
Title	Called to be a teacher: A Christian and personal viewpoint
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Published by	The Teachers' Christian Fellowship (Singapore)

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Called to be a teacher : a Christian and personal viewpoint

Ruth Wong

Foreword

The late Dr. Ruth Wong Hie King took both her profession and Christian calling seriously. As an educationist who served in Malaysia and Singapore for about three decades, she helped to train generations of teachers. As a Bible teacher and counsellor, her Christian influence led hundreds of others to a better understanding of the Lord Jesus Christ and to take His Word more seriously.

When I first approached Ruth Wong to write this article, at the request of the Teachers' Christian Fellowship, she was already ill. Despite this, she readily agreed to it. The article was completed just a few weeks before the Lord took her to be with Himself. During those months of her writing, I had occasion to visit her a number of times. I was much impressed by her deep abiding concern as to how more Christian teachers could be encouraged to regard their profession as a God-given opportunity to serve Him.

In publishing this article, the TCF hopes that it might, in some measure, make this concern a reality.

Bobby Sng
Adviser, TCF

The questions "Why do you want to be a teacher?" and "Why are you a teacher?" generally invite a whole range of answers, some of which are sentimental and evasively romantic, and some seemingly earthly and selfish. The answers depend on the circumstances under which either question is asked.

I remember how candidates, during the interview for admission to the Institute of Education, invariably elaborated on the "call" and the "attraction" of the job. This sentiment, some claimed, moved them as early as the age of four or five, when the joy of teaching and playing with younger siblings made them realise how rewarding a teacher's task could be. Answers of this nature came from the majority of the young women who were interviewed.

Interviewers of these candidates, however, were quite well aware that the sentimental, stock answer was meant to create a favourable impression. They were also aware that for 95 per cent of the applicants, the real and unexpressed reasons were (i) the training allowance, (ii) the limited opportunities in the other sectors of the job market for their skills, (iii) the half-day spent in school, (iv) the inter-term vacations, (v) job security, and the non-reason, "nowhere else to go".

In fact, those genuinely interested in teaching or in coming to grips with the demands of teaching hardly made up 10 per cent of any given group.

Yet, it would be hardly fair to single out teachers for particular censure regarding lack of purpose and dedication

to the job. As professionals, they merely reflect a general malaise in society. This affects other professionals as well, be they doctors, lawyers, engineers or accountants. Society itself is materialistic, devoted to false values such as "moneytheism", achievement without honest effort, pursuit of personal advantage whatever the cost to others — such values leave little room for care and concern for others. They leave their stamp on the personality traits of contemporary and up-coming generations.

What puts teachers at the centre of social attention more than other professionals is the nature of their work. Of all professionals, they are the ones most intimately in touch with human lives and their development. Parents and other adults with a vested interest in the growing generation are prone to interfere with the teaching process. Moreover, guidance at home for the children is minimal, with both parents out at work in many cases. Parents, who should share the responsibility of teaching life's values to their children, tend to shoulder less and less of this. At the same time, the influence of mass media on growing young minds is such as to promote values which are often not desirable. Thus, subtly the norms of behaviour change: what to preserve, what to discard become increasingly controversial. For the teacher, this poses many problems in the guidance and discipline of children. The difficulties are compounded when parents differ in their views about behaviour norms.

Always, as before, teaching is a job to which every layman boldly claims expertise, while not actually offering to do it. The practitioner is not given much support to develop professionally. Meantime, changing technological demands require an appreciation of new goals in subject mastery, an acquisition of new insights and the development of new skills in teaching methods.

The circumstances described, coupled with the low rating the teacher's status is accorded in a materialistic society, tend to deter many on the threshold of seeking a career from giving a fair assessment to the teaching job. It is often a last consideration when all other doors are closed.

What is the Christian perspective on such seemingly uninviting circumstances? Let me assume first that the Christian's vision is not dominated by the material rewards or the status which the job offers; also, that he has accepted his placement in the teaching profession as an appointment of the Lord. He should be able to see things in a different perspective from others whose insights may be clouded by

considerations in which the Lord's values have no part. Then, indeed, the harshness of the scene softens, and in the words of the hymn-writer:

Heav'n above is softer blue,
Earth around is sweeter green!
Something lives in every hue
Christless eyes have never seen.

