

ADDRESS BY
HIS EXCELLENCY MAJOR GENERAL MICHAEL JEFFERY AC CVO MC
GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
ON THE OCCASION OF
OFFICIALLY LAUNCH THE GOONDIWINDI SCHOOL CHAPLAINCY PROGRAM
GOONDIWINDI CULTURAL CENTRE, QLD
23 APRIL 2007

- . Mr Tim Mander, CEO, Scripture Union QLD
- . Councillor Tom Sullivan, Mayor, Goondiwindi Shire Council
- . Councillor Tom Woods, Mayor, Waggamba Shire Council
- . Mr Alan Smith, Principal, Goondiwindi State High
- . Pastor David Jensen
- . Distinguished guests
- . Ladies and gentlemen

Good afternoon to you all, and what a pleasure it is to be here.

One of the fascinating aspects of being Australia's Governor General is having the opportunity to travel throughout this great country and see for myself what an extraordinary nation of people we are, and what a remarkable, contrasting landscape we live in.

And so, I find myself in Goondiwindi, a wonderful place, rich in history.

Settled in the 1840s, not only did it become one of the more important administrative and commercial centres on the NSW-Queensland border, it boasts the magnificent backdrop of the McIntyre River, is home to the legendary Gunsynd racehorse, has a thriving cotton industry within its progressive agricultural portfolio, and is the junction for six national highways, thus bringing many a weary and admiring traveller to its door.

But the secret to the success and survival of any township, large or small, is the strength and support one finds within its community.

And Goondiwindi's strengths are well demonstrated by its wise investment in its young people.

For example, the community has developed a thriving sporting culture, where one can take up Australian rules, rugby union, rugby league, basketball, netball, cricket, touch football, soccer, water skiing, swimming, or my particular favourite now, golf.

Sport, as we all know, is a great leveller and a great instructor. It teaches team work, leadership and self discipline, and provides many opportunities for mentoring our young, for passing on knowledge.

Another obvious avenue of investment in young people is in supporting our schools.

Which brings us here today. The Goondiwindi community, through its very good high school, is taking a new, vital step forward in providing support and encouragement for its young people.

Today we are here to launch a chaplaincy program which aims to give counselling, advice and other help to students as they negotiate life's journey.

Ladies and gentlemen, I make no apologies for my own firmly-held belief in the necessity for such a program within schools, and let me tell you why.

I guess all of us at some stage in our lives have lain out under the stars on a really clear night and, looking up into the lovely constellations above, thought long and deeply about the universe, its size and complexity, how it all happened and why?

As we contemplate the total order, beauty and harmony of the universe, it seems to have all the hallmarks of some greater being or force responsible for, and in total control of it.

In his essay on the "Origin of the Universe", Professor Stephen W Hawking concluded: "Although science may solve the problem of how the universe began, it can not answer the question: why does the universe bother to exist? Maybe only God can answer that."

It was only in 1925 that Edwin Hubble was able to prove the existence of galaxies using the then new 100-inch telescope at Mount Wilson.

Now we know our galaxy is one of thousands of millions, all apparently rushing away from each other at tremendous speed.

About 1000 million galaxies can be photographed by the largest optical telescopes.

Others, much further away, can be observed by radio telescope.

As insignificant as earth appears in the size of the universe, it does have a uniqueness that is not readily apparent in any other part of the cosmos that we know of.

And that unique thing is the existence of living, breathing life.

And the wonder of our planet is that, notwithstanding the millions of different life forms on it, there is one group that dominates over all others, and that, of course, is the human species.

But unlike plants and animals, whose biological growth is guided and controlled by the laws of nature, man I suggest has been given something else - a special quality, a divine spark which makes us different, animates us and, I would suggest, underpins our values.

It is, in other words, our spirit.

So what is this thing that we call the spirit?

I asked a good clergyman friend to give me his interpretation and this is broadly what he said.

Within all people exists a basic inclination for good, a deep-seated sympathy for others, and a real concern for their wellbeing.

This fundamental orientation, or spirit, is shared by all, to a greater or lesser extent.

Put simply, it is as though we have been "wired up" with an innate potential to do good, so that we can be consistently available for others.

