



the UK and around the world attended The Church of England's fifth National

Max Colson

Keynote speeches came from the Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Keegan, the Children's Commissioner for England, Rachel De Souza, Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell and