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Experiencing education in the new Christian schools in the United Kingdom: listening to the male graduates

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Experiencing education in the new Christian schools in the United Kingdom: listening to the male graduates

SUMMARY

The new independent Christian schools developed by parents and evangelical churches in the United Kingdom since the late 1960s remain controversial among both Christian and secular educators. In response to this controversy, the present study traced 106 men who had graduated from these schools between 1985 and 2003 and analysed their evaluation of the education they had received in these schools within four main themes: the quality of the education, the context of Christian and moral nurture, the quality of relationships (among the pupils, with the teachers, and with the wider world), and preparation received for life after leaving school. Although there were some issues of criticism, the balance of opinion among the former pupils within all four areas was generally supportive of the new independent Christian schools, which were generally perceived as having prepared them well for life.

INTRODUCTION

When the Cedars School was opened in Rochester in 1969 a new era dawned in educational provision in England and Wales (Deakin, 1989). The Cedars School proved to be the first of a series of uncoordinated initiatives taken by Christian parents and by evangelical churches to create a radical alternative to the predominant secular ethos of the state-maintained sector of schools as a whole (Baker and Freeman, 2005). By 2005 the Christian Schools' Trust had enlisted 46 of these independently founded schools into an informal network, stretching from Plymouth in the south west and Rochester in the south east of England to Dundee in the north east of Scotland, and Bangor in Northern Ireland. A number of other independent Christian schools continue to flourish beyond the network of the Christian Schools' Trust.

In one sense, little may seem remarkable about the development of Christian or church-related schools in England and Wales. Many of the best-known independent, private or fee-paying schools (oddly known in the English system as 'public schools' since they are the very opposite of what would be known as public schools in the North American system.) trace their origins to denominational initiatives, including Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and Quaker. Moreover, the current system of state-maintained schools in England and Wales owes its origin to the initiative of the churches during the first half of the nineteenth century with the development of voluntary societies, including the National Society (Anglican), the British and Foreign School Society (Free Church) and the Catholic Poor School Committee (Cruickshank, 1963; Murphy, 1971; Chadwick, 1997). There were, however, two crucial ways in which the new Christian schools differed from the more established notion of church-related schools in England and Wales. These two differences concern the way in which the new Christian schools were established, and the theological rationale underpinning their establishment. Both issues are illuminated by Baker and Freeman (2005) in their insider

account of 'the story of the new Christian schools'.

Regarding the way in which the individual new Christian schools came into being, Baker and Freeman (2005) rehearse the foundation narratives for 17 such schools: The Cedars School (Rochester), Trinity School (Stalybridge), Immanuel School (Romford), Christian Fellowship School (Liverpool), Covenant Christian School (Stockport), The King's School (Basingstoke), The King's School (Southampton), The King's School (Witney), The River School (Worcester), The King's School (Nottingham), Bethany School (Sheffield), Christ the King School (Sale), Kingsland School (Bangor, Northern Ireland), The Bradford Christian School (Bradford), Chrysolyte School (London), Emmaus School (Trowbridge) and Lewis Independent School (Stornoway, Western Isles). Read through a sociological lens, these narratives tend to tell a common story of Christian parents shaped within an evangelical tradition becoming acutely aware of the discontinuity between the beliefs and values fundamental to the shared life of their family home and the prevailing beliefs and values of their neighbourhood state-maintained school. In response to this perceived discontinuity between home and neighbourhood school, Christian parents (sometimes supported by their church pastor and congregation, but not always so) felt called by their God to make extraordinary sacrifices and to take (in faith) extraordinary risks in order to establish an alterative educational environment by founding an independent school. Read through an evangelical theological lens, these narratives tell of a pioneering initiative by God to sow the seeds for a new kind of Christian education within the hearts of several faithful disciples independently of one another.

