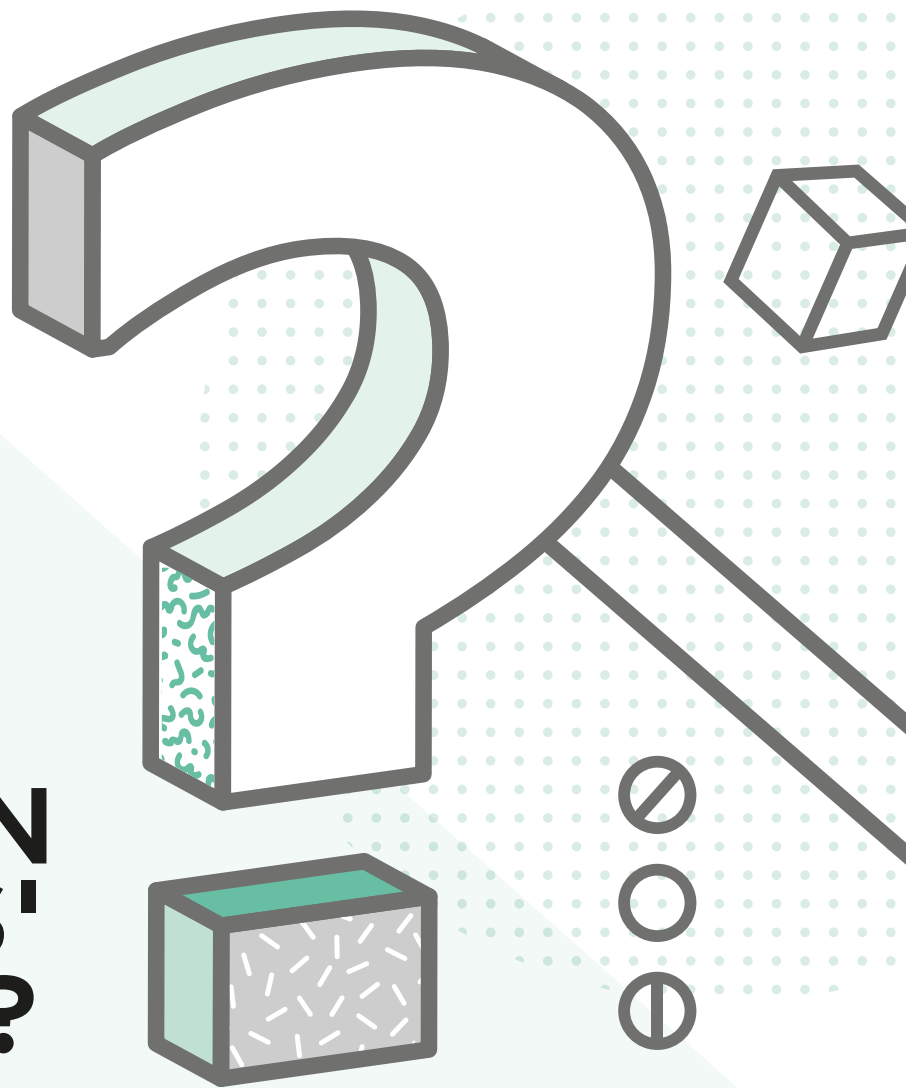




CAN I COME TO SCHOOL IN THE GIRLS' UNIFORM?



CHRIS PARKER INTERVIEWED A PRINCIPAL WHO RECEIVED A REQUEST FROM A FAMILY FOR THEIR PRIMARY AGED CHILD (BOY) TO COME TO SCHOOL DRESSED IN THE GIRLS' SCHOOL UNIFORM. FOR THE PRIVACY OF THE FAMILY CONCERNED, THE PRINCIPAL AND SCHOOL ARE NOT IDENTIFIED.

CP: *In your role as principal, you recently had an interesting request from a Year 6 child and his parents. What was that request?*

Principal: The family were exploring permission for their son to come to school dressed in the girls' school uniform. This Year 6 student had been dressing as a girl at home for a number of years and had started dressing outside of the home this way. He identified himself as a girl. They had recently taken him to the sexuality unit at the children's hospital in their local capital city; the unit that deals with transgender. They identified him as transgender, and encouraged him to dress as a girl. They diagnosed him as transgender in the first visit.

CP: *A temptation as a principal of a Christian school might be to go straight to a fairly conservative view of gender and sexuality for a number of reasons—not the least a commitment to being biblical. However, there are many layers of sensitivity required in these sorts of conversations. What were some of the complexities and sensitivities that unfolded during the discussions with the parents?*

Principal: This family had been in the school for more than 10 years, and also had another child in the school. Not only was there a pastoral layer needing to be considered, there was the history of relationship between the school and the family. It was far more complex than simply appealing to the authority of Scripture. The question in front of us was, how do we love in this situation, and still stay true to God's Word? We are a grace infused, yet conservative Christian community.

