concept in Christian school education in the US in the last couple of decades. Notably, they observe that 'Within that same period, educators with various worldviews are increasingly looking for measurable results to help them evaluate the effectiveness of their educational endeavors. But in too many instances the embracing of worldview is merely a token effort.' (p. 227). They cite Barna (2003) who 'asserted that while everyone possesses a worldview, "relatively few have a coherent worldview or are able to articulate it clearly" (p. xviii). This lack of coherence persists because "most people don't consider their worldview to be a central, defining element of their life, although it is" (p. 229).

Depending upon the type of school they are leading, Christian leaders of (any) school will have differing ideas about the value of overt teaching of worldview. For many Christian leaders, Jesus promise of 'life in all its fullness' involves biblical beliefs, which they will wish to teach pupils. For other Christian leaders, worldview has not been something they have considered in depth. Both types of leader, and those in-between, may see the value in teaching pupils what a biblical worldview is, or at least recognising worldview in their own teaching. It can help pupils to develop a coherent perspective of their own, to discern worldview in statements made by others, and think critically about the beliefs behind an assertion in any given subject area.

In terms of how much we know about the effectiveness of efforts to instil worldview in students, Schultz and Swezey tell us that few studies 'evaluate the effectiveness of school efforts to inculcate a comprehensive biblical worldview in their students'.

### 1.6.7 Inspection agendas

There is recognition in the academic literature of the tension of a dual inspection regime for Church schools (Ofsted<sup>5</sup> and SIAMS). Lumb's (2014) 'Bernsteinian analysis of the school's learning environment' looks at the support school leaders need to tackle this tension. Her approach is a year-long ethnographic study at a single primary school. She highlights how 'there is an expectation that... doctrine will be opened up and

explored within the curriculum' (p. 43) although we did not uncover literature that looked at how this is done.

Lumb highlights 'a need for church school leaders to be provided with opportunities to develop a reflective theology that will inform both their thinking and their practice' (p. 56).

### 1.7 Models of leadership

Just as education is not a neutral endeavour, so principles of leadership can be examined for their underlying beliefs about the world and the purpose of human life. As we know, the absence of religious foundation for a belief, theory, model, or framework, does not imply neutrality. Secular leadership principles can also be considered in light of their compatibility with a Christian worldview.

In its declaration of its *Vision for Education* the Church of England's 'deeply Christian' manifesto holds 'life in all its fullness' and notions of human dignity and human flourishing as central. These cannot be separated from the underlying worldview of the Church of England that demonstrates a profoundly Christian view of the purpose of human life.

With this in mind, we draw upon models of leadership that, while secular in origin, may contribute to thinking. Conceptions of leadership that might speak to Christian leadership include Moral leadership, Servant leadership, Spiritual leadership, Ethical leadership, Principled leadership, Virtuous leadership and 'Effective' leadership. These seven models of leadership are explored in the full report.

In terms of how Christian leadership in schools can be understood, Fadare (2016: p. 86) cautions against oversimplifying by, for example, 'equating servant leadership to spiritual leadership, equating protestant Christians to all Christian denominations, equating Christian school leaders to spiritual leaders, and equating Christian primary and secondary school leaders to Christian college and University leaders'.



## 2. What does the evidence tell us about what ‘works’ in Christian leadership

### 2.1 Leadership for what?

In order to understand what we know about what ‘works’ in Christian leadership, we need to ask: works for what? Even when we have answered this question there are still, naturally, challenges to evaluating what works.

What might be the Church of England’s desired outcome(s)? Its vision statement communicates that its own approach would aim to ‘educate for’ four key elements that form ‘an ‘ecology’ of the fullness of life’: Wisdom, Knowledge and Skills; Hope and Aspiration; Community and Living Well Together; Dignity and Respect. Outcomes equated with ‘success’ in the broader education literature are sometimes considered explicitly and at other times implied. Some incorporate elements of character, flourishing, and the four explicitly mentioned the Vision. Others might be more at odds with them. Outcomes we found, both explicit and implicit include – academic; a broader view than exam results; labour market or ‘real world’ success; Ofsted judgements; pupil learning; pupil performance; school effectiveness; pupil character; pupil outcomes; pupil outcomes versus values; teacher efficacy; and wholeness.