We have been programmed to respond positively to situations of human need.

We share a basic inclination to uphold the dignity and wellbeing of humanity.

But, of course, even though we are "wired-up" this way, we still have to decide to flick the switch!

Our natural orientation is to do good, not evil, and this spirit is within all of us.

It is a fundamental - perhaps the fundamental - characteristic of humanity.

Our challenge is to allow this natural instinct to speak.

For we are confronted always with situations, circumstances and pressures which will distort, or even entirely prevent this inner, fundamental human spirit from expressing itself.

We should strive to let this spirit "be itself", and be the dominant influence of our lives.

However, the spirit is, I suspect a little bit like the small seed of a delicate flower, which when planted, requires careful nurturing of the soil, watering, and removal of weeds before it will germinate and develop into a beautiful bloom.

The existence of this distinct human spiritual dimension makes it impossible for me to believe that there can be anything other than a great force at work who endows us with this spirit and whom we call God.

But this spirit, like the flower seed, needs nurturing from childhood and this is where the school chaplain can play such an important role.

You see boys and girls, in today's world, there is very little mention of God. The emphasis on traditional religion seems to be in decline. Yet I would argue that if ever there was a time when our young people needed a spiritual and ethical hook on which to hang the cloak of life, today is it.

Without falling too much into the trap of lamenting the good old days, one must acknowledge that the challenges facing young people today are great: they live in such a frenetic world, where scientific advances and religious intolerance throw up new questions about faith; where celebrity and money seem to be the fundamental measures of success and satisfaction with life; and where family breakdown and exposure to drug and alcohol abuse is the all-too-familiar catchcry in the list of society's ills.

I see chaplains and religious education, therefore, as a critically important part of the educative process.

Just as we learn sums or geography, so too must we learn of religion and of the spiritual aspects of our world. Why? Because it can provide a fundamental moral and ethical basis to life and living.

I think it borders on the tragic, that young people might live their whole lives without an opportunity to participate in a faith that promises resurrection after death to a new and greater life with an eternal dimension. And that in part, is why the school chaplain is so important.

So how, then, does a chaplain operate in today's school environment? I believe the role of the chaplain is to act as listener, friend and counselor; to work with teachers, parents and others to help students; and to provide a moral and spiritual resource for teachers in the classroom, yet remain independent so as to provide clear, unbiased support.

These days, as well as traditional instruction, a chaplain's pastoral care and counseling may include dealing with personal problems at school, broken homes, truancy, leaving home, abuse, suicide, illness, births, deaths, drugs, alcohol, police trouble, community services, financial needs, or study skills.

A chaplain is thus a social worker, mediator and teacher.

During my time as Governor of WA, I was a great advocate of chaplains in schools. Indeed, a survey conducted among high school principals found that 93 per cent indicated a chaplain's work was indispensable in the school environment. Not a bad answer to those who oppose such a scheme.

Queensland similarly recognises the good sense in implementing chaplaincy programs. Employed within the Scripture Union, headed by Tim Mander, who joins us here today, Queensland first

introduced a chaplain to a state school in 1990. There are now chaplains in more than 200 such schools in Queensland.

The increasing employment of chaplains across the country gained national attention last year when the Federal Government announced the National School Chaplaincy Programme, a funding scheme to help schools maintain or negotiate chaplain support.

Some in the community questioned the appropriateness of such funding, suggesting that relying on one religious affiliation would offend those in the community who belonged to others or to none.

That line of thinking is exactly why religious education is so vital within schools. Ignorance of all religions leads to intolerance, and narrow-mindedness, not the other way around.

Ladies and gentlemen I suggest for every dollar invested in the spiritual education of our children, there will be returned many times its value in the overall well-being of our children as future citizens, leaders, parents.

The Goondiwindi community together with the Goondiwindi High School is to be commended for initiating a school chaplaincy program to help nurture and support its young people; for taking up the challenge of restoring faith.

Congratulations to everyone concerned in introducing this important, and in my view, essential element to a child's education.

And so it is, that I now have great pleasure in officially launching the Goondiwindi Chaplaincy program.