

THE PRESBYTERIAN AND METHODIST SCHOOLS' ASSOCIATION - SHOULD IT CONTINUE?

by Geoff Hines

PMSA Council Member 2006 to 2011

BBC Council Member 2006 to 2011

BBC Chairman 2008 to 2011

INTRODUCTION

Geoff Hines resigned from the Presbyterian and Methodist Schools Association (hereafter referred to as the 'PMSA') Council on 31 January 2011. His six years of experience on the PMSA Council and six years on the BBC Council (three as Chairman) have convinced him that it is time for the PMSA in its present form to be abolished and the assets of the Association split between the two constituent Churches – the Presbyterian Church and the Uniting Church in Australia. This paper will present strong arguments for this point of view and the reasons for it.

He joined the PMSA following an advertisement placed in "*Journey*" asking for suitable candidates to join the Council. Geoff had heard so many bad opinions expressed about the PMSA in the Brisbane community that he thought he should volunteer his services. This would be a practical way for him to demonstrate his Christian conviction to the role of Christian education. He also believed that his broad background in education and business, as well as considerable board and management experience, would be of value to the organisation and that he could 'make a difference'.

THE PMSA

The PMSA was formed following a meeting of representatives of the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches in Queensland in the minister's vestry at St Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Creek Street, on Thursday 13 December 1917 at 2.00pm in order to consider the purchase of the Brisbane High School for Girls and Clayfield College, and to decide on joint action in relation to such purchases.

The two schools were to be taken over on 1 July 1918. Meanwhile, the PMSA was incorporated under the provisions of the Religious, Educational and Charitable Institutions Act of 1861. The first meeting of the Association was held on Friday 7 June 1918. The original Council comprised twenty-four people, twelve from each of the two constituent Churches.

An excellent history of the PMSA was published in 2004 as a book entitled "*For the Good of the Community*" by Dr Noel Quirke. There are a large number of comments in this book

about the difficulties faced by the PMSA on being answerable in the final analysis to the different churches and also to some of the less than sensible decisions which the Council made, including publicly dismissing a Headmaster, Graham Thomson, from Brisbane Boys' College, and then reinstating him a few days later following huge protests from the BBC community. A very similar situation happened at the same school a few years later when Mike Norris was dismissed as Headmaster.

CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

1. **Annual General Meetings**

Having joined the PMSA Council in 2006, I attended my first Annual General Meeting. To my great surprise, the only people present were members of the PMSA Council. Effectively, the Council was reporting to itself. I spent many months campaigning to have this changed, initially being blocked by the then PMSA Chairman, the Reverend Guido Kettmiss. However, two years later, I managed to have this changed and the Council now invites three representatives from each of the two Churches to attend the AGM - this is still a long way short of good practice for a public organisation such as this.

2. **Annual Reports**

The PMSA Annual Report and each individual School's Annual Report are very secret documents and not available for general publication. However, they are now sent to each of the two Churches but are not available for general publication. However, initially, they did not include a number of items one would normally expect to see in such a report. This included a list of the Directors (Council Members), their qualifications, experience, and their attendance history at meetings. Following strong representations, these are now included.

In addition, there was no mention of "Related Party Transactions". I have discovered that, over the years, a number of PMSA Councillors had provided goods and services to the PMSA and the individual schools without any reference to these activities, or the sums of money involved, in the Annual Report. Following my comments, this has now been changed. There is no reason why PMSA Councillors should not provide goods and services to the organisations. They should neither be advantaged nor disadvantaged, but it must be open and transparent, and be reportable as a Related Party Transaction.

3. **Power and Control**

For a school like BBC, a member school of the GPS Association, it has, unlike its competitors, three levels of Governance Control. These are the Uniting Church Schools' Commission, the PMSA Council, and the BBC Council.

This is an incredible level of over-governance and control - one has to question the link between over-governance and ineffective and slow decision-making. All one really needs for effective governance is an experienced School Council, headed by a committed Chairman, who can work effectively with the Headmaster to provide direction for an educational organisation with an annual turnover of over \$30 million. This is the kind of single structure that BBC's competition has, whereas BBC has three levels to deal with. The results are confusion and conflict.

4. **Tenure**

There are a number of PMSA Councillors who have been on the PMSA Council for much too long, e.g. –

Bernie Stein	-	over 30 years
Guido Kettniss	-	24 years
Des Robinson	-	21 years
Jackie McPherson	-	19 years

They show no signs of stepping down and seem to have come to believe that they are irreplaceable.

Over two years ago, the PMSA Council commissioned the firm, Effective Governance, to carry out a governance study. A detailed report was presented to the Council but no action has been taken. One of the recommendations was that Councillors should stand down from office after 12 years of service on the Council, or 15 years if they have been Chairman of a School.

The Uniting Church Schools' Commission Protocols say that individuals on a School Council (including PMSA Schools) should only serve for a maximum of nine years (three periods of three years) and only in very exceptional circumstances should they serve any longer.

