July 11, 2019

Media Statement on School Chaplaincy Service

Chaplaincy services in all schools must be maintained
The Methodist Church in Fiji will maintain its chaplaincy ministry in schools as a central commitment to quality education for our people, in view of the decisions by the government to cease remuneration in the new budget and to bring all chaplaincy appointments under the OMRS.

We will work with the school authorities, national leaders, key stakeholders such as the parents’ and former students’ associations, as well as community leaders to establish the alternative arrangements that are necessary for this objective.
Early this year, the President of the Methodist Church, Rev Dr Epineri Vakadewavosoa had expressed the Church’s view that the OMRS was a threat to quality education in the way it does not recognise religious education as an important aspect of education and therefore a proper requirement for teachers in our schools.

The Church must engage its ordained practitioners more effectively in the education system alongside its lay professionals and will work with the relevant authorities to ensure that the qualifications of Church professionals continue to be recognised alongside others.

Scrutiny on schools chaplains policy
The Church may also make a legal claim for individual and group rights to conscience and religion in response to the Government’s new policy on chaplaincy service in schools.
The Church may also make a submission to the Fiji Human Rights Commission on the new policy, seeking its scrutiny regarding state protection of the religious rights of students and their families, as well school staff and the Church as a religious organisation, under the relevant sections of the 2013 national constitution.

New Ministry policy
The Ministry has confirmed that the positions will be treated like other civil service positions, in the new school year, ending the longstanding practice of engaging Methodist ministers and deaconesses in these posts.
Government has decided to cease paying for chaplaincy positions in schools and in other chaplaincy roles funded under the Free Education Grant, as advised by the Permanent Secretary for Education, Ms Alison Burchell, in a meeting with my Church delegation on June 10th:

(i) that as from 1st January 2020, the chaplaincy positions in schools will be public service positions, and the Ministry will make the appointments under the OMRS (Open Merit Recruitment System), that is, as posts whose duties and required qualifications are determined by the Ministry;

(ii) that schools also will have to adopt the same appointment system for all positions which are funded under the Free Education Grant.

Implications
Our ordained officers in the positions that will be affected have until the end of the third term, when appointments lapse and remuneration normally ceases. Their welfare and their next assignments need to be sorted out in time as necessary.

Equally important are the roles that they carry out for the Church in these stations, in the religious interest and development of students and the school communities. The role of providing religious and pastoral service throughout the week, for students and staff, in some cases also for parents, can be compromised.

It adds to the perception of a diminishing role of the Church in the education and development of our young people in the school system. The Church emphasises:

(i) that the leaders in schools influence programmes in terms of religious matters, and that non-believers are more likely to simply pay lip-service to them and may even abstain legally from participating in important religious events;

(ii) the availability of enough Christian teachers in our schools for important activities such as devotions in class, religious education classes;

the opportunity for Christian teachers to maintain relevance in the curriculum of their belief system, for example, science teacher exploring both creation science and evolution in a Biology class, sanctity of sex in marriage in a Basic Science or Biology lesson on Human Reproduction, and also character building regarding hard work, honesty, honour and positive language.”

Response
The Church involvement in the education system is historical in the formation and development of a modern nation, and this must continue.
This is provided in the national constitution -- for citizens as well as religious organisations -- hence the function of our Church schools, that 'their primary object shall be to give instruction in a Christian setting'.

The appointment of the right teachers and our ordained personnel is essential, and the Church must mobilise those members who are properly qualified to take up these positions.

It is important to apply the OMRS responsibly, to include competent experience (including curriculum components for religious development in schools) and equivalent qualifications such as those of Church professionals.

There should not be bias for high academic qualifications without regard for the proven value of our Church qualifications (for example, Diploma in Theology, Diploma in Diakonia and Bachelor of Divinity).

As stressed to the Permanent Secretary for Education, our qualifications should be subjected to appropriate evaluation by the Fiji Higher Education Commission which, it must be said, is not normally consulted in the formulation of minimum qualification requirements for the Ministry's positions!

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion are absolute rights and cannot be derogated, as can happen though this change in state policy, because it can limit legitimate access to religious development for young citizens who attend schools run by their own religious organisations.

The derogation of any right should be limited, and the situation may need scrutiny by the Fiji Human Rights Commission, to prevent abuse of power and the harm it can eventually cause, for faith groups and society at large.

We have lost key school positions held previously by our own members, along with the expected diligence in our institutions for Methodist education and nurturing.

As established in research, the school system already fails to support students in their faith life, in training for a life of discipleship, and in equipping them for Christian service for others in the world today.

Our own Methodist University College project aims to correct the estimated 50 per cent loss of faith by our students (reported United States estimate, around 70-80 per cent) at tertiary level professional training.

The breakdown in ethical and social standards is regularly highlighted by the Fiji Police, Prosecution Office, Correction Service and Health Ministry. We must
expect greater normlessness in the Fiji of the future as a direct consequence of privatising and limiting the faith life, and collective moral value systems, of young people in schools today.

Pastoral roles for the school community ought to be maintained and mapped out with the Ministry and school authorities, to include partnership on accommodation and other support by the schools.

Our Church schools will seek to engage ordained officers as normal staff members, with the Church divisions and the school authorities assuming full responsibility. Direct engagement with the Minister for Education and other management officials should intensify, and a national education forum is proposed to review the situation.

Meantime, the Church will organise the expected relocation of its officers who are in the school system and establish an alternative system for serving the needs of its members in these institutions.

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General Secretary