The very circumstances which others decry and which appear so obviously disheartening are now seen as posing challenges which one, who asserts that he wishes to serve the Lord, will accept as golden opportunities for doing so.

Why?

Challenges of the profession

Teaching as mentioned above has to do with children. These are not inanimate objects. Nor are they mere putty in our hands. They possess feelings and emotions: each has a will of his own; each needs direction. Each is capable of response to different types of treatment. When children are in school, both their hearts and minds become the concern of the teacher. Foolish would be the teacher who thinks he can reach the one without the other. Difficult would be his task, if he thinks he can teach subject matter without paying due attention to the quality of the interaction between himself and his pupils. For, depending on the type of interaction, there can arise interest or phobia, positive motivation or unresponsiveness, willingness to work or rejection, and friendliness or sullen repulsion. My own belief is that good relationships with pupils begin when the teacher is perceived as sincerely and earnestly seeking to make what he has to teach understandable and enjoyable.

The Christian teacher with a sense of mission will remember to present himself to God as one approved, "a workman that needeth not to be ashamed". (2 Timothy 2: 15) If he prepares his work well and, with each passing year, seeks to improve on his material and his skills, he will be pleasantly surprised by the way eyes light up when he enters a classroom.

A teacher is not a pot-filler: he is a lighter of fires. Once rapport with his pupils is established, he will not fail to notice the cooperation his pupils give him in the things he requires to be done, and the little acts of affection which only children can show so charmingly.

This holds true even for so-called low-ability children. I have had occasion recently to teach a class of Primary Four monolinguals. Admittedly, discipline in the beginning was hard going and punishment had to be meted out when deserved. But what a joy it was when during my illness I received a little note written on a scrap of paper from a girl to whom I had to administer discipline more than once. The message was, "You is a good teachers. I loves you very must. Please comes back." She had understood that my expectations and my firmness were governed by concern for her personal progress. There were tokens from others too in the class.

How lovable children can be, but only love and concern can beget a loving response! If the Christian message is one of love, then there is fruitful ground in the classroom and in the school for such love to be shown. Every opportunity exists for forging good relationships. The teacher is not merely an instructor; he is a friend. In no other profession do the years of a single career bring one into contact with so many potential friends.

As we look back we find that on our own lives certain teachers have made their impact. In mine, three stand out above others. One gave me the confidence which a socially disadvantaged child lacked; another taught me how to taste and read good books; the third taught what care and concern for others meant in practical terms by feeding the poor and the weak among us with milk and cod-liver oil each lunchtime at her own expense. They went, perhaps, beyond the call of duty, but they made many friends.

The fact that so many children are left to their own devices at home makes the teacher's role even more important. The models they miss at home, the discipline and guidance they lack, the absence of an authority figure who can help them with reason to make the value choices which so often confront and confuse them — these, whether consciously or unconsciously, they will look for in other adults. And the most available ones are the teachers in school. Thus, in many ways, fruitful classroom relationships expand into extra-classroom guidance. If a teacher is approachable, children seek him out for counselling.

I have been told by many a young person requiring counselling on personal problems that they do not feel free nowadays to confide in father or mother. That is because many working parents come home at the end of the day weary and fractious, with their own problems. They may be

too irritable to lend a sympathetic ear to their children's problems. The result is less listening, less interchange about the happenings of the day in today's family life.

A teacher who is aware of this ever-widening communication gap between the generations and is willing to answer the needs arising therefrom, must be prepared to give more of himself to his charges. Listening to the problems of others is time-consuming. Besides, helping to set the young on the right paths of behaviour and nurturing their growth require much patience.

Problems of children cover a wide range. These include those associated with the home environment — an environment not conducive to or supportive of study objectives; truancy or illness without caring adults around; no older siblings to help tide through a difficult passage; failure to achieve even though hard work has been applied. Children from broken homes go through traumatic experiences and are the ones who need much assurance and guidance.

There are also the personal, emotional problems of growing up — inability to relate to others; lack of opportunity to share fears or hopes with someone who can assure or guide; sense of loneliness. Certain emotional problems may be related to physiological causes which have not been identified.

