

## **Trinity College Theological School Religious Education Forum, March 2012**

A stimulating, challenging and valuable conversation on the role and place of religious education in schools was the focus of a forum hosted by the Trinity College Theological School on 17 March 2012. Speakers who contributed included Dr Marian de Souza, Australian Catholic University, Denise Nicholls, ACCESS Ministries, Meredith Peace, Australian Education Union, and Scott Hedges, parent and an opponent of the current way religious education is provided in Victorian schools.

In addition, a panel of four people including Trinity College Foundation Studies Chaplain, the Revd Chris Carolane, Anne Maher, Carmel Hunter and Ron Noone, spoke briefly on their experience of teaching religious education in schools.

A wide cross section of people was present, including volunteer teachers of religious education, advocates for change, parents, academics, clergy, and others interested in the topic. The mix of the group provided stimulus for the discussions that followed.

Marian de Souza spoke about the need for a study of all religious traditions and the place of spirituality in building community. Denise Nicholls focused her talk on the history of the provision of special education in public schools as well as noting that other providers included the Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh communities. She advocated strongly for the present system to be maintained.

Meredith Peace stated the recently revised AEU policy saw special religious education as an optional extra for children, and should be provided outside schools hours. Further, the Union believes qualified teachers should teach the subject. This created significant discussion for the differing sides of the debate. Scott Hedges argued for the complete withdrawal of special religious education, arguing that it did not serve the church or faith well, and that we should look overseas for a better model, citing the Quebec model as one worth exploring. Others also spoke about this model as being a possible way forward.

In closing the forum, Dr Brian Porter pointed out that the role of chaplains in schools had not been discussed, and the need to have an opt-in rather than an opt-out policy for special religious education would be preferable. The majority of speakers, panel members and the audience also supported the need for religious education to be provided but argued strongly for a trained professional and a revised curriculum as a necessary starting point.