Are private schools handicapped when compared to public schools? In our interview with Mr. Ken Leys, who happens to be my father and the principal of Terra Ceia Christian School in Pantego, North Carolina, I began to realize that just maybe the public schools are more handicapped in talking about certain issues than the private schools.
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For instance, Terra Ceia Christian School teaches both the “Big Bang” theory of the creation of the universe as well as the creationist theory. However, the public schools are limited in presenting the creationist theory. In Terra Ceia history classes, the history of religion—certainly an important component of history—is taught. But are the public schools even allowed to teach the history of religion? So perhaps private schools have some advantages of latitude in the curriculum that the public schools don’t have. Certainly, this is an arguable question, and Mr. Leys made it very clear that he is all for public schools being as good as they can be.

Located on Terra Ceia Road, in Pantego, Terra Ceia School has been around for a long time, in fact, for almost 60 years. Although the school now has no formal relationship to the Dutch Reformed Church, members of that church did found the school. Today approximately 40% of the students are in the Dutch Reformed Church. On the school’s fiftieth anniversary in 1988, a brief history of the school was written. Concerning the beginning of the school, the authors stated: “On March 3, 1937, a small group of parents, concerned about Christian education, met in Terra Ceia with the idea of establishing a school where their children could receive a formal education based on the solid foundation of God’s word.”

Mr. Leys has been at Terra Ceia School for a total of nine years. Under his leadership, the school has continued “on the solid foundation of God’s word.” As we interviewed Mr. Leys on December 6, 1995, he talked to us warmly, easily, wittily, and sincerely. He presented himself as a man firm in his beliefs and
clear about his mission at Terra Ceia. And I know that’s true because he’s my father!

Life: How long have you been associated with the school?

Mr. Leys: I came here in 1984. I was here till ’88. Then I went to Florida for three years, came back in ’91, till the present time, so about nine years, total.

Life: How long has the school been here?

Mr. Leys: It began as a school society in 1937. We had a 50th anniversary in 1987, and wrote this [showing a copy of a book] as a history of the school. It really operated for two years as a summer school. Then in the fall of 1940, it began as a full-year school, nine months. The founders recognize 1937 as the beginning of this school.

Life: Is it affiliated with a particular church?

Mr. Leys: No. It is a parentally controlled Christian school. Now, the Christian Reformed Church, across the road there,
their members did start the church. Always the perception has been that it is related to the Christian Reformed Church, but it is not. The church has no financial interest in this school.

Life: How many parents are members of the Christian Reformed Church?

Mr. Leys: Forty percent.

Life: Do you have students from all over the place?

Mr. Leys: Oh, sure! And that is why we are growing. For many years the students were primarily from the Christian Reformed Church. Church members began the school as being a part of their heritage. Most of them are Dutch from the Netherlands. In the Netherlands they had their own schools, so they brought that [idea] with them.

Life: How many students do you have now?

Mr. Leys: Today, 134, K through twelfth grade.

Life: And you are growing?

Mr. Leys: Yes. I'd say we grow about 10-15 students every year. We just opened up five new classrooms.

Life: Are there still any influences from the Dutch Reformed Church in your operation?

Mr. Leys: No, not in curriculum. We do not teach a doctrine, for instance, in our Bible class. We teach the Bible, but it is not a particular doctrine of any particular church. Is there influence? I guess so.

Life: So you are teaching the Bible but not the general theology of that church?

Mr. Leys: Of the church? Right, no.

Life: But it is a Christian school?

Mr. Leys: Right! Oh, yes!

Life: How do you think this school differs from the public schools, like Washington and Northside?

Mr. Leys: The primary difference is the philosophy behind the institution. Public education primarily trains for good citizens. We train so that students that graduate from here can make a difference for their Lord in the society in which they are placed. So we emphasize good citizenship, but there is a purpose for you to be a good citizen, and that is that Christ requires it, and he wants your whole life. And so I would say that is the philosophy behind this school. I don’t think you will walk down our halls and see any halos here. Kids look the same, dress the same, but I think the purpose is different.

Life: Do you think you are successful in reaching your goals?

Mr. Leys: Yes, I would say so.

Life: You have a marvelous reputation in the community.
Mr. Leys: Yes. I’d think that when you look at kids that leave here and then when you see them later on in life, I would say, yes, we are successful.

Life: Which classes do you have that are more oriented towards this Christian mission of the school?

