

BRUCE ALCORN: TEACHER, MINISTER



I started teaching at St Albans High School in 1956, the very year that the new school was established. I worked for a total of 20 years with the school, which makes me one of the longest serving of all the original teaching staff.

I was born in Queensland in 1922. My father was Australian and my mother was English; she was born in London. Her family migrated to Australia in the 1800s when she was a little girl, and she learnt to walk on the sailing ship that brought them over. Her family first went to Wellington in New Zealand. After a short time they came to Victoria and settled in Dorcas Street, South Melbourne. Then they moved to Maldon near Castlemaine, where the father worked as a draper and mercer in clothing. From there they moved to Brisbane. I was born just outside Ipswich, in a place called Blackstone. I did my primary education in Blackstone State School and then we moved to the country. In those days grade seven was the top rung of the primary school, and the end of which there was a scholarship exam. If you passed the scholarship exam you were entitled to a secondary education free of charge. I passed the exam, so I was able to go to the Boys Grammar School in Ipswich free of charge. I completed the four years of study there, qualified to matriculate to university, and then I moved into church life.

Ministry Work

In my twenties, I came down to Melbourne to study for the Ministry. Having done that I obtained a Ministry in the country, and then came back to the city. I've had dual influences in my life, due to a large extent to wanting to work closely with young people. I had felt in the early days of my Ministry training that I wasn't as close to young people as I would like to be. I saw in teaching an opportunity to develop this relationship with young people. I was always grateful for that opportunity.

While I was teaching, the opportunity came to help out some congregations that had limited resources, and I decided I would help. The principal of the college where I had trained asked me if I would go out to the church in Sunshine, and that's how we came to be in the western suburbs. By this time I was in education, and that led to our living in Sunshine for 23 years.

Teaching Work

I started my career in education in the 1950s as a primary school teacher at Sunshine, Albion, and Braybrook, and I was able to continue my degree studies half-time while I was teaching. Therefore it suited everybody pretty well, including me, to be based at St Albans High School, a new school, and at the same time attend lectures at Melbourne University.



Mr Alcorn and Grade 3b, Albion Primary School, 1952.

St Albans High School

The school started in 1956, which was the year that the Olympic Games were held in Melbourne. There was a lot of significance in that because the school crest, which was designed by one of the original teachers, Leo Murphy, featured the Olympic wreath that was given to the winners of the ancient Olympic games and the water tower, which was a local landmark. Leo worked both these icons into the crest. He also included a beam of light radiating from the top of the tower, which fitted in with the school motto of "Truth Is Our Light". It was very beautifully designed, and credit for that must go to Leo Murphy.

There was a bit of discussion on whether the motto should be expressed in Latin. That discussion didn't last long because everyone agreed it should be in English, particularly with the nature of the school population.

The school came about because the population in the area was growing rapidly. Sunshine High had started the year before and it was already bursting at the seams. Something had to be done to provide secondary education for the grade sixers of St Albans. The question was, what about the grade sixers of Albion? It was considered to be a good thing for the Albion grade sixers to join in with the St Albans grade sixers instead of going off to Sunshine. It suited the Albion students to have the St Albans High School begin in Sunshine.

The school began at the Sunshine Presbyterian hall on the Presbyterian Church grounds in Anderson Street. The first headmaster - as we knew them in those days, I don't think he was spoken of as the principal - was Mr J A Barker. His name was James Barker, but he was always known as Mr Barker. He had come from Warragul High and St Albans was his first appointment as a headmaster. He was a very, very friendly and capable headmaster and was a great support particularly to the staff in those difficult times of the first year. Mrs Barker was also on the staff. She was very well qualified and was a most capable person.

Doc Walsh

Doc Walsh became something of a legend. He had been at Williamstown and came to St Albans High with a very good reputation of being a teacher who established very good relations with students. I mention Doc in particular, because apart from teaching in history he supervised sports. He was the sports master and organised sporting activities like football, cricket, basketball, tennis, and organised them very, very well with a great sense of order and discipline.



M Kadniak, N Ostepeev, R Clifford, Mr Walsh, H Koch, J Arnautovic, Mr Alcorn.

He also did a lot of work with debating and history nights. He gave himself body and soul to the school. Being single he had fewer family obligations, but that doesn't detract from the quality of the work he did. He would organise history nights with guest speakers and invite the public. Footballers coming to talk to the kids were also very popular sessions.

One of the very memorable things for which Doc Walsh was responsible was the production of a couple of musicals. He was very capable of organising anything, especially his history nights.

Early School Days

The school had 137 students enrolled in the first year. I remember that the children who came from St Albans to the Presbyterian Hall that first year were either bussed in or came by train. While we were in the hall the Education Department was busy getting the new school ready in Main Road East. The first wing

of the school was ready for us in the beginning of 1957, and that housed the headmaster's office and the general office as well as the classes.