We needed to discuss with the parents the fact that our students have known this child for 6 years as a male. The idea that there would be a sudden change to the child's gender identity was going to present challenges in our community—perhaps more than if they were new to the school and making a similar request. Perhaps our biggest challenge was going to be in the area of community

perception, as we are conservative in outlook. Though we recognised that we would also need to consider staff perceptions and training at one level and even the issue of toilets and change rooms etc. at another.

CP: *So with the parents, do they have a stated faith and how did they respond to discussions about biblical perspectives?*

Principal: The mum sees herself as a Christian and has a faith. When I opened up dialogue about biblical perspectives, she seemed surprised at some of the viewpoints I presented. The discussion also addressed the possibility that there would be times during the child's school life where his class may discuss sexuality, with the view presented that homosexuality, and some forms of transgenderism, may not be part of God's good design. Obviously, I said we would be sensitive in these situations and work with her and her son, but we discussed how she would feel about this.

CP: *What was the final position agreed upon between the school and the family?*

Principal: The final position we came to, gave both parties time to consider all possibilities and the best way forward. There are options in the Year 6 girls' and boys' uniforms that are very similar, so if he wore shorts/long pants for the rest of Year 6 it would not be obvious. Obviously though, it was going to become a more significant issue leading into secondary school but we had time to research, reflect, and to pray.

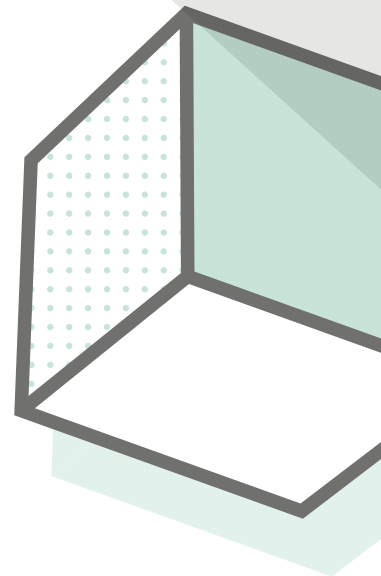
CP: *How did the family respond to that suggestion?*

Principal: The mum was very open and very thankful for the honesty. She felt that I was supportive in the way I spoke with her and wasn't judgemental about her parenting and that we showed the love and care of Christ at the same time as attempting to affirm the Bible. However, in the end they took the child out of the school and sent him to an alternate independent school nearby which embraced the child's desire to dress as the opposite gender to their biological gender.

CP: *There is no doubt that you (and the school board) would have learnt a lot through this process. What could you share with our readers (both school executive leaders and teachers) by way of advice or a suggestion of things to consider if (and when) they find themselves in a similar situation?*

Principal: The advice I would give is don't knee-jerk. The scenario we had with a 12-month window to work this through was a good one—so that's the first thing. The next thing I'd say is that you have to love people. Jesus loved them. He spoke plainly to them but it was always in the context of love and the focus on relationship. This will include honouring the relationship—in this case going back over 10 years.

I think the other thing that's important—and I probably should have mentioned it first—is to commit yourself to prayer and biblical reflection. Often in my role I have found that when I initially think "oh my, how am I ever going to deal with this issue?", God comes up with a solution and a path to follow that He may unfold through prayer. In this case it was that the family found a school that is supportive of their worldview. Now that may not be God's worldview, but I suppose we could argue that every family has that responsibility before God, and if their worldview is different, to choose that worldview. Doesn't necessarily make it right, but it exercises, either rightly or wrongly, the authority God has given them over their children. ■



STAFF MEETING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

We offer these questions for small group discussion during a staff meeting. The discussion could come before or after reading through this interview (though you could choose any of the articles in this edition for stimulus—or maybe make the reading of the whole edition a professional development activity).

1. How free would a student at our school feel to disclose a gender identity, and/or sexual orientation, struggle to a staff member?
2. How likely would we as a staff come to know if a primary student was dealing with a gender identity concern?
3. How likely would we as a teaching staff come to know if a secondary student was dealing with a gender identity, and/or sexual orientation concern?
4. If a family was to share with the principal that their child had a gender identity, and/or sexual orientation struggle, how widely should this be made known to the teaching staff?
5. When, how, and at what age should these sorts of issues be discussed among students in a Christian school?
6. What would you want to say to a family that was requesting their child come to school dressed in the opposite sex uniform? What are some of the things that your answer would depend on?
7. Do you know someone personally who is homosexual or has a gender identity different to their biological sex? Tell your group about them and your friendship with them.