

TISCA interview with Dean Close Foundation Warden, Emma Taylor

Thanks for agreeing to this interview Emma, please could you give us a potted history of your career to date...

I joined the teaching profession after spending a year as a Lay Assistant at St Ebbe's in Oxford back in the day; I was involved in leading the youth work and found I loved it. I am a natural 'jack of all trades' academically and worked out recently I have taught 11 subjects in my 30 years in the profession; I've also directed plays, sung in choirs, been a DofE assessor, been 'Master in Charge' of sculling, coached a rugby team, run two boarding houses, supported Oxbridge applicants and been on numerous school trips, including to Nepal, Japan, Rome, China and Prague. For a polymath it's hard to imagine anything better... For the last 20 years I've been in senior leadership, first as Senior Mistress and Admissions Tutor (bit of a mouthful – really a Deputy Head position) at Dean Close, then as Head of Christ College Brecon for 10 years and now as Warden here at the Dean Close Foundation. I like variety and change, luckily...there has always been something different to keep me challenged but the core has always been seeing young people, particularly teenagers, grow into their best selves.

Tell us how your Christian faith has influenced your career?

I wouldn't have been a teacher without my faith; journalism or the diplomatic service were my earlier thoughts after a degree in PPE. As I have gone on I have been heavily influenced in my choice both of job and of school by the desire to be free to speak about the Christian faith and to shape an education which is informed by a Christian view of human nature and of the world. I believe that the mind and the heart are equally important and have resisted being either 'pastoral' or 'academic' in my career, aiming to bring both together. In the early days I remained involved in the Scripture Union holiday parties I had attended as a student and enjoyed leading there; I learned a lot about teaching through the wise leadership I encountered there.

Life must be busy and intense during term time, what keeps you going as a Christian?

In Cheltenham we are lucky to have several excellent churches and I find church vitally important to get me out of the school 'bubble' and ensure I focus on being a disciple and not just an employee. I am an extreme extrovert so I find being alone difficult; I study the Bible and pray better with others so I look for opportunities to do that, making use of social media and a wide network of Christian friends for encouragement, advice and sometimes redirection if I am going astray. In my current role I am fortunate that, because Dean Close is an explicitly Christian Foundation, we begin meetings and discussions with prayer and often with a thought from the Bible. We also have an excellent Chaplain and I rely heavily on him for keeping Jesus in plain sight rather than allowing finances, employment issues and all the other management issues to crowd Him out.

As Warden, what are the some of the qualities you look for when employing teachers today?

My role is not mainly about appointing teachers now; the Heads do that. But I am responsible for appointing Heads and senior leaders, and this is vital because they will set the tone of their schools and help shape the direction of the Foundation. I look for intelligence and evidence of an ability to learn and adapt, for integrity and straightforwardness and for a genuine passion for seeing young people flourish. I look for a sense of vocation; these days it is more common for teachers to talk of a profession rather than a vocation, but I believe the demands of teaching and academic leadership require a commitment that is more than just a job or even a career. And stamina. If there is one thing all school leaders need it is stamina.

What's something which you think is going to play a bigger part in education in years to come?

I think we will have to work ever harder on being holistic in our approach; being really interested in helping young people to develop the qualities and characteristics that will enable them genuinely to thrive in life when the world is changing so rapidly. There are so many pressures to narrow the focus of our education either in scope (too much focus on exams) or in time (just getting to the next stage of education). It will need real leadership to ensure that resources, time and attention are given to ensuring that our young people are not just highly qualified but physically and mentally healthy, with the qualities that will enable them to be great spouses, parents and members of society rather than just high earners. We will need to listen to our recent school leavers about what they would have found helpful as they join the world beyond education and adapt accordingly.