Some reasons why the ‘Inherent Requirements’ changes should be rejected
Why it’s important to protect faith-based schools

The ALP is again seeking to change the Equal Opportunity Act by adjusting the religious exemptions which currently allow Christian schools (CSs) the freedom to employ Christian staff. The changes would mean that CSs would be required to prove that faith is required for each and every job within the school, meaning that while we would have the freedom to employ a Christian for the role of teacher of Religious Studies, we would not have such freedom for a maths, sport or art teacher, or administrative staff. They call it the ‘Inherent Requirements’ test. The Bill is being considered by the Victorian Parliament.

CSs recognise that everything in life comes under the Lordship of Christ. The most distinguishing feature of MECS is that every subject is taught from a Christian, biblical perspective, and that every staff member is a passionate Christian, all working under the same umbrella belief that all that we do contributes to God’s kingdom here on earth. We cannot separate some subjects, or some roles, as ‘inherently requiring faith’ because they all do.

Parents within CSs need to be aware of the bigger issues afoot in this debate. This legislation strikes at the heart of the distinctive nature of CSs, parental freedom of choice and the fair expression of religious thought and understanding in our society.

Here are some reasons why the ‘Inherent Requirements’ changes or ‘clipping the religious exemptions’ should be rejected.

1. Employing staff who align with your values and beliefs
   Being able to employ Christian staff, people who passionately share the religious values and beliefs of the school community, goes to the very heart of why CSs exist. It’s been a long-held freedom and practice. The present Victorian legislation provides an exemption for political parties to allow for this appropriate form of discrimination – and so it should! We are just asking for the same consideration.

2. It takes a village to raise a child
   The ‘Inherent Requirements’ argument says that you can only use your religion as a basis to decide on employment positions where faith is ‘relevant’. This dualistic understanding of faith separates the secular (Maths teacher, Receptionist) from the sacred (Biblical studies teacher) and means that CSs that it would be illegal to ask the Maths teacher about their faith. By contrast CSs strive to be holistic learning communities where God is integrated in every part of the school’s life and where everyone plays a part in the education of the students. As the old saying goes it ‘takes a village to raise a child’.

3. Freedom to choose
   CSs clearly state their beliefs and their values. It’s impossible to miss that they are steeped in the teachings of the Bible and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Some agree with this faith, many don’t. Those who disagree can choose another option. They are not required to be a part of a faith-based community. For those who agree, faith will shape their religious and moral viewpoints and the way that they wish to model their beliefs.

4. Parental choice and religious freedoms are crucial
   The rights of parental choice and religious freedom are a vital part of Australian democracy. Human rights’ covenants that Australia has signed, protect religious freedom and the right of parents to choose their child’s school. The implications of the proposed change challenges these rights by reducing both parental choice and religious freedom. The right of parents to send their children to a CS is a freedom we expect in a democratic, tolerant and pluralistic society.
5. Who gets to decide?
An ‘inherent requirement test’ requires a secular tribunal like the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) to decide what religion means and what’s ‘inherent’. In the viewpoint of the past VEOHRC Chair, the school’s “doctrines, beliefs and principles” were irrelevant for the teaching of Maths.

6. Disagreement is not discrimination
The proponents of reducing the religious exemptions are of the view that CSs need to stop being ‘havens of bigotry’. CSs fully agree that treating people with dignity, fairness and respect is a value that should be expected of all. However when CSs seek to employ staff who are supportive of the Christian faith and understanding does that mean they are being unfairly discriminatory? It is this question that is at the heart of this whole debate. CSs would say this isn’t unfair discrimination.

7. The case for change just isn’t there
The present exemptions have provided a baseline protection for religious institutions for a long time. In attempting to adjust these long-held religious freedoms the ALP claims it is defending individuals and society from unfair discrimination. Here proponents are listening to voices that portray CSs as being separatist, bigoted and discriminatory places with far too much freedom. We know that such stereotypes are simply not the case.

8. Balanced consultations
The ALP claims that those they consulted within the church/religious schools’ sector were satisfied with what they called the ‘inherent requirements’ compromise. CSs are certainly not supportive. That’s a voice that should be listened to.

9. Thin edge of the wedge
CSs do not want to be shaped by secular guidelines that would distort their very character. This subtle compliance measure (needing to prove an ‘inherent requirement’) crosses a line that shouldn’t be crossed and represents a dangerous directional change. Starting down this path has the potential of further meddling in religiously-shaped CS practice.