Mr. Leys: We teach all our classes from that perspective: history, math, science. This school would be a Christian school even if we didn’t have Bible [class]. I really believe that all classes are taught with the basis that Christ is our Savior. That’s important. But Christ is also our Lord and demands our whole life. And our education is part of our life. History, math, and science are all part of it. So everything comes under that Lordship. Now [laughing] we don’t give theological treatisism in math class! We teach math, but everything has a purpose, and that’s [the Lordship of Christ] the purpose behind these classes. So all classes are taught with that behind it.

Life [Wendy]: Do you teach the “big bang” theory of the creation?

Mr. Leys: We teach what the big bang theory is and what evolution is. We’ll also teach creation, and we will teach why we believe creation is how this world came into being. We don’t believe our kids are isolated here; I believe kids in public schools are isolated. They aren’t taught creation, for instance. So, in a sense, they’ve been isolated. But our science books teach evolution and what it is. I think we are more free to talk about it than other schools [are].

Life: What kind of requirements do you have for students to graduate?

Mr. Leys: We follow state guidelines; so, right now, they need 20 credits with so many in math and science, you know.

Life: Do most of your graduates go to college?

Mr. Leys: Yes, either to a two-year or four-year school. I can’t say all of them do, but it’s kind of an exception if they don’t. They will go on further, and most of them will go to a four-year [college].

Life: To what colleges do they go?

Mr. Leys: I would say there is not a [particular] college, but more seem to be going to East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C. I think it’s [a matter of] expense. [From] last year’s graduating class, Chapel Hill, Campbell, private colleges up North, one went to each of those. There seems to be a wide spread.

Life: The school seems to be thriving now. Does it have its good times and bad times?

Mr. Leys: Finances are always a problem. Parents have to pay.

Life: Do you have an endowment?

Mr. Leys: No. Tuition covers about 80% of costs, and then there are fund-raisers.

Life: How much is your tuition?

Mr. Leys: Not including transportation, everyone pays, $2,000 a year for one child. There is a sliding scale [for more than one child]. I don’t know what it would be for two.
Life: So it’s moderately expensive?

Mr. Leys: Right.

Life: You have students from how far away?

Mr. Leys: We have eight vans. One goes to Plymouth and Roper, one goes to the community outside of Washington, Tranter’s Creek, one starts there, one goes to Pamlico. We got them all over: Hyde County, Swan Quarter.

Life: That’s a pretty good ways!

Mr. Leys: Yes!

Life: Do you have many brothers and sisters as students?

Mr. Leys: Yes.

Life: In your experience here, what do you think has been the biggest problem in the achievements of the school?

Mr. Leys: I think the biggest challenge is just getting our school name out in the community. In the South the phrase “Christian education” is often tied to private education. Many of the private schools here were started during integration. Honestly, we are put into that same lump or class. There is a difference between us and a private school. I don’t think the general public understands that. Then you have Christian schools that are missions of a particular church. So the biggest challenge is [getting the word out] why we are different and what makes us different.

Life: You really are very different because you are an old school. If you had a school that was started in the late ’60’s and the ’70’s, Christian academy is kind of like a code word for “white.” But this school isn’t like that. Do you have black students?

Mr. Leys: Yes

Life: How many?

Mr. Leys: One.

Life: But there is no problem with black students?

Mr. Leys: No, there never has been. If you read the history of this school, in the [nineteen] sixties this school could have had 300 kids, but we admit parents, not students. It has always been required to belong to a church, regardless of race.

Life: Did you have black students before?

Mr. Leys: We’ve had them before, sure.

Life: What about the building being torn down?

Mr. Leys: That building that we are tearing down used to be a public school. The church bought it for a church and used it for a while as a church and then gave it to the school to be used as a school.

Life: You know, I think really what you’re saying is that people don’t know about this school, and really that is a sad thing. I think
that is a very unfortunate thing. I know it is a very frustrating task, but how have you tried to get the word out about your school?

Mr. Leys: We’ve tried newspaper advertisement. Now, we are trying—we should get them in a couple of days—through the Chamber of Commerce to try putting a pamphlet together on our school, explaining ourselves. Word of mouth has been our biggest asset in the last five years when we really started to grow. That seems most successful, word of mouth. We are not interested in having 500 or 600 kids. That is not our goal, but we are interested in growing. Through the Chamber of Commerce is what we are going to try now. There seem to be many people moving into this area. We will do things like invite the public to our school. Until this year, we never put in the paper what our students accomplish. This year we are. Why we never have, I don’t know. Maybe people will read about our students’ accomplishments.

Life: You say that you don’t admit the students, that you admit the parents and the only requirement is to be members of a Christian church?

Mr. Leys: Right. They have to have a pastor’s form basically stating that they attend church.

Life: Is that any church?

