A Chaplain Remembers: Lifelong Reflections on the Educational and Spiritual Values Shaping the William Carey Chapel

A Chaplain Remembers is the memoirs of the ministry and career of Alan Wright and his influence for the William Carey Chapel. While chaplain at Carey Baptist Grammar School in Melbourne, Wright travelled overseas in 1966 on a Staff Travel Scholarship and had three significant experiences.

First, he visited India and saw where William Carey had pioneered churches and schools, and pursued agricultural and translation work. He also visited a Gandhian style Ashram with a secondary school where students studied academically and engaged in community development projects. They ‘reflected and practiced how to build a better world’. Carey and the Ashram inspired in Wright a renewed commitment to “engaged spirituality”.

Second, he was inspired by Oulton Beadd’s capacity to lead “the light in their eyes” of youth. Whereas secondary schooling can degenerate into a narrow academic setting whose pressure cooking works only for some, the active learning offered by Oulton Beadd engages students in experience and community issues and allows space for broader human values.

Third, he was engrossed by war ruins in Stuttgart and Coventry and had a vision of God being “above all, through all and in all”. His imagination was captured by a fresh praying of the Lord’s Prayer, especially for God’s name to be hallowed – in hearts and homes, classes and commercial spheres, and for God’s reign and forgiveness to be extended in all life.

This educational and spiritual vision formed the architecture and symbols of the William Carey Chapel, and shaped the remainder of Wright’s educational career and research. It is expressed in the Chapel’s theme of engaged spirituality: “Hallowed be thy name – in recreation God be in my limbs and in all my leisure, … in commerce, God be in my desk and in all my trading, … in the home, God be in my heart and in all my loving, … in education, God be in my mind and in all my growing.”

The book’s 291 pages offer a pleasantly surprising breadth of reflections. He discusses progressive pedagogy and engaged prayer, war and peace, Marxism and school church politics, personal and marketplace spirituality, sexuality and human development, Baptist history and distinctive, diocese, outdoor education and environmental concern. The book explores a vision for how secondary school education can be different with outdoor education, engaged spirituality and everyone finding something they do well. Wright reveals episodes of taking Carey students out bush, sending them into Hawthorn music centres for research and empowering them to engage with drama and organize interschool clinics, all to unleash motivation for learning.

Wright draws on the fascinating chapters of his life – from a wartime RAAF pilot and military chaplaincy it would have liked to have read more of the priest, pastoral ministry, and early industrial chaplaincy, chaplaincy at Carey 1956-1972, and then work as a researcher for the Poverty Commission interviewing eight-year olds and how they got started after school, and later work with unemployed youth in Ballarat.

Throughout his career, Wright sought to empower the creativity and potential in every young person. He had a high vision and hope for education to be not merely about acquiring knowledge but cultivating the wisdom of men to make the world a better place.

“I’ve received an “education” without gaining wisdom – and its inherent spirituality – it will mean that somehow we will keep moist the point of our lips on earth. That will always be said. Let us rather warm our souls at the fire of spirituality, giving that part of ourselves our full attention” (p.187).

It is a deeply personal memoir of a man’s experience of God and his grappling with his vocation of helping others understand their vocations. He draws on his Baptist heritage and the example of William Carey. But he laments for the next generation of teachers and students to not sit down and leave things to God, but “do another William Carey”. He urges his readers, as he did his students, to attempt great things and grapple with a changing world.

A Chaplain Remembers is suitable reading for teachers, chaplains, youth workers, qualitative researchers, students of Baptist tradition and parents. It has something for anyone interested in challenging ideas and inspiring human stories that expand possibilities for experiencing God and educating the next generation.

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