Regarding the theological rationale underpinning the development of the new Christian schools, Baker and Freeman (2005) provide a number of important clues in the context of

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rehearsing the foundation narratives of the 17 schools. Theologically, pioneers of the new Christian schools conceptualise a strong division between the Kingdom of God and the secular world. They take a high view of the responsibilities of Christian parenting and seriously question whether it is right for Christian parents to send their 'child to be trained by someone who may not know the Lord and may even despise him and his truth' (p 14). They argue that, in comparison with the secular school, the Christian faith posits 'a radically different curriculum' (p 133) and 'a radically different view of the child' (p 134). According to this view, 'Christianity affects the whole of life and there is a Christian perspective on all that is being taught' (p 132). Going beyond the topics taught, there is emphasis placed on the view that 'Christian education involves character building' (p 49). In particular Baker and Freeman (2005:49) argue that consistent exposure to what is right develops the ability to recognise what is right, and the protection from destructive influences and pressures at an early age results in strength to withstand these when the child is older. Above all, the greatest priority in the children's education is for them 'to come to know the Lord' (p 27).

Within the theological rationale defining the nature, content and context of Christian education for the new Christian schools, there are two particular points of potential conflict with the prevailing received wisdom of the secular school. These two points concern discipline and science education. Regarding discipline, authority is sought from several biblical texts to mandate the parent to discipline the child, when appropriate, with physical correction, and it is argued that the Christian school stands in *locus parentis*. According to Baker and Freeman (2005:51) corporal punishment, 'properly, kindly and lovingly administered' plays a part in God's order. However, today, Christian schools do not practise corporal punishment in accordance with legal requirements. Regarding science education, the opening chapters of Genesis teach that God created the world in six days and rested on the

seventh day. Accordingly, the new Christian schools are inclined to teach evolution from a fully critical perspective and to ensure that the biblical teaching on creation is presented as a viable and credible alternative.

Baker and Freeman's (2005) insider account is well corroborated by the series of independent research studies into the new Christian school movement undertaken by Professor Geoffrey Walford (1994, 1995a, 1995b, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c). For example, in 1993, Walford (1995a) conducted an enquiry among the 65 schools then included in the address list of the Christian Schools= Trust. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the headteachers in 11 of these schools. Information was obtained on the curriculum, discipline, governance, and policy matters, as well as basic information on the school=s pupils and staff. Headteachers were encouraged to talk at length about the educational philosophy of the school, the reasons why the school was established, and the links between the school=s philosophy and the curriculum and teaching methods used. Questionnaires were then sent to the remaining 54 schools. Overall detailed information was received from 53 of the 65 schools. Walford's data demonstrate considerable diversity in these schools, but also clear underlying themes which unite them. The following profile is offered by Walford (1995a:7).

> These schools share an ideology of biblically-based evangelical Christianity that seeks to relate the message of the Bible to all aspects of present day life whether personal, spiritual or educational. These schools have usually been set up by parents or a church group to deal with a growing dissatisfaction with what is seen as the increased secularism of the great majority of schools. The schools aim to provide a distinctive Christian approach to every part of school life and the curriculum and, usually, parents have a continuing role in the management and organisation of the schools.

In addition to the distinctive educational ethos and curriculum of the new independent Christian schools, there are some other highly visible ways in which pupils educated in these schools would perceive their educational experience as being quite different from the experience of the majority of their peers educated in the state-maintained sector or in other parts of the independent sector. The new independent Christian schools tend to be small schools, and especially at the secondary level the numbers in any year group may be very small. A small number of teachers may be expected to teach a wider range of curriculum subjects. The school buildings tend not to be purpose built, and some of the new Christian schools have found themselves moving from building to building in the quest to find a more adequate and more permanent base. Sometimes the facilities and the resources have taken time to catch up with the founding initiative.

The new Christian schools, as an international movement, have not been without their critics both among Christian and secular educators. Two major areas of criticism concern the detrimental effects such highly distinctive schools may exert over the pupils themselves, both during their school years and then in their subsequent life experiences. In spite of the importance of such criticisms, as yet little educational research has been invested in England and Wales to listen to the voices of the pupils and the former pupils themselves. In terms of listening to the pupils during their time at school, two pioneering studies were undertaken by O'Keeffe (1992) and by Francis (2005).

In the first of these two studies, O'Keeffe (1992) administered the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis, 1988) to 439 pupils between the ages of eight and 16 years attending six independent Christian schools. O'Keeffe (1992:105) drew the following conclusions from her data.

