

THE ENACTMENT AND OPERATION OF THE 1950 AMENDMENT
TO THE VICTORIAN EDUCATION ACT

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Prior to the passing of the Education (Religious Instruction) Act 1950, religious instruction was permitted in State schools in Victoria, but had to be given outside the hours prescribed for secular instruction. Within these limitations, representatives of the non-Roman Catholic Churches provided basically non-sectarian teaching under the auspices of the Joint Council for Religious Instruction in State Schools.

The 1940's, however, saw a growing dissatisfaction in the Churches with the secular nature of the Education Act and a desire for statutory recognition of the place of religion in the education of children. Through the Joint Council and its successor, the Council for Christian Education in Schools, and through a series of conferences of the Heads of Churches begun in 1943, negotiations were initiated in order to seek common ground for an approach to the Government. The Anglican desire for segregation and the unstable political situation were the biggest obstacles to progress.

By 1950, after protracted negotiations and many disappointments, the member-Churches of the Council for Christian Education in Schools had reached agreement, and with Roman Catholic support, secured the 1950 Amendment.

With new status and authority the Council for Christian Education in Schools inaugurated a period of development to meet the opportunities of the Act, the greatest needs being the recruiting and training of instructors, the production of Agreed Syllabuses, the publication of Teachers' Handbooks, and the provision of adequate financial resources. A particularly important

development was the chaplaincy system begun in 1955.

Despite all its efforts, however, and faced with an enormous growth in school enrolments, the Council has always found itself restricted by the inadequate financial commitment of its member-Churches. Moreover, a minority of Anglicans continued to express dissatisfaction with the Agreed Syllabus, pressing instead for segregation, until decisively defeated at the meeting of the Provincial Synod of Victoria in 1964.

In an attempt to overcome the shortage of instructors, and in order further to integrate religious instruction into the life of the school, the Council for Christian Education in Schools in 1961 began to investigate the possibility of a further amendment to the Act which would permit departmental teachers to give religious instruction. Here the Council met the resolute opposition of the Victorian Teachers' Union.

So the Victorian system of voluntary instruction, unique in Australia, has entered its second decade, with the Churches more united than ever, but facing its greatest challenge, namely an emergent secular, pluralist society. The future of the voluntary movement in Victoria under the settlement of 1950 depends upon the way in which the Churches work out their relationship to this society. The need is for the clarification of objectives and methodology, and the shaping of a positive, creative role for the Church which will win the respect of supporters and opponents alike.