

SUNDAY SCHOOLS AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The Editor,
The Waiapu Church Gazette,

Sir,

You have asked me to write an article on the above subject. I have put what I have to say in the form of a letter, in order that it may, I hope, provoke some discussion in your columns; for, it seems to me, there is no matter more important to the welfare of the Church at the present time, and on which discussion may be more valuable.

In order to get as exact information as possible, I applied to the Government Statistician, and am indebted to him for supplying me with the following facts.

The non-Maori population of the Diocese is estimated at 120,780. The Church of England population is estimated at 46 per cent of that, giving 55,558. Of this, the per centage of school age, that is, 5 to 16, is 22.75. That gives us the number of children in the Diocese for whom our Church should be providing religious teaching. It works out at 12,639. A return presented to Synod this year gave the number of scholars on the rolls of our Sunday Schools at 4,079. If we add to that number of Bible Class members—830, we get the total number for whom apparently the Church is providing teaching, 4,909. It is however to be remembered that a number of these Bible Class members are Maoris, and quite a large proportion are over 16 years of age. It is probable that five hundred children of the Diocese are attending boarding schools where they get instruction in religion. It is possible however that some of these are included in the returns supplied to Synod, as members of the Sunday Schools or the Bible Classes. There will be some children, too, who are taught at home. However, making all the allowances that may be thought fair, we get the broad fact that not half of our children are getting instruction in religion, at any rate, not in our Sunday Schools or Bible Classes.

Perhaps the statement will be made, that a large number of those who do not attend, cannot possibly do so by reason of distance from the nearest Sunday School. I doubt that this is an adequate reason for the deficiency. I am sure that the evil is general. But supposing that that is the reason why they are not on the roll of any Sunday School, the question at once arises as to what the Church is doing about it. If half the children of the Dominion were not catered for by the State Schools, would the Education Depart-

ment be content to let the matter slide? Surely it should be a prime duty of the Church authorities to help the parents of such children. The greater the number of these in the Diocese, the more urgent was the need for this part of the work to have been organised years ago. Let me at once acknowledge that some years ago, when Archdeacon Butterfield was editor of the Church Gazette, he inserted, each month, lessons for back-block children; but they were discontinued because their value did not seem to be appreciated. In any case those lessons could have reached only a very small per centage indeed of those who needed them. It would be very interesting to know how many used them.

To return to our numbers. It must be pointed out that the return presented to Synod is that of the number of children on the rolls. A number of these attend very badly, and some are returned as attending when they have made very few attendances during the year. I believe that in only a few Schools would the average attendance be over 60 per cent of the roll number. But, taking our roll number as 5,000, and allowing a per centage of 70, we get an estimated number under instruction each Sunday as 3,500. I am sure that this is a very liberal estimate. Accepting it however, we get the second broad fact that not one child in three belonging to our Church in our Diocese is attending Sunday School on any average Sunday.

It is right here, I think, to point out that a very probable effect at first of the introduction of Bible instruction into the day schools, if the agitation for that reform should be successful, will be to reduce this number still further. Some of us even now know from experience that the giving of half-an-hour's instruction under the Nelson System is used as an excuse by parents for not sending children to Sunday School. They say that they do not need it as they get it in the Day School.

I need hardly take up your space in pointing out how that, despite the self-sacrificing efforts of our Sunday School teachers, owing to the unsuitable conditions under which they work lack of adequate equipment, want of proper training, of proper system, and of helps, their work is nothing like as efficient as it might and should be.

Let me get on to what seems to me to be the real problem. It is now sixty years since Bible Instruction was dropped out of our State School curriculum. We have reached the third generation of people who have not had teaching in that way. It is at present idle to talk about the parents instructing the

children in religion. In very many cases the parents are as ignorant as their children. I am of the opinion that the position in the main can only be altered by the education of the parents. That may not seem a very hopeful proposal. Most of them do not want to be instructed. Yet perhaps if the matter is introduced in the right way, something may be done. The necessity for adult religious education is strongly stressed in the report of the Lambeth Conference.

"But first we would urge that far greater insistence should be laid upon mental discipline and exercise as one of the duties of the Christian life. Too often religious instruction is regarded as completed by the preparation required before Confirmation. Every new communicant should recognise that Confirmation is a new beginning, and that spiritual progress will normally depend upon a growing intellectual apprehension of Christian truth. Study and discussion circles for adolescents and adults should be part of the normal equipment of every parish. We welcome many indications that such activities are being encouraged and assisted both in Great Britain and the British Dominions and in the United States, by Diocesan and Cathedral authorities and by such central organisations as the Church Tutorial Classes Association." (p.79).

And again,

"Inasmuch as nothing can take the place of home influence, it is vital that parents should have an opportunity of learning how to teach the Christian faith and life to their children. We welcome the efforts that are now being made to provide such opportunities through various schemes for the religious education of the adult." (p. 196).

How any such work is to be done in a scattered diocese like ours will demand the keenest thought, expert knowledge, efficient organisation, and considerable finance, and perhaps, most of all, a persistence that is untiring. For it will be years before its results begin to be seen.

If I might presume to suggest some lines on which action might be taken—First, I would endeavour to get the ideal into the older children that they must keep on learning, and that the Bible Classes are the natural organisations with which they should link up at Confirmation. I should like to see adult Bible Classes formed in every parish, and that not only for the instruction of adults, but also for the purpose of encouraging the young people to continue as Bible Class members until they join some adult organisation for study. Then, it seems essential