The main conclusion to emerge from this study is that schools are exercising a positive influence on their pupils' attitudes toward Christianity. The responses of pupils demonstrated that the majority of pupils build positive attitudes toward God, Jesus, the Bible and personal prayer.

In the second of these two studies, Francis (2005) compared the values of the 13- to 15-year-old boys attending 19 independent Christian schools (usually providing quite small secondary facilities) with the boys attending the 114 non-denominational state-maintained schools included in the Teenage Religion and Values project (Francis, 2001). The comparison was based on 136 boys in the independent Christian schools and 12,823 boys in the non-denominational state-maintained schools. Francis (2005:139) drew the following conclusion from his data.

The data provided by the present study [demonstrate] . . . that the values environment modelled by 13- to 15-year-old boys attending Christian schools is significantly different from that modelled by boys in the same age range attending non-denominational state-maintained schools.

According to these data, boys attending the Christian schools were more likely to be committed to belief in God and in the inerrancy of scripture. They were more likely to hold a positive view of the church, to support the place of religious education in school, and to reject superstitious beliefs. They were less likely to hold liberal attitudes toward alcohol, tobacco and sex. They were less likely to be troubled by bullying at school and more likely to respect their teachers. They were more likely to feel good about life and about themselves.

While the empirical data provided by O'Keeffe (1992) and by Francis (2005) provide some clear evidence regarding pupils during their time at independent Christian schools, by their

very nature these two studies were not designed to answer the subsequent set of challenging questions. What happens when school life is over and these pupils are released from their highly distinctive school environments into the wider world of sixth-form colleges, tertiary education or work? How well will they have been equipped to handle the dialogue between the faith in which they have been educated and the values environment of their secular host society? When they look back to their experience of attending one of these independent Christian schools with the benefit of hindsight will they applaud their parents' choice in selecting for them this highly distinctive form of education, or will they resent it? Given the choice, would they want their own children to follow in their footsteps, or to walk a more conventional educational path?

In an initial study designed to understand how pupils of the new Christian schools fared after leaving school, ap Sion, Francis and Baker (in press) traced 135 female alumnae who had graduated from new Christian schools between 1986 And 2003, and obtained from them extensive qualitative responses to an open-ended self-completion questionnaire. These data were analysed to illuminate the former female pupils' assessment of four key issues: the quality of education that they had received in their school; the Christian and moral nurture provided by their school; the quality of relationships expressed within their school and within the wider neighbourhood; and the way in which their school had prepared them for participation in further education, higher education and the work-place after leaving school. The findings suggest that the majority of female alumnae who responded to this survey took a positive attitude both toward their time at school and toward their transition from school to other places of education and work, although there were some significant areas of criticism highlighted by the survey responses.

The fact that ap Siôn, Francis and Baker (in press) concentrated exclusively on profiling the experiences of female pupils sets a major limitation to the scope of their study. Several recent sociological analyses of the religious climate of England and Wales have drawn attention to the feminisation of the Christian churches (Brown, 2001). According to this perspective, it may be much easier for women than for men in England and Wales to develop and to display a positive attitude toward Christianity. According to this perceptive, it may be somewhat more difficult and more problematic for males educated in the new Christian schools to integrate effectively and painlessly with the secular culture later encountered in further and higher education and in the work-place. As a consequence males may also with the benefit of hindsight look back less positively than females on their time at school. It is for this reason that the present study intends to extend the work of ap Siôn, Francis and Baker (in press) by listening to the experiences of the male graduates from the new Christian schools.

METHOD

Procedure

As comprehensive list as possible was generated of the male students who had graduated from 11 Christian schools between 1985 and 2003 and for whom current postal address could be located. A questionnaire was despatched to the male graduates identified.

Instrument

Although there were some variations in the questionnaire in order to generate data of interest to specific schools, the same common core of combined closed and open-ended questions was used, including the following.

- Did you enjoy your time at the school? Other comments

- Were you overprotected? If yes, in what way?

- Were you prepared for the next stage of your education/work? If not, in what way?

- Did work/sixth form come as a shock? If yes, in what way?

In an open-ended question pupils were also asked to comment freely on what they liked and disliked about the school.