Then, there are the social problems: these may arise where the school and the home cultures are disparate. For example, a child may not be deliberately foul-mouthed, but he copies the language used at home: or he may be told "Finders, keepers" by his parents and may not understand why the school calls this an act of dishonesty.

As it seems clear, problems vary in depth and kind. While some may require the help of specialist counsellors and psychiatrists, many of these problems lie within the scope of the skill of the teacher who has the welfare of his children at heart. What children in trouble need are a listening ear, a sympathetic attitude and wise counsel. This aspect of the work is not something *demand*ed of teachers, but to me it forms a most important part of the task of nurturing the young. To see the seeds of love fructify, to watch the little saplings grow strong and straight — these are gratifying in themselves. If the Christian looks for a mission field, the school is certainly full of opportunity. To be sure such activities as guidance and counselling will erode the length of the free half-day or even the vacation. But it all depends on

what the teacher perceives to be worthwhile and, for the Christian, what kind of accounting he hopes to submit to his Master.

It is not only with respect to the forging of worthwhile and lasting human relationships that teaching is satisfying. For the teacher himself there are other benefits. He will find a lifetime of intellectual stimulation. However routine the school round, each day brings new questions and new insights. The teacher is a perpetual learner. There is no likelihood, if he keeps up with the requirements of good quality and effective classroom dialogue, that he will mentally atrophy. There is much to read about: new subjects, updated methods and approaches to teaching, the needs of children, behaviour modification and change, and so on. A breakthrough to the so-called "dense" or recalcitrant is always an occasion for rejoicing. Teaching has a rejuvenating effect on the teacher for it is association with the young that keeps him young in outlook, while accruing wisdom through the years.

Choosing teaching as a vocation: a testimony

Suppose you have been persuaded that teaching can be truly rewarding. You then ask: "How do I know that I should choose teaching as my vocation?" I must confess that, on asking around, teaching as a vocation is hardly a deliberate choice even among Christians. This was true of my generation too. Young people are easily influenced by the opinions and values held by society.

To cite my own case in point. As a teenager, heady, high-minded and opinionated, I felt that no profession befitted my intellectual capacity better than the medical. (Even in those days, doctors were rated high on the social status scale.) I did pray to the Lord about my vocation, but hardly for His will. It was a patronising prayer: "Lord, grant me the opportunity to be a doctor. I shall do my best for my patients as behoves one who serves You and, for the poor, I shall conduct two free clinics a week."

At first, things seemed to be working out well towards my goal. I passed both my Junior and Senior Cambridge examinations with honours and was awarded a scholarship to attend the preparatory class at Raffles Institution, which at that time was the only school offering a Lower and Upper Sixth curriculum for university education in the United Kingdom. The best scholars from the class would be chosen for

the Queen's Scholarship awards which were considered most prestigious in those days.

For me, the eldest of ten, this was a welcome opportunity to prove myself without placing an additional burden on my father, while seeking to further my own higher study objectives. I was hoping that this would lead me to a fruitful stint abroad to fulfil my ambition.

Just about that time, however, my father's limping business failed miserably, I was told the family needed my help. Should I cling to what I had been personally provided or should I forego what I had desired for years? Somehow, in the midst of all my conflicting emotions, I could not ignore the Biblical injunction, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord." (Ephesians 6:1) I gave up the scholarship and took to teaching in a private school at the lordly sum of \$26 a month. Money then had good value and this was enough to help keep the wolf from the door. In the meantime, the Lord made special provision for me to enter Raffles College where I managed to study even as I taught part-time. Finally, the option left at the end of the course was teacher-training. I was not to see any university education till fourteen years later and it turned out to be non-medical.

After a manner of speaking, then, I was shunted into education. But over the years I have seen God's guiding hand and have learnt some valuable lessons.

Teaching as a vocation: three lessons

- A VOCATION IS NOT WHAT I DECIDE UPON FOR MY OWN ENDS. IT IS ASSIGNED BY GOD.

We are human. We are prone to be affected by the values around us. We are also essentially selfish and it is often within the perspective of self-gain that we assess our opportunities and our so-called desire to serve God. Indeed, deep down in our hearts, we are not prepared to obey even when God very clearly shows His way. Not that we are consciously so motivated. In fact we are able even to convince ourselves that what we want is for the greatest good of God and man.

