

Inner West Christian Scripture Board

Submission concerning the Productivity Commission's draft report on Philanthropy

About us

The Inner West Christian Scripture Board conducts Christian scripture classes at the following public schools in Sydney, NSW:

1. Strathfield Girls High School
2. Homebush Boys High School
3. Concord High School
4. Burwood Girls High School
5. Strathfield South High School

Our enrolments and volunteer deployments are as follows. We employ one paid staff and 16 volunteers to teach 450 students from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. That requires an annual budget of \$68,000, which is entirely raised by donations from individuals and churches.

The board is constituted by the following members:

1. Rev Sam Yip, St Thomas' Anglican Church, Enfield
2. Pastor Andrew Bardsley, Western Sydney Chinese Christian Church, Strathfield
3. Ms Katie Stringer, All Souls Anglican Church, Leichhardt
4. Ms Diana Herwono, Bayside Community (Baptist) Church, Concord West
5. Ms Bevley Wong, St James Presbyterian Church, Burwood
6. Rev Dr Kamal Weerakoon, Gracepoint Presbyterian Church, Lidcombe

Correspondence regarding this submission should be addressed to Rev Dr Kamal Weerakoon, kamal.weerakoon@gracepoint.org.au, 0433 800 973.

Our response to the commission's draft report

The commission's report demonstrates a surprisingly negative attitude towards religion in general and special religious education (SRE) in particular which contradicts the Australian Government's commitment to multiculturalism and religious plurality.

Religion is not a "private" matter. It is certainly a matter of personal conviction. But those personal religious convictions have "public" consequences. Religious convictions shape and are shaped by the relationships, families, and communities which religious people participate in.

All major religions possess the internal resources to inculcate goodwill not only towards their specific religious or ethnic community but towards the world in general. Christianity can inculcate that kind of public, "secular" goodwill through the doctrines that the one God created the whole world, created all people in his image, and offers the one saviour, Jesus Christ, to the whole world (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2). Other religions inculcate it through, e.g.,

Hinduism and Buddhism valuing charity as removing demerit (“bad karma”) and accruing merit (“good karma”), and Islam’s tradition of charity (“sadakah”).

SRE is a significant opportunity to reinforce this kind of public goodwill in ways drawn from, therefore consistent with, religious traditions. This religious consistency makes the teaching plausible therefore persuasive to young people at a significantly formative time. Young people who benefit from SRE can thereby grow up to be adults (citizens!) who exhibit goodwill to people who hold different religious convictions to them (including people of ‘no religion’), where this goodwill does not stem from a dilution of their religious convictions, but is an expression of them.

SRE can thereby, in an era of global fragmentation and increasing conflict, significantly contribute to creating an environment of intercultural, interethnic, inter-communal peace and harmony. It can thereby help Australia as a nation to possess the demonstrable moral credibility to be a world leader in achieving genuine peace in, not despite, diversity - a harmony which does not suppress but is on the contrary founded upon the particularities of communal religious beliefs. SRE can thus reinforce the principles of multiculturalism, multiethnicity, and religious plurality which have characterised Australia for decades.

This is why we find the productivity commission’s recommendation that SRE loses its deductible gift recipient status (DGR) status perplexing. It demonstrates a disappointing ignorance about the nature and public benefits of religion. It contradicts the Australian government’s long-term commitment to multicultural, multiethnic, multi-religious plurality and tolerance.

We urge the commission to reverse this recommendation. Instead of seeking to make the resourcing of public religious education more difficult, it should seek to encourage it, so that the various religions of Australia can play our part in blessing, not just our particular communities, but our nation and the whole world.