

Module 14 – Connecting Church and School

This module has been written by Gilly Harwood-Smith, Leadership Consultant, School Improvement Partner and former headteacher, Downton Primary School. The aims of the module are to examine the connections and relationships between our churches and local schools. Strong relationships bring benefits for both parties and in both rural and urban communities, the connections are essential for nurturing the future generations of Christian community.

Types of school (in the UK):

The main categories of state schools are as follows:

Community schools: These were previously county schools. The LEA employs school staff, owns the school lands and buildings and decides the arrangements for admitting pupils.

Voluntary Controlled: These are almost always church schools and the lands and buildings are almost always owned by a charitable foundation. The LEA employs the school staff and has responsibility for admissions.

Foundation schools: Many of these were formerly grant maintained schools. The governing body employs the school staff and has primary responsibility for admissions. The school land and buildings are owned by the governing body or a charitable foundation.

Voluntary Aided: Many of the voluntary aided schools are church schools. The governing body employs the staff and decides admission arrangements. The land and buildings are normally owned by a charitable foundation.

Church School ethos

All schools that have a religious character must have an ethos statement. The Church of England has developed the following model ethos statement:

‘Recognising its historic foundation, the school will preserve and develop its religious character in accordance with the principles of the Church of England and in partnership with the Churches at parish and diocesan level.

The school aims to serve its community by providing an education of the highest quality within the context of Christian belief and practice. It encourages an understanding of the meaning and significance of faith, and promotes Christian values through the experience it offers to all pupils.’

The Church School should make it clear that the Christian ethos of the school infuses the whole of the school curriculum and school life. Relationships with the local church are just one way in which this might be evidenced.

Opportunities for forging links

Connecting Church and school is more than a weekly assembly taken by the vicar. In a voluntary aided school, or foundation school with a religious character, the majority of governors must be practising Christians and are nominated by the PCC. So links between the church and school can arise directly through personal relationships and the Christian witness of these unpaid volunteers who carry significant responsibilities.

Schools often choose to celebrate specific events – Christmas, Easter, leaving services – in their local churches. Sometimes, churches donate items, such as crosses and bibles. But more often, the church views the school as the ‘nursery’ for potential members and places an expectation upon the school to encourage children to attend services with their families.

Many schools may adopt links via their local church with school communities abroad, especially those in developing countries in need of resources. A Diocese may have projects that a school can be actively involved in, keeping in touch with the children and raising funds.

Challenging areas

Some parents and staff may not appreciate the requirement that some schools have to follow Anglican traditions of worship. In a diocese such as Salisbury, there are many voluntary aided schools and parents do not have the option of selecting a non-faith school. In this situation, tensions may arise as the school may be seen as primarily the ‘village school’ and its religious foundation may not be regarded as significant by parents.

Churches themselves do not always readily understand and appreciate their role in fostering links with their ‘church school’ and may not readily welcome children into church.

In contrast, the expectation placed upon school staff to encourage children to attend church services outside of the school working week can be unreasonable in that many staff do not live in the communities where they work. Staff need to supervise children in church if the service is seen to be connected to the school in some way and this can often cause difficulties if the teacher’s own church has a celebration at the same time (carol services and Mother’s Day celebrations etc). Which faith community should take precedence?

Pressure can be exercised upon pupils to attend specific Sunday services by both teachers and the visiting priest, but ultimately, attendance does demand the co-operation of the child’s parents. Without parental support, children are unable to attend church even if they wish to go.

But the biggest problem of all is that the overwhelming majority of children do not enjoy the experience of traditional Anglican worship and simply have no wish to repeat the experience.

Worship

Where schools have a religious character, then the programme of worship in that school must reflect the school's foundation. For Anglican schools, therefore, it should reflect the Anglican tradition of school worship.¹

How is it that schools can provide opportunities for worship that children enjoy but this experience is not repeated in many churches? To understand that, we need to look at the biblical basis of worship and the key principles which underlie effective teaching and learning in schools.

Biblical basis

Exodus 10:9	worship was intended to be a family and community activity
1 Kings 19:19-21	the importance of partnering and training between the generations
Malachi 4:6	unity between the generations is a key to revival
Mark 9:37	the importance of welcoming children ²
Mark 10:13-16	the importance of being like children

We live in a society full of choice – if I don't like it, I can opt for something different. Church attendance is in decline and patience is no longer seen as a virtue – everything is instant. Media – TV, film, advertising, internet – is visual and young people today demand increasingly sophisticated visual stimulation in every aspect of their lives.