### 2.2 Challenges to evaluation

A major focus for the Church of England’s work on flourishing to date is in the area of ‘character education’, within which field there is ‘a substantial body of information’ concerning its effectiveness (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004: p. 73). The Church of England’s work with the Jubilee Centre has been its most significant partnership in this area. The 2017 report *Leadership of Character Education* (The Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership) is the most recent of these, sitting within the context of a range of resources produced by Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership to support school leaders in relation to the Vision. The material for leaders provides prompts for self-reflection that ensures ‘that evaluation

is formative not summative in nature’ (p. 39).

As the focus for the Church of England’s ‘approach to developing and celebrating human flourishing’ (The Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership, 2017: p. 5), character education and academic outcomes are ‘strongly linked’ (p. 60).

Outside of the area of character education, the idea of leadership for flourishing is under-evaluated. It is a small field of study with only a small core number of journals that might make some contribution. In terms of what ‘works’ to bring about the Church of England’s four explicit desired outcomes, there is very little evidence – beyond the character education contribution – of what makes for effective practice. There are virtually no well-evaluated questions.

### 2.3 Leadership for Flourishing and ‘Life in all its Fullness’

The Church of England’s mission to serve the common good reflects Jesus commissioning of his community of learners, the disciples. This mission is articulated in its 2016 *Vision for Education*, which sees schools as ‘signs of fullness of life for all, as they educate children for Wisdom, Knowledge and Skills, for Hope and Aspiration, for Community and Living Well Together, and for Dignity and Respect’ (p. 8). It recognises the holistic nature of this ‘fullness’ – encompassing ‘the whole of culture’ and having something to say about how individuals ‘live before God in family, friendship, community and nation’.

In terms of helping students to develop a coherent worldview, Schultz and Swezey (2013) cite six studies in the ten year period to 2008 as examples of research investigating ‘some aspect of worldview’. They observe, that ‘few evaluate the effectiveness of school efforts to inculcate a comprehensive biblical worldview in their students, though it appears to be a nearly universal practice to evaluate the effectiveness of their academic efforts through standardized testing.’ (p. 229)

### 2.4 Leadership for Wisdom, Knowledge and Skills

From any Christian perspective, wisdom and theology are inseparable, yet it ‘is not a word that is much used in contemporary discussions of education’ (The Church of England Education Office, 2016: p. 9). The Jubilee Centre conducts research into character and virtues within education. Its underlying position is that there are ‘proto-typical or universal ‘goods’ to which people, whatever their background, adhere and relate to in some capacity’ (Ward & Harrison, p. 3). Its understanding of virtues has been ‘corroborated empirically by a number of social scientists and philosophers, who have conducted studies suggesting such virtues are likely “to be recognised and embraced by representatives of all cultures and religions”’ (p. 2). One study they cite extended across 75 countries and a million participants.

It is clear from the wider literature that certain ‘virtues’ (for example: courage, justice, honesty, compassion, gratitude, and humility) are accessible and recognisable to children in most classrooms.

‘Practical wisdom’ can be defined as ‘the ability to be balanced, to make the best judgement’ (p. 3). The example the Jubilee Centre gives is of the ‘British Value’ of ‘tolerance’. Tolerance, we argue, does not mean accepting the validity of a belief; rather it is accepting an individual’s right to hold and express that belief. The Jubilee Centre proposes the ‘golden-mean’ is the point at which the absence or presence of tolerance is neither intolerance nor passivity.

Attempts to bring critical thinking more overtly into education through the use of philosophy-led approaches like Sapere’s<sup>6</sup> Philosophy for Children (P4C) have demonstrated their effectiveness – in terms of cognitive and social benefits – through research trials (Gorard, Siddiqui, & See, 2015) which showed small but significant progress in maths and literacy, with wider positive impacts on ‘pupils’ confidence to speak, listening skills, and self-esteem’ (p. 3).

The concept of educating for wisdom is not new. Among the Fathers of the Church, Augustine’s theology of education was heavily influenced by his quest for

wisdom. At its heart, Christian wisdom is about living a life that follows God’s laws, and the Bible is clear that this will seem like ‘foolishness’ to the world. For example: ‘It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.’ (1 Cor 1:30)

Eckert (2016) writing on education and wisdom argues that the Bible emphasises that the point of education is to become wise. Other goals such as intellectual knowledge or skills are ‘reductionist’ and, she argues, the more reductionist the goal of education, ‘the less it leads to an abundant life and the farther it falls from wisdom’ (p. 95). Her rationale for making this claim is that wisdom is, ‘in essence, the mediator and promotor of life in its fullness’. Wise people in the Bible, she argues, ‘hold two basic characteristics in common: they are humble and seek reconciliation’ (p96). Wisdom is developed through education when the educational process itself reflects wisdom.