Respondents

Respondents reflected a wide range of backgrounds in respect of age and career. For age, there was an eighteen-year age gap between the youngest and oldest respondent. For career, employment contexts were diverse and included professions relating to teaching, law, medicine, social work, charity work, the Armed Forces, ICT, engineering, and business. A number of respondents' careers were explicitly related to the Christian faith, for example, missionary and church-based work, and around 28% classified themselves as students.

Analyses

The data generated by the questionnaire were analysed to illuminate four main themes: the quality of the education, the context of Christian and moral nurture, the quality of relationships (among the pupils, with the teachers and with the wider world), and preparation received for life after leaving school.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative analyses

Table 1 presents the responses to the key questions included in the survey for quantitative

- insert table 1 about here -

analyses. These data demonstrated that the majority of the male graduates enjoyed their time

at their Christian school (85%), and left feeling well prepared for the next stage of life (75%). While some felt over-protected by their school, the majority did not share this view (60%). A very high proportion of the male graduates had remained committed to the Christian faith, with 79% regarding themselves as practising Christians and 70% regarding themselves as members of a church.

Qualitative analyses

The original qualitative analyses exemplified fully each of the four main themes; however, due to space considerations only the most relevant subcategories within the themes are exemplified here.

Quality of education

Responses in the quality of education category are divided into three subcategories: teaching and learning; curriculum breadth; and extra-curricular experiences. The first two subcategories are exemplified here. Although overlaps with other categories occur, all responses included in this section are connected explicitly with the quality of education in a broadly academic sense.

Teaching and learning includes comments concerned with academic standards or experiences within these two areas. Most responses referred to high academic standards achieved either in general or within examination contexts. Many responses made an explicit causal link between high standards in teaching and learning and small classes, motivating and quality teaching, and the individualisation of the education process through teachers working with pupils on an individual basis and collaborative school-parent relationships which enabled pupils to achieve their potential. One male commented that his school experience provided

related benefits in relation to increased articulacy and confidence, and some males contrasted the academic educational benefits of their schools positively with those of other schools or state schools.

> The small class sizes and individual attention when required definately improves grades.

> The thing that was good about the school also was that they wanted you to succeed and do well and would "work" with your family (say if you were not getting homework in on time or were not particularly doing well in a subject) to help you reach your potential.

Some males commented on the informal, relaxed, and 'fun' learning experiences, and one male appreciated a school ethos which was not based on grades.

> My best memories are informal, relaxed lessons.

> [after positive comment on high standards] 'Grades though of course are not everything and academic achievement I don't think has ever driven the school's ethos – this sets it apart nicely from other schools.

Weaknesses cited by males in teaching and learning included issues related to teachers, subjects, and the Christian foundation of schools. Some references were made to inadequately trained subject teachers or unqualified teachers as well as lack of continuity in teaching staff in some subjects.

> The lack of teachers trained in their field of teaching.

Sometimes I felt that there was a little lack of continuity. One teacher would begin a subject and another would finish. This was only occasionally though.

Some males made critical comments about certain subjects such as physical education, and one male criticised the school's attitude to non-core subjects, with physical education cited as an example. In addition, some males criticised the use of Christian teaching materials from the USA.

I still think to this day the attitude to subjects which were not Science, Maths or English. Subjects like P.E which in other schools is actually a subject. The attitude was not right and from what I have heard it still isn't.

One male felt that teaching about sex, drugs, and alcohol should feature in the curriculum.

We were never taught how to deal with issues such as sex, drugs and drinking alcohol

Some males made a negative connection between the quality of teaching and learning and a school's Christian foundation, which is reported to justify lower standards, confuse teachers' academic and faith development roles, and offer a narrower perspective on Christian and moral matters than other schools.

[It feels like] the school uses its foundation in God, as an excuse for lower standards of teaching.

I disliked the way the teachers didn't teach at all. All they wanted to do was preach the word of 'God' before being a teacher. The school was like being at a church, not a school.

Curriculum breadth includes comments relating equally to choice of examination subjects and the scope of the wider curriculum. Most responses were general comments about restricted subject choice, although a few males named specific curriculum areas that were unavailable as examination subjects or sporting activities.

> I remember feeling under-privilaged in that I couldn't take IT and music at GCSE but loved the fact that our school took us to France and windsurfing etc.