Schools have been quick to respond to these changes, and their response has been supported by research into the neurological workings of the brain. Each person has a preferred 'learning style' – some people learn best by doing (kinaesthetic) some by looking (visual) and only a few by listening (aural). In all, there are some nine learning styles and the challenge to teachers is to ensure that the content of each lesson matches the learning styles of the individual pupils. There is an emphasis upon rapid change (one minute concentration for each year of a child's life), and a range of visual resources, often IT based, to support the teaching and learning experience.

This approach to lesson delivery is often extended into assembly and worship times, with projected images accompanied by reflective music, a lively talk using a range of physical resources, and perhaps a chorus with actions followed by a concluding prayer. But how does this increasingly sophisticated approach to teaching and learning compare with the average Anglican church service? And what are the implications for church services and, in particular, church music if young people are to be encouraged to attend?

Should the church aim for cultural relevance as a priority?

¹ The National Society's Inspection Handbook (National Society, 2000, ISBN 0715149547) contains a great deal of information on this issue

² He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms he said "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

The importance of music

From an early age, children respond to music. Schools make use of this receptiveness as a tool to enable children to worship. They select worship songs carefully, and are not afraid to use instrumental backing tracks. They do not assume that noisy, unstructured worship is automatically spiritual and that quiet, structured worship is automatically formalistic. But they do make use of their knowledge of children to choose their worship material and resources and try to include a breadth of styles.

Schools without a faith foundation make extensive use of the BBC books '[Come and Praise](#).' These are largely humanistic songs and get over the hurdle of multi-faith assemblies by adopting a culturally inclusive stance. The songs have catchy tunes and are backed up by BBC assembly tapes and backing tracks. They are a million miles away from most Victorian hymns used by many Anglican churches on Sundays.

When children go to church, they are often confronted with songs that they are not familiar with and that they do not like, accompanied by an organ. Often songs are pitched outside their range and they are unable to read the words. Sometimes, worship is seen as a performance – conversely, they can relate better to this as they are used to public 'shows' – but it is unlikely that they will be won over by this style of worship.

All-age worship

To actively encourage links between school and church, it helps to carry out an all age worship health check. Thinking about the categories of people in church (0-3s, children, teenagers, young adults, families, single adults, older people) consider the following:

- should worship ALWAYS be inclusive of all ages in church?
- which age groups are the most difficult to include in worship times?
- how can we draw neglected age groups to our worship times?

Suggested strategies

Linking church with school has to be a two way process – it will not work if the church assumes that the children need to either join the church choir or that the school needs to start teaching some 'real' hymns. There must be give and take on both sides.

If the church is organising a specific event, then let the school know well in advance that it is taking place, that they would welcome school involvement and provide the music so that the school can practise.

In many schools, you will come across qualified musicians who may balk at teaching a hymn that is poorly written and is in a language that the children will not identify with. To teach material like this contradicts the principles of effective teaching and learning and schools are likely to resist.

There are many worship songs which appeal to both the younger and older generations³ - the trick is to mix and match, so that there will always be something of the familiar to the young.

³ 'El Shaddai' – Amy Grant 'Age to Age' album, 'The Gift' – Graham Kendrick, 'What a friend we have in Jesus' Bryn Haworth, instrumental music 'The Touch', 'Such Love' – Rob & Gilly / Kingsway

'Children are the future of the church – should we sacrifice to serve them?'

(Any written work for this module may take this question as a starting point.)

Resources

[Youth A Part](#) – General Synod Board of Education, National Society – looks at how young people relate to the Church of England

[Sing it Again](#) – the place of short songs in worship – Anne Harrison
ISBN: 1 85174 537 8

[Worship Audit - Making Good Worship Better](#) - Mark Earey, Grove, ISBN: 1 85174 294 8

[Common Worship in Church Schools: An Experiment in Integration](#) – Ian Dewar - ISBN: 1 85174 522 X

[Hymns and Spiritual Songs—The Use of Traditional and Modern in Worship](#) - John Leach ISBN: 1 85174 288 3

[Reclaiming a Generation](#) – Ishmael, Kingsway

[Great Big God](#) – Vineyard

[Songs for the Shepherd](#) - Keith Green

[Body Beautiful? Recapturing a Vision for All-age Church](#) – Grove, Philip Mounstephen and Kelly Martin.

[Common Worship in Church Schools: An Experiment in Integrations](#) – Ian Dewar, Grove Booklets W174.

Additional useful website links:

www.jonbirch.demon.co.uk

www.patamb.supanet.com

www.ishmael.org.uk

www.nat.soc.org.uk

www.chbookshop.co.uk

www.churchnet.org.uk

www.familyworship.org.uk

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schoolradio/collectiveworship/>

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