However, God can take occasion to rule otherwise and, if we accept the fact that, in the Christian's life, circumstances are not just happenstance but are ordered of the Lord, we are in a better position to see our way becoming clearer

with time and to commit our future to Him, because we have confidence in Him.

One of the earliest Biblical passages I had to commit to memory was Proverbs 3:5-7: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths. Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the Lord."

If He has said that I should trust in Him, I shall so act in the full belief that He will keep faith, for "He is faithful that promised". (Hebrews 10:23) He arranges circumstances and He can alter them to suit His purpose for me, if they are not to be permanent. What Christians do not realise is that in praying for God's will they are frequently praying for their own, hoping against hope that God will do it exactly the way they want it.

- The second lesson I learnt was that GOD WILL ADEQUATELY EQUIP US FOR THE WORK TO WHICH HE HAS CALLED US. Quite frequently we are told or we read in certain Christian literature that we should assess our own strengths and weaknesses before deciding on a vocation. The suggestion is based on the thought that we can estimate a best fit for ourselves. This is not always reliable.

In my case, if I had not been directed by the Lord into teaching, I would never have imagined I could teach. I was a rather introverted type of person, not always at ease in the presence of others. I was frequently tongue-tied, not given to asserting my own views or volunteering my opinions in conversation. In a class of some 35 peers, I knew about five intimately, although I was on friendly but shy terms with the others. I read avidly, but seldom discussed my thoughts with others. Most of the time I kept my feelings to myself. Only at home did I relax with parents and younger siblings. Nobody could be less suited for teaching than myself, judging from my visible traits.

However, my experience has shown that, if the Lord intends a person to assume a particular role, He will give grace and equip him for it. The person will grow on the job. God will provide him with the necessary talents and abilities to discharge his responsibilities in a way which manifests His blessing. The vocation is the situation where God's spiritual gifts for His service will be endowed and enhanced. All this will be a Christian's lot, provided that he does not, in the first instance, so discount himself and feel so discon-

tented with his position that God cannot use him with any degree of effectiveness.

As a corollary I might add that it is undoubtedly to a Christian's profit if he is not too sure of his own ability, for then he will learn to depend on the Lord and look to Him for direction in his daily work. He will be more open to learning in new and unprecedented situations, which teaching abounds in.

- I often come across discontented Christian teachers. An unsympathetic superior, lazy colleagues for whom they have sometimes to bear responsibility besides their own, difficulties of all kinds in the environment, unjust treatment — these problems can be very real and stressful. Meeting with such experiences they are so pressured that they say in seeming resignation, "Perhaps the Lord is indicating that I should leave," or, "I am going to apply for a transfer; pray for me that it will come through."

If a harassed Christian takes time to check with others who serve the Lord, he will find that the Christian, in whatever vocation or position he finds himself, does not find life a bed of roses. He faces testing on the job. For the same reason that Christ, who was altogether without sin, endured a great "contradiction of sinners against Himself" and "resisted unto blood", (Hebrews 12:3,4), THE CHRISTIAN IS CALLED TO WALK IN HIS FOOTSTEPS.

We do not find ourselves yet in such an extreme position as that which Christ faced, but a servant cannot be above his Master. Thus, if a Christian wishes truly to do His will, he has to have confidence that his reward for good work will surely come one day from his Master, whether or not he receives any from an earthly one. He may be slighted, unjustly treated, without receiving any commendation or appreciation, but he will grow on the job. Lessons of patience and endurance he will have many, and like the Biblical Moses he will endure, "as seeing Him who is invisible". (Hebrews 11:27) Others will notice that there is the presence of the Lord in all his ways. Surely this is true testimony for the Lord; it is maintained not in spectacular success or in talk without example. It is a daily learning of "godliness with contentment". (1 Timothy 6:6)

True, sometimes God moves in a new direction through the circumstances which befall us, but the Christian can rest assured that God's intervention is never too late and

He always confirms His move to His greater praise and glory.

Final remarks

I am biased towards teaching. Having spent 44 years at the job, teaching students at all levels — from kindergarten to university — I can look back with joy to thank the Lord for His choice for my life. There were indeed dark patches sometimes, but rewarding experiences more than compensated for these as well as for the times of difficulty and stress. Always the students were lovable and responsive to love. Would I take up a medical course, if permitted to live my life again? No. God has shown that what gives joy is the fulfilled life and this can only be found in His sovereign will.