Christian and moral nurture

Responses in the Christian and moral nurture category are concerned mainly with the 'non-academic' part of pupils' education in relation to the schools' Christian context, provision, and faith development as well as other related 'non-academic' areas.

Most responses in this category made positive comments concerning the presence and quality of the Christian foundation instilled in pupils and their faith development which one male described as non-coercive and self-reflective.

> In my Christian life [the school] helped me to grow up a lot and become a much more mature Christian – this was especially due to the teachers picking up character issues and giving a lot of opportunity for us to learn and grow as Christians. I don't think that [the school] forced me in any way to be a Christian – instead it strengthened my faith and helped me think through issues and formulate my own opinions.

A few males commented on their appreciation of an educational context that reinforced the Christian principles of home and a desire to provide a similar foundation for their children.

> I am very thankful to have been at school in a place that re-enforced Christian

principles of home. I value the foundation of these principles far more than any academic achievement.

Some males commented explicitly on the present or lifelong implications of their Christian education.

Having become a Christian myself 2 years ago and currently preparing for London Bible College, where I am studying a Cert in Higher Education and Diploma in Music. I feel my time at the school has prospered me and not harmed me.

In addition to Christian foundation and development, some males referred to related development in other 'non-academic' areas such as spiritual, moral, and character issues.

Secondly the spiritual grounding which is offered as part of your everyday experience is possibly the most valuable schooling you can ever receive.

Some males commented that they liked the Christian environment and appreciated the integration of Christianity in all curriculum areas, the 'foundation of Jesus' in teachers, the confidence to challenge conventional scientific theories in further education, protection as young Christians, and lack of peer pressure.

Having a Christian education through all the subjects was great and the fact that a number of children and parents became Christians was excellent.

It [the school's training] provided a biblical foundation upon which to question and analyse academic and personal opinions/theories and beliefs. I was taught not just to accept what science dictates.

Specific positive experiences and opportunities related to faith experiences were cited by

some males. These referred to enjoyment of assemblies, including a reference to experiencing God's presence, and memories of conversions and a healing.

Some of my best memories come from the assemblies that we used to lead. The fun of pioneering and being let loose to lead people into the presence of God!

[best memories] Being healed on a ski holiday of a broken fractured ankle through prayer with NAME and NAME and NAME then laying hands on a broken thumb and her being able to move it.

Many responses reflected positive aspects of an ethos or atmosphere characteristic of close communities, and words such as 'family', 'homely', 'friendly', 'happy', 'loving', 'safe', and 'caring' featured prominently.

The school felt like a big family with loving relationships with a lot of the teachers, and my class felt like brothers and sisters.

The school was excellent, and unlike many others had a caring atmosphere.

However, one male commented that non-Christians did not 'fit in' the family atmosphere.

I also found that pupils who weren't from a church background, sometimes even from a different church to the school's, often were excluded to some extent. I felt that a non-Christian did not fit into the family atmosphere.

Other males commented on the accepting environment found in their schools.

My best memory was the whole thing really in that it was a place of acceptance and love. These qualities are not to be lost.

For some males, their appreciation of the ethos or atmosphere was directly related to a school's Christian foundations.

> I loved the general feel of the school. It was very homely and generally, very friendly also. I am sure that having it's foundation in God is the reason for this.

However, many males made negative comments about the type and quality of Christian teaching received, and its scope. Christian teaching was criticised by some males as being monochrome and simplistic, unreflective, 'rightwing', 'spoon fed', focusing on conformity rather than difference, and coercive. For a few males, coercive elements pushed people away from faith. A few males commented on the apathetic quality of Christians leaving the Christian school and how the integration of faith into the curriculum did not go far enough.

> [to change] perhaps a more encouraging environment in which to question things, discuss issues and actively involve oneself in bringing Jesus into people's lives outside of church/school.

> The school does breed apathy – the kids who leave who are Christians (in my class about 40%) are generally not exactly "on fire" for God, while the rest just don't care. For secondary education, Christian education looks good on paper, but I'm not sure how well it translates practically. I don't ever remember a teacher explicitly setting what they were teaching (whether it be maths, science, history or English) within the backdrop of a Kingdom mindset, or how it relates to the Bible. We were taught – as in any school – what we were taught because we had to learn it.'