Alan Grummit is an interesting case, as he served on the Council for over thirty years. Originally appointed to the PMSA Council by the Uniting Church, when it decided not to re-appoint him, he organised to be appointed to the PMSA in one of the Council vacancies. When the PMSA Council decided not to re-elect him, he then organised for the Presbyterian Church to appoint him until they realised last year that he was not a member of the Presbyterian Church and so did not re-appoint him. Even then, there was an attempt by one of his Presbyterian friends, Jackie McPherson, to have him appointed to a Council vacancy. Fortunately, at the AGM last year, there were more votes against than for him.

5. **Theological Differences**

There are clear theological and ideological differences between the Presbyterian Church and the Uniting Church, otherwise the remaining Presbyterians would, by

now, have joined the Uniting Church. These have shown up from time to time in discussions such as, for instance, the teaching of the Creation theory and Darwinism.

The situation today is summed up extremely well in a quotation from Noel Quirke's book, *"For the Good of the Community"*. On page 488, he wrote:

"There was a viewpoint, shared by many, but openly stated by Professor Henry Spykerboer, that he saw little likelihood – and, possibly, little desirability - of a long-lasting and effective working relationship between the two Churches, and it might be best to grasp the nettle now and make alternative arrangements for control and ownership of the schools that would preserve their individuality within the direct control of a single church.

This separatist view was also held by some Presbyterians, who could see no reconciliation of theological differences that would allow for a joint approach to sensitive issues such as creation, co-education, alcohol, Sunday observance – let alone on ideological and social issues such as the role of women in society, labour and industrial relations, discrimination and multiculturalism – to name but a few."

6. **Power, Influence and Control**

It is clear that, historically, by allowing the Presbyterian Church and the Uniting Church to have equal representation on the PMSA Council, the Presbyterian Church has power, influence and control completely out of proportion to its size. This is wrong.

Originally, the PMSA Council had 24 members - 12 from the Presbyterian Church and 12 from the Methodist Church. After the Uniting Church was formed, the Uniting Church had 16 Council Members and the Continuing Presbyterian Church had 8 Council Members. Around this time, the Continuing Presbyterian Church threatened to withdraw from the PMSA unless they had equal representation on the PMSA Council. In 1982, the Uniting Church agreed to equal representation. Their influence on decision making is now 'way out of proportion to their size.

7. **Council Size**

Currently, the PMSA Council has 15 members – six each from the Presbyterian and Uniting Churches, and three Council positions that the Council can appoint itself. The recent Effective Governance study recommended a Council the size of nine - which is a more reasonable size to encourage effective teamwork. Larger Councils

and Boards inevitably lead to the formation of 'cliques' or factions within the Board or Council. The PMSA, like all the other recommendations, has taken no action on this one.

8. **Organisation Name**

The name of the organisation – the Presbyterian and Methodist Schools' Association – is now a misnomer because the Methodist Church does not exist today as a separate entity. In May 1990, the Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia formally asked the PMSA to change its name to reflect the Uniting Church presence in it, rather than the now defunct Methodist Church. Nothing has been done about it.

9. **PMSA Image in the Community**

If you were to carry out a market research study among teachers, parents and past members of the schools, you would find a very negative attitude towards the PMSA. They see it as an aloof, autocratic and self-serving organisation that is answerable to nobody but themselves. A number of them cannot understand why the PMSA exists at all and why the Church allows this to happen.

10. **Finding Competent and Effective Council Members**

The PMSA now runs four schools – Brisbane Boys' College, Somerville House, Clayfield College, and Sunshine Coast Grammar School. It is now a business that turns over more than \$80 million per year - clearly, an important economic entity in Queensland. Unfortunately, a number of people on the PMSA, 'though excellent and worthy individuals in their own right, do not have the necessary experience to be effectively a Board Member of a substantial business operation.

Finding competent, effective and experienced Council Members is not an easy task. In recent years, there have been a number of competent individuals resign from the PMSA after a comparatively short time on the Council. It would be interesting to carry out a study of these individuals to ascertain why they did not remain a member for longer.

The bad image of the PMSA is a very major deterrent to getting suitable people prepared to put their names forward for appointment – either to the PMSA Council or to the School Councils under the current structure. A School Council at the moment is comprised of three Community Councillors and three PMSA Councillors, one of which has to be Chairman. Unfortunately, under this arrangement, the PMSA Councillors, for some reason known only to themselves, tend to see their colleague Community Councillors as inferior beings.

SUMMARY

There are a plethora of reasons as to why the PMSA should now cease to exist. It is time now for the Uniting Church to take strong action to change the current structure and ensure that we have excellent Christian Schools operating under the Uniting Church guidelines in the future.

There are precedents for action. The St Andrew's War Memorial Hospital used to be jointly managed by the Presbyterian and Uniting Churches. Today, it is solely a Uniting Church organisation. And New South Wales, very early in the history of the Uniting Church, realising that there would be difficulties ahead, divided the schools under their supervision, giving some to the Presbyterians and some to the Uniting Church to administer.

I would be pleased to assist the Synod in this task in any way possible as I strongly believe in the future of Christian education and the importance of maintaining excellent schools. I would be happy to discuss this paper further with the Synod executive.

GEOFF HINES

June 2011