There was no school canteen at the start. One of my extra curricula activities at the start was to sell bottles of Tarax soft drink from one of the small rooms, for fundraising purposes. I would sell them at tuppence (two pence) a bottle profit towards the school funds, one of my achievements for the school.

It was at the end of that year, 1957, that I left St Albans and went to Williamstown High School on a promotion. I was away for five years, so there is a gap in my knowledge of what went on in those years.

Return to St Albans, 1963

Then the opportunity came to go back to St Albans, again on a promotion. I was glad to be back. The school had made great progress with added buildings and the enrolment at the school was ever so much more. When I came back at the beginning of 1963 I was aware of the fact that academically the school had made excellent progress. There were some fine students indeed. It also had a capable staff. Mr Torpey was there for some years as the headmaster, and Mrs Gliddon as the headmistress. Miss Taylor, the headmistress who had preceded Mrs Gliddon, had laid a good foundation to Mrs Gliddon's time as an outstanding headmistress. She was friendly and approachable as well as being strong in leadership.

Return to Ministry Work

I left early in 1965 to return to the Ministry, which has always been a strong interest of mine. In my earlier years, i.e. in my twenties, I had trained for Ministry and became an ordained Minister. I had always felt the desire to be part of the church, and it was more than a desire. Part of the tradition of the family in which I grew up was that if you were not a Minister you were a teacher. I remember my mother's view very clearly, and remember her saying to the family doctor one day when I was a boy: "Education is the best legacy you can give your children." I can hear the doctor responding, "Absolutely!"

That central importance of education and teaching as a profession was part of my upbringing, and here I was balancing the two while I was at St Albans. In 1964 I felt a strong desire to go back into the Ministry area, which is what I did for a year in 1965.

Return to St Albans, 1966



Bruce Alcorn and senior students, 1966.

I returned to teaching in 1966 and the Department sent me back to St Albans for my third stint, starting in 1966. That was a happy circumstance for me because I liked St Albans. I liked the school, I liked the pupils, and I always admired the people. I continued teaching at the school until April 1982. In all, I had something like 20 years in three periods at the school.

I appreciated the people of St Albans and was always sensitive to the great struggle that many of them had to re-establish themselves. When the Commonwealth-funded library was built at the school, I would sometimes stand on the second level and look out across the houses and the back yards and see how so many of them had made efforts to plant trees. It was rather beautiful to look out and see the number of trees in what in previous years had been a treeless area. This was an observation made by Mr McInnery when he came out, that it was treeless area.

An attempt was made in the 'seventies to plant trees and shrubs around the perimeter of the schoolgrounds. It was a splendid idea, but many of the trees died. Many attempts were made to beautify the grounds. Jim Betson was there in the 'seventies as Principal, then Mr Wilkinson, John Brooks and Neville Daynes, all of whom contributed significantly to St Albans High.

Extra Curricula Activities

The school was always blessed with a good School Council. I was on the School Council for some years and cherish a framed tribute that was given to me when I left; it acknowledges those years of service and my teaching activities.

Another of my extra curricula activities was the Inter-School Christian Fellowship, which I led for a time. In the 'sixties Father Val Noone, a Catholic priest, would come to the school, and there was the Anglican vicar, Father Radford. They would take religious instruction.

Inter-school sports were a feature for many years, including swimming sports. You had to be vigilant to avoid potential problems. I remember going with a group of students by train to the swimming sports, where we were to leave the train at Richmond to get to the pool. I suspected something unusual was going on because a flask was being passed from one to the other in the carriage. I confiscated that because I had my suspicions. The students, who were in year ten or eleven, admitted it was a mix of vodka and orange juice. I don't think St Albans students distinguished themselves in the swimming sports, but they were not disgraced.

Part of a cherished personal vision I had was to establish a swimming pool at the school. It never materialised because it was seen as being expensive.

Appreciating Multiculturalism

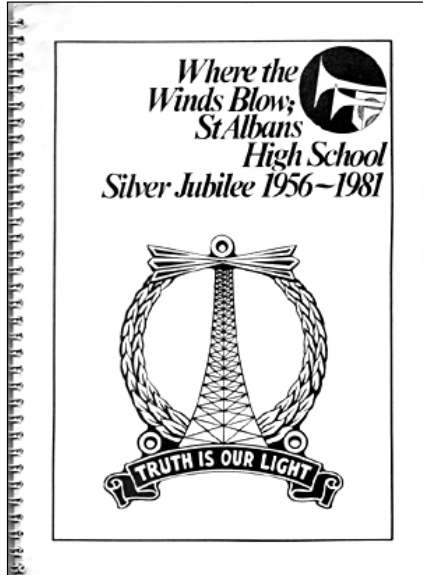
I alluded to my sense of the richness of school life in St Albans brought about by the co-mingling of different nationalities. I remember doing a survey for the Education Department once, and one section of the survey was about the language groups in the school. There were 37 different languages represented at the time. These students co-mingling and sharing together inevitably enriched the school life in general and the atmosphere of the school. Then again, I sometimes wonder whether we made enough of that. I think it was generally appreciated by all the staff.