According to some males, the scope of Christian teaching should be broadened by placing

more emphasis on active evangelism, practical implementation of Christian principles, and the giving of testimonies. One male thought that there should be restricted entry to the school for children from non-Christian families.

> More opportunity to give testimonies etc. This may help to encourage, challenge and wake up others! … I don't know what I would change but to have a bigger emphasis on the mission statement and how to live as a Christian in the world today.

> The only criticism was that there was no practical advice on how to put into practise a Christian life or how to handle common issues of being a Christian at college.

Quality of relationships

Responses in the relationships category are divided into three subcategories: relationships among pupils; relationships between pupils and teachers; and relationships between pupils and the outside world. Only the *relationships between pupils and the outside world* subcategory is exemplified here. Although overlaps with other categories occur, all responses included in this section are connected explicitly with the quality of relationships.

Responses in the *relationships between pupils and the outside world* subcategory mainly contain comments about how pupils were sheltered, protected, or distanced from the outside world, the effect of this on pupils, and suggestions for improvement. In this context, a few males commented on their limited experience and understanding of the outside world, restricted experience of popular culture, and infrequent interaction with non-Christians.

> [overprotected – yes] Little exposure to anything external/secular. Very little teaching on such matters either.

Restrictions on songs from popular culture and letters to parents advising restriction on television viewing.

A few males commented on the affect that their restricted knowledge and experience of the outside world had on pupils, which included 'shock' on entering the outside world after leaving school and difficulty relating to non-Christians.

For some years I felt unable to relate to non-Christians and to make new friends, but this I think was as much down to my own personality as it was down to the small environment of the school.

Suggestions for improvement made by a few males included introducing the outside world more often at school, greater interaction with other schools, and contact with past pupils.

[What he would change] somehow prepare pupils for outside world. Eg.: teach about other religions: real extent of controversial issues (eg. drugs etc): lessons with ex-pupils.

However, a few males perceived benefits in their schools' restricted relationship with the outside world, and some males commented that they experienced the outside world during non-school hours, with pupils from other schools, through community service, and children from non-Christian families at the school.

Its good to be kept from somethings untill your old enough to really think about what your really doing.

Preparation for life

Responses in the preparation for life category are concerned with the extent to which

Christian schools were perceived explicitly to prepare pupils for life immediately after leaving school or for life in broader terms.

Most males felt that their schools had prepared them well for the next stage of education or life, although a few males wrote that they felt prepared through out-of-school experiences. Some responses were general references recording positive connections between their Christian schooling and post-school lives, with a few males commenting generally on the foundation their schooling laid for the future.

> Although there was no formal teaching or preparation, I was fine with college.

> [Prepared for next stage] This was mainly due to my out of school activities such as Air Cadets and Hockey.

> It [the school] gave me a firm foundation for going into 'the world.'

Many responses referred to academic preparation in general with some males focusing more specifically on the benefits gained from the study of certain subjects on future career choices and life experiences, the ease with which they adapted to workload and standards, and the enabling of pupils to reach their potential.

> Academically speaking, I was average if not better with the work task presented.

> help with child care became very useful.

In addition, many males referred to non-academic positive effects of a Christian school education, relating to personal development in general, the development of specific attitudes

and qualities, and Christian faith education. Personal development in general included personality and character development and maturity. Specific attitudes and qualities developed included sense of right and wrong, awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses, critical thinking skills, and care for others. A few males explicitly stated that Christian faith education provided a Christian foundation for their lives.

> It was this upbringing that instilled in me a backbone, a sense of right and wrong, equiping me for college, university and the work place (in the construction industry).

> The teaching I received at NAME has helped me become aware of my strengths and weaknesses when faced with any situation.

> I came out very able to think and ask questions and to care for people and that's helped me as a person.

However, many males critically qualified their positive statements or identified areas where they felt unprepared. Most of these responses related to adapting to the world outside their Christian school and academic issues. Regarding the outside world, many males recorded feelings of shock and being unprepared for the real world, issues with swearing, drugs, alcohol, and pornography, the non-Christian context, and the testing of faith. A few males suggested that the school ought to prepare pupils more effectively for the outside world in general or in two cases in financial acumen. For a few males, the shock of the real world was welcomed as pleasantly unexpected.