Mr. Leys: Any Bible-believing church. Part of the basis of this school is a triangle: family, home, and school to train the child. You need all three ingredients, and if something is missing, something is going to be missing from that child. So that’s why [we have] the church requirement. I don’t want to teach your children the importance of church attendance, the importance of being faithful
Two young scholars use the school's computers.
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to God, and then parents not living it at home. You see, the child is your responsibility, not mine. God gave him to you, and so I want to be able to teach your child what you are teaching him or her at home. I don’t have an ax with public schools. I think they operate differently. It’s to my benefit as a citizen that they produce a good product. And secondly, I pay for it with public school taxes. I hope they produce a good product. I really don’t believe if they were producing great things, it would affect us one bit. I do think public schools are handicapped. I feel sorry for kids that don’t have the freedom to talk about every issue, as we can. The teachers are limited to what they can bring into their classrooms; we’re not. So, yes, they are handicapped because they have to leave a segment of a person’s life out of their classrooms, so they can’t teach life. They can’t teach history anymore because a big part of our history is religion, and when they can’t teach that, they are handicapped. I’m all for good public schools. I want to make that clear.

Life: If you had good public schools, they would have no fear of vouchers would they?

Mr. Leys: Well, I don’t see why they would fear vouchers.

Life: Well, they do [laughing].

Mr. Leys: The fact is that one of our handicaps is that you have to have money to go here. And so what I think the public system is seeing is a real drain on their upper economic scale students. If they can afford it, they are getting out [of public education].

Life: That is perhaps unfair to the people who can’t afford private education.

Mr. Leys: Yes, it affects them adversely. So it seems to me that less affluent people should be fighting for the voucher.

Life: Do you have any scholarships?

Mr. Leys: We have tuition help if a family can’t afford it, but it’s very limited. The one thing the church does do is give us some money for the ones who can’t afford it. We have some families that we will give aid too. But if we had more, we might be bigger.

Life: You mentioned you don’t want to have 500 or 600 students. What would you consider to be optimum enrollment?

Mr. Leys: With our present facilities, I’d say 200 or 250. We would have to get more land and build more if we were to get more than that. But that [200 or 250] would be about optimum right now.

Life: Have you tried other methods of raising funds like an endowment?

Mr. Leys: We tried but when I was here about 1985 (of course our school society has changed since then), a lot of our school society was in agriculture. And families in agriculture, they leave everything to their families, so there has been no talk about aggressively pursuing an endowment. There is a parent in charge now of finding grants and things like that. We’ll try that route rather than endowments.

Life: So you would say the biggest challenge you face is financial?

Mr. Leys: Yes, that is all the challenge; yes, you bet.
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Life: Of what are you most proud that has been accomplished under your leadership?

Mr. Leys: This new classroom wing, the gym. The growth has been an accomplishment. I think that the school has a good reputation.

Life: Yes, it has. It has a great reputation.

Mr. Leys: We are proud of it, even Wendy [laughter]!

Life: What extra curricular activities do you offer?

Mr. Leys: Volleyball, basketball, cheerleading, softball, baseball, Beta Club, Quiz Bowl, yearbook, student council, choir.

Life: I wanted to ask you, what does “Terra Ceia” mean?

Mr. Leys: No one knows. No one knows what language it comes from. It’s not Latin, Spanish, or French, but the older folks say “Terra Ceia” means “Heavenly Earth.” That’s splendid, but no one knows where it comes from.

Life: “Heavenly Earth” is an appropriate name for the school. I think I’d go with that! One thing I like to ask my interviewees is what would you tell these two students about how to be successful in life?

Mr. Leys: Have a clear goal, and work towards it. Study! I think a lot of young people today don’t really know what they want, and not having a goal in life makes it difficult.
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Conclusion

By Marsha Woolard

Mr. Ken Leys was very interesting and informative in our talk with him. He clearly presented the educational philosophy of the school: that the students are not just educated to be good citizens but are also encouraged to dedicate their lives to the service of the Lord, thus combining conventional education with "the word and teachings of God." The recent growth of the school, both in enrollment and physical plant, suggests its success, but rather than take personal credit for these, Mr. Leys instead praises the performance of his faculty and the commitment of the students and their parents. When asked if he thought he, as principal, had been successful in achieving the goals of the school, Mr. Leys replied, "Yes, I would say so." I was quite impressed with Mr. Ken Leys, who is obviously very proud of his school, the Terra Ceia Christian School. And with Mr. Leys as principal, I believe that Terra Ceia has a bright future.

Headmaster Ken Leys, with Wendy Leys and Marsha Woolard

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