

Religious schools mustn't sacrifice their mission to the marketplace

By William C. Kashatus

The Quaker meeting at a Philadelphia Friends school gives students from many religious persuasions a framework for exploring their own spirituality.

Worship is silent, leaving students free to search for spiritual truth in their own way and, if moved, to share a message.

Sitting in silence, reflecting on one's life, focusing on the concerns of others address one of the most pressing needs of schools today — how to teach children to be good.

Robert Coles, author of *The Spiritual Life of Children*, cautions that schools founded to teach children "how to become good and decent, as well as broadly and deeply literate, may abandon the first mission to concentrate on a driven, narrow book learning."

Teaching children to be good involves cultivating their spiritual lives in ways that allow them to "take that big step from thought to action, from moral reasoning to fulfilled moral commitments," Coles says.

Often, the school's methods, rather than its creed, help achieve this goal. Quaker schools, for example, use the meeting for worship as a forum for students to voice their feelings on right and wrong, good and evil, and for teachers to provide moral direction. Community-service programs and service integrated into the curriculum nurture compassion and a love of learning that places intellectual enterprise above academic rewards.

But the key rests with the teachers. Friends schools have always managed to attract deeply spiritual educators, many of whom consider their career a calling from God. Regardless of their background, nearly all understand that meaningful religious education depends on taking the initiative with students — enjoying their company, rejoicing in their success, sharing their pain during a setback — and realizing that the most important lessons often happen outside the classroom.

Today, it has become difficult to give children a meaningful reli-



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gious education. Our technological culture trains us to focus on the physical and material worlds. We have removed the spiritual from our lives — and, more sadly, from the lives of our children.

While public schools defend their secular position on the constitutional principle of separation of church and state, private schools are increasingly choosing to compromise the spiritual quality of education for a greater reward in the consumer market. I have become deeply concerned about this trend in Friends education.

Quaker schools are not immune to society's economic patterns. They are forced to operate like businesses, competing for students, generating exposure to raise funds, and finding ways to cut costs while improving education. The danger is falling victim to the market mentality that directs these pressures.

Larger Friends schools are tending to define growth by the number of facilities built, students enrolled and graduated, and Ivy League degrees among the faculty. Academic credentialism is taking precedent over spiritual commitment.

Part of the problem is that Friends have depleted their own ranks in the very schools they established. By my own informal survey, of three dozen Friends schools in the Philadelphia area, no more than 5 percent of the students at any school — and even fewer faculty and administrators — are Quaker. While these dedicated individuals earnestly try to act on Quaker principles, most lack a clear understanding of the Friends' decision-making process and vision.

I do not mean to suggest that Friends schools should return to the religiously guarded days of the 18th century when they tended to

practice exclusion. But my experience in Friends' education was meaningful because the schools I attended had a critical mass of Quaker leaders to model those values and spirituality.

Philadelphia's Quakers must strengthen their commitment to the schools they established. That means taking an active role in oversight and administration.

Quakers have always been known as progressive educators. Community-service programs, conflict resolution and interdisciplinary learning were all staples of Quaker education long before they were in vogue at other schools. Friends' education must emphasize these spiritually based fundamentals.

Children are a trust. Hopefully, they will grow to serve God and His creatures in a constructive, compassionate manner. Helping them discover their spirituality is not only critical to this process, but one of the most important responsibilities of any school.

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