Must a Christian always think of others? What about promotions or opportunities for furthering his own prospects? I can say that if he looks after God's interests first, God will look after his. God is no man's debtor. I became a teacher and was quite willing to remain one. In my whole career, I left no post by deliberate choice to further my own ambitions, more particularly because I had no personal resources. With each step upward, God had to equip me first with the wherewithal to cope and His provision was always just where and when it was needed to anticipate His next move.

So to you who are teaching or on the threshold of teaching, I would say this: "Teaching is a worthwhile service. It will not disappoint you. Render service 'in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not with eyeservice, as men pleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord.'" (Ephesians 6:5-8)



Ruth Wong Hie King

Born in 1918 the eldest of a family of ten children, Ruth Wong received her early education at the Methodist Girls' School. As she has described in this article, her last before she went to be with her Lord, changed family circumstances caused her to forego an opportunity to join the Queen's Scholarship class when she completed the Senior Cambridge Examination with honours. The Lord was to provide her later with many more opportunities and open doors.

Even when she entered Raffles College later that year in 1935 she continued to give private tuition in order that she would not be a burden to her parents. She was to continue teaching for the rest of her life and did so in a variety of positions and milieus.

When she completed her studies in Mathematics and History at Raffles College, and obtained a Diploma in Education in 1939, she returned to her Alma Mater to teach in the secondary school. There she taught till the advent of the Second World War. The consequent upheaval in the lives of the people of Singapore brought her the new task of teaching in the Paya Lebar Primary School and later the St. Joseph's Primary School when the Japanese civil administration had re-organised the educational system.

After the Japanese Occupation she returned to the Methodist Girls' School to teach for the next 5 years till she was awarded a scholarship to study at Queen's University, Belfast, where she graduated B.A. (Hons.) in 1954. On her return, she was sent to the Anglo-Chinese School where she taught for about a year before she was appointed Head of the Mathematics Department of the Teachers' Training College, as the Institute of Education was then called. In

1957 she was seconded to the Department of Education at the University of Malaya (Singapore). At the same time, she served as Principal of Eusoff College.

In 1960 she received a Fulbright Scholarship to spend some time first as Testing Associate at the Educational Testing Service at Princeton, N.J. and then to proceed to Ed.M. and then Ed.D. at Harvard University. Soon after her return with the Doctorate in Education in 1962, she was appointed Foundation Professor of Education and Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, where she was to serve till 1969. During that period she served for a year as Senior Specialist at the Institute of Advanced Projects, East-West Centre, of the University of Hawaii.

On her return to Singapore in 1969, she was appointed Director of Research at the Ministry of Education. In 1971 she became Principal of the Teachers' Training College and when it was renamed the Institute of Education in 1973 was its first Director till her resignation in 1976.

Even after her resignation from the Directorship of the Institute of Education, she continued to be involved in research projects in education; among them, a study of pre-primary education under the aegis of the People's Association and special projects at the Ministry of Education.

She received many honours and awards, including an Exhibition at Raffles College, the Isabella Todd Memorial Prize and the Sir John Porter Scholarship at Queen's University. While at Harvard University, she held a Merit Scholarship and was made a member of the Pi Lambda Theta Honor Society of Women in Education. She was also a Visiting Commonwealth Fellow in Australia in 1971.

She was elected a Fellow of the College of Preceptors, London, and a Fellow of the World Academy of Arts and Sciences. She also served on several international educational organisations (among others, the Governing Board of UNESCO Institute of Education, the International Institute of Educational Planning Council of Consultant Fellows, the Board of Directors of the International Council on Education for Teaching), and on the Editorial Board of the International Review of Education. She was a member of the Research Review Advisory Committee of the IDRC, Canada, and the Advisory Board to the International Education Group, Faculty of Education, University of Toronto.

She was a member of the Council of the University of Singapore from 1977 till it became part of the National University in 1980. At the same time she maintained a keen interest in the welfare of undergraduate students, accepting a role as part-time Student Counsellor at the University of Singapore and eventually becoming a Resident Fellow at the Kent Ridge KE Hall. She was active in several voluntary organisations and was President of the Girls' Brigade from 1976 until she passed away.