> I also think that there is no reason for students to be unprepared for later life by being at a Christian school, but they <u>must</u> be made aware of what a non-Christian environment is like.

It wasn't that bad but sixth form was very large, noisy, and had . . . normal people! I had somehow come to expect they would all be without hope, begging for Christianity and all on drugs/have overactive sex lives! Okay, so some of them do, but . . .

Regarding academic issues, problems cited included shock at increased workload and its difficulty, gaps in subject knowledge, and limited GCSE and extra-curricular activity options. Some males suggested improved or more extensive career guidance with one male complaining about the lack of support offered for his 'unusual' career path. A few males suggested that more education on sex, drugs, alcohol, and other religions was necessary to prepare pupils for life after their Christian school.

> Felt that both in Maths, Science i.e. Physics, and Product Design, I began with a handicap, having much less background knowledge, and even in Product Design, key facts at my disposal. It was clear that pupils from other schools, had recieved far more in depth and thorough teaching on their subject.

After leaving their Christian schools, many males were unprepared for and shocked by their new social experiences, citing mixing with peers in general, greater numbers, differences in backgrounds, and behaviour of peers as issues and in some cases the shock was viewed as avoidable.

> Its size was a shock and mixing with people from very difficult backgrounds was difficult. Had we as a school had more contact with others schools etc. during our time at NAME, this shock might have been avoided/reduced.

A few males commented on the lack of support and strong community network in their post-

school experiences that led some pupils to abandon their faith.

> Having a close Christian community, which you get used to, going out into the world is a big challenge if not right support – so many people who were Christian have fallen away.

Some males commented that the fact that they felt unprepared related not to the Christian school but to themselves or the sixth form.

> When I left NAME I found it hard to adjust to college. Some people would say that it was due to being in such a small school. However, I would say that the weakness isn't within the school, but within the college itself. To go out from an environment of strong relationships both with classmates and teachers is always going to be difficult. I know that the atmosphere in the school was much more condusive to learning and developing a relationship with God than that of college.

CONCLUSION

The present study has set out to listen to the voices of male graduates from a sample of new Christian schools in the United Kingdom. Their views have been analysed within the context of four basic themes: the quality of education, the context of Christian and moral nurture, the quality of relationships (among the pupils, with the teachers, and with the wider world), and preparation for life after leaving the school. On the basis of these findings, the following main conclusions can be drawn.

First, although pupils were well aware of the limitations imposed on the curriculum by the small number of pupils and the consequent small number of teachers, generally the advantages of small classes, caring staff and high standards outweighed the negative aspects

in the pupils' minds. Secondly, many pupils had a general appreciation of the Christian foundation of the school and the opportunities for personal, spiritual, and moral development. In terms of specific content, though, responses were mixed, illustrating a healthy diversity in pupils understanding of the Christian faith. Thirdly, although some pupils wrote in positive terms about their relationships with the outside world while at school and after leaving school, many pupils felt that their schools provided a protective and sheltered environment, which raised a number of issues retrospectively. Fourthly, most pupils thought that their schools had prepared them well for the next stage of life in terms of academic competence and personal, spiritual and moral development. However, many pupils also observed that the step between the school culture and the cultures of the wider world was a large one.

On balance, hypothetical concerns regarding the detrimental effects such highly distinctive schools may exert over pupils, both during their school years and in their subsequent life experiences would be seen to be unfounded from the perspective of the former pupils in this study. These former pupils generally felt that they had received positive educational experiences and a foundation for life in a secular world, which was often distinctive and valuable, and many had retained their commitment to the Christian faith. However, on the basis of mature, self-reflective observations of a significant number of former pupils, these Christian schools may benefit from developing further an increased awareness of the outside world and alternative world views without compromising the positive aspects of their mission-based identity, which would ease the transition of their pupils to the 'outside world'.

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Table 1 Counting the responses

	Yes %
enjoyed time at school	85
felt well prepared for next stage of life	75
did not feel over-protected by school	60
currently a practising Christian	79
currently a member of a church	70