At times I thought we could feature different nationalities one by one or in groups like the Slavonic cultures in displays and the like. I mention that because it is still part of my personal appreciation of cultural richness, so to speak, for which I thank St Albans High School. I have, as most people these days do have, a kind of empathy for people from other countries and I trace that back to the rich experience at St Albans.

It was always known as a friendly school. As an example, one of the inspectors - in the days when inspectors came around checking up on schools - said to me: "There's a difference between the students here and students in certain other areas. These students are always ready to have a go." Memories dim with age, but there are some that linger permanently, and that is one of them. I think he was referring to the western suburbs as a whole rather than just St Albans, but I think it typified the student attitude. The children were always "willing to have a go," meaning if you asked them a question they weren't afraid of trying to answer it.

The environment was so friendly, nobody put anybody else down, and this made a very good impression on the inspectors. I cherish that as one of the fine characteristics of the school. It's interesting when outsiders make such observations and comments, because you can make a valid observation from within though it could be seen as not being objective, but when an outsider comes in and confirms it, then it must be real.

Senior Teacher Responsibilities



I was with the school until April 1982. In that third and last phase of my time at St Albans I was involved with some school administration and the senior classes for English and history; these were my particular interests and teaching areas, with varying degrees of success. I remember asking one student who was doing HSC if he had read the prescribed textbook. Here he was in year twelve, and his reply was that he had never read a book in his life. That really surprised me. He was a lovely boy but quite obviously his interests were along different lines to book learning. He had a great interest in astronomy, and he's probably a success in some chosen area.

In addition to these school commitments I was a tutor in the History department of the faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne.

I was acting deputy principal for a while, and the overall supervision of the H.S.C (now V.C.E.) exams was my responsibility. My wife did a lot of the actual supervision and my task was to see that the papers were safeguarded. In the earlier

days students may have sat for the exams in the school, but they were still administered externally. Mr Torpey kept the papers under lock and key and he would personally carry the papers from the safe to the examination room. He followed the law to the letter in all ways.

More Work in Ministry

In 1982 I was in my sixtieth year and I thought I would leave teaching and devote the rest of my working life to Ministry. I had a phone call from the church authorities asking if I would allow my name to be submitted for appointment as the head of our churches in Victoria and Tasmania. I almost fell off my chair, because I had never sought that honour. I talked it over with my wife and was able to ring them back and say I would. That fitted in with the time frame of my sixtieth year. I could resign from teaching and devote my time to the Ministry.

I represented our churches in Victoria and Tasmania at government functions and the first casino inquiry in 1982-83, and the Requiem Mass for Cardinal Knox at St Patrick's Cathedral. I travelled the two states visiting churches and being involved with various inter-church structures: Catholic people, Anglican people, all sorts. We had moved from Sunshine to Footscray in 1973 and lived there for nine years. In 1982 I served a term as Vice President of the churches, to become President.

I was invited to become the Minister of the church in North Balwyn, which I accepted and was there for five years. That time was characterised by a very lovely inter-church relationship with the priests and ministers of various congregations, and congregation with congregation interaction.

Then in 1987 I accepted a call from a congregation in Northcote. I was there for ten years up to 1997, when I finished being involved with full-time Ministry. That does not mean I withdrew from church life. In fact I pursued it in different directions without being involved in conducting Sunday services, preaching, and the like. I have always been involved in inter-church activity and developed great friendship with people of all denominations.

Current Activities

These days I am still involved in church work. I am a chaplain with the Northern Hospital at Epping. I go there once a week or more if required to visit the sick. I had a very positive experience yesterday. I visited a patient who was on my list as a Christian, but that was a mistake, because he was Muslim. He was

being visited by his father. They were so friendly. The patient said to me: "You know we all worship one God. I would like to see a school where Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians all would learn together." That was his desire. He said: "Would you pray for me?" I offered an inclusive prayer for them and the Muslim people. At the end of the prayer he put his arms around me in a big hug. I won't forget it.

I belong to that part of the Protestant Church that believes that the Church of Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one. We are one family, but, like so many families, there are fractures and disagreements. Sometimes family members may not speak to each other for years, but sometimes healing takes place. We are still family. The Church is like that. Father Len Thomas, a Catholic chaplain with the Northern Hospital, says that people sometimes ask him: where is the Church? He says the Church is here: I am here, you are here, this is the Church. There is a lot in that. You might be Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Muslim, or Buddhist. The Church is the family of God.

Bruce Alcorn, 2005.



Bruce Alcorn (L) with Irene Wescott (R) at 50th reunion, 2006.

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