Rather than seeing Christian wisdom as the goal of education, John Dewey’s philosophy of education saw it as a ‘necessary pre-condition for democracy... [which] resulted in an emphasis [on] the acquisition of practical skills... over nurturing a love of learning... or the pursuit of wisdom..., which had been seen as the purview of the elite classes’ (Martinez, 2015: p. 242). His philosophy was grounded in Darwin’s work on natural selection as an explanatory mechanism for the observed diversity in nature. Dewey’s book *A Common Faith* (1962) assured his readers that religion would become void as a result of scientific thinking. For Dewey, the pursuit of ‘desirable’ social goals was a religious activity itself, as indicated in the book’s title. Highly influential in Western education in the early 20th century to this day, Dewey’s beliefs about the value of a pragmatic education over a classical education, became very popular. Rather than thinking about ‘what sort of citizens do we want’, educators policymakers began to think ‘what do we need them to be able to do’. Progressive education has dominated the education landscape since the early 20th century.

In contrast, Augustine – whose writings are foundational to much Christian interpretation of the Bible – believed that ‘the liberal arts experience is a means to subject

one’s heart submissively to God that leads to a powerful model for both intellectual learning and for spiritual development’ (Shelton, 2013: p. 449).

### 2.5 Leadership for Hope and Aspiration

Hope – as spoken of in the Bible – is to be found only in the person of Jesus, born in human form, died, and now resurrected according to the Bible and the tenets of the Anglican faith: Hebrews 11:1 tells us that ‘Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.’ (NIV). It is only knowledge of the truth that brings people to love God and put their hope in Him. But what do we know about educating for hope?

The Church of England’s *Vision for Education* speaks of hope in the context of aspiration (hope that there might be a positive future for each child); reconciliation (that relationships can be restored) coping (that children might learn resilience when things go wrong or when evil happens), and truth (which gives us purpose).

In terms of the Church of England’s approach to drawing people to the truth in its Vision document:

*Many will enjoy the wine and not recognize where it comes from; some will, with our help, trace it to who is responsible for it; but whether our inspiration for doing what we do is acknowledged or not, it is the right thing to do – as followers of the One who came to bring life in all its fullness, to do signs that give glory to God. (p. 8).*

The concept of ‘hope’ is not one that features in the broader education literature. There is a body of work on ‘gifted and talented’ education, which looks at maximising potential for a particular set of children. This does not, though, frame it in terms of the ‘God-given potential’ (p. 10) of each and every child.

In a political climate where fears for the environment and society are often at the forefront of the media, a Christian focus on hope can help draw young people away from this perceived despair. The Bible has much to say about stewarding the world we live in. The Christian faith is realistic ‘about how flawed and fallible we are’ (The Church of England Education Office, 2016:

p. 10), and would prevent us from engaging in what C.S. Lewis called ‘chronological snobbery’ (2012: p. 240), attaching a false hope to the potential of human society to progress to a place of better values. Instead, the concept of common grace fills us with a deeply Christian hope that human beings, made in the image of God, are capable of great things, and that one person can make a difference, beginning with themselves.

### 2.6 Leadership for Community and Living Well Together

Within this aspect of ‘fullness of life’, the Church of England’s Vision mentions the importance of ‘qualities of character that enable people to flourish together’. Of all the desired outcomes expressed in that document, ‘character’ is the best researched. In the UK, character education was, for a time, at the forefront of education policy, led by former Secretary of State for Education Nicky Morgan (2017). Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership has produced its own report of Leadership of Character Education (Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership, 2017) which builds on the discussion paper *The Fruit of the Spirit* (The Church of England Education Office, 2015).

The Education Endowment Foundation<sup>7</sup> has conducted reviews of the strength of research evidence in 14 high-priority areas linked to improving attainment and wider outcomes of children and young people. The Jubilee Centre has generated materials on character and virtues that are a valuable resource for researchers looking to understand impact and practice within this area; *The Fruit of the Spirit* (The Church of England Education Office, 2015) has already raised some interesting pedagogical questions and their implications for teacher development. A meta-analysis by Jeynes (2017) examined 52 studies. Findings show ‘a clear relationship between character education and student outcomes overall. The overall relationship appears to be about 0.3 to 0.4 of a standard deviation, which, in academic terms, would be about .4 of a GPA unit on a 4-point grading scale’ (p. 28-29).

### 2.7 Leadership for Dignity and Respect

Human dignity, from a biblical perspective, is grounded in the Imago Dei; the Bible’s claim that human beings are made in the image of God. The longer report contrasts this with the dominant paradigm in contemporary culture, which is the concept of ‘personhood theory’. There is an important distinction between human dignity as human rights, and the origin of human dignity from the perspective of Protestant theology. The Church of England’s *Vision for Education* document cites the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights as a ‘global agreement on the worth of each person’ (p. 7) that is now almost universally acknowledged. The idea of human dignity as a foundation for education deserves revisiting because it raises questions like ‘what should the purpose of education be?’ An Academic Search Complete search for ‘human dignity’ and ‘education’ and ‘school’ (last 10 years’ worth of scholarly papers) returned 140 items. Many of these were not relevant to this review, with a large number focused on nursing and/or medicine, or social work, and several focused on ‘social justice’, a term commonly used in today’s culture and often linked to identity politics.

### 2.8 School Effectiveness Research

School effectiveness is a vast body of research and much broader than this review. The ‘school effectiveness’ is relevant because of its focus on ‘what works’ in terms of schools meeting their own objectives. Van der Walt and Zecha (2004: p. 173) found that ‘very little research has been done with respect to the effectiveness of Christian schools’ noting that none of the researchers studied ‘deemed it worthwhile to approach the problem from a Christian (or biblical) perspective.’ (p. 170). At that time, they found school effectiveness as a concept to have no consistent definition. In their paper, school effectiveness is used to refer to ‘the extent to which the school has met its goals or objectives, among others through guiding and enabling the learners to attain or master the desired dispositions’.

This challenge of defining what a Christian school is in order to be able to evaluate whether it is ‘working’ is something that we explore in the full report in more detail drawing on Walt and Zecha’s framework.

In the full report each of these areas is explored in much greater detail than the snapshots in this section of the summary allow.

## 3 How strong is the evidence base?

Our initial scan of the literature revealed a paucity of research with a thin theoretical base, very few robust models, a few journals, no randomised controlled trials, few meta-analyses, no longitudinal studies and a small number of intervention studies, for example, in the area of character. We looked at approximately 120 relevant pieces of evidence.

### 3.1 Strength of the evidence

There is a large body of literature concerning the various models of leadership that might speak to Christian leaders, but little specific work to guide their practice. Van der Walt and Zecha’s 2004 framework of school factors related to effectiveness is the only framework we found that addresses effectiveness from a Christian perspective.

The Church of England’s vision to educate for fullness of life and flourishing sees it focus on wisdom, hope, community, and dignity. Of these four aspects, leadership for community is exceptional in its research base, when we categorise the concept of character education here.

In terms of the Church of England’s concept of flourishing: there is very little literature that speaks to Christian leaders about what ‘flourishing’ means and how they might bring it about. There is also very little literature suggesting how Christian leaders might educate for wisdom. The necessity of doing so is clear, but practically speaking there is a dearth of information. Leadership for hope is, not unexpectedly, an under-researched area. While the message of the gospel offers a clear hope, but how leaders might reflect this in everything they do is not explicitly researched.

There is a small-to-medium sized literature on human dignity. Its meaning outside of a biblical definition is contested, however. Debates about dignity can risk being politicized and ideological. Human dignity as image-bearers of the Creator is fundamental to a Christian’s understanding of what it means to be human. There is a lack of helpful literature exploring how leaders might incorporate this truth into their practice.

Notions of leadership for character (a close proxy to community in its treatment of individuals in relation to their neighbours) are well researched, particularly from a secular perspective. Biblical treatment of the importance of character, and what right interactions with our neighbour look like, is clear. Aside from the work that Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership is already doing in providing material for leaders, research translating leadership for character into practice for Christian leaders in schools does not appear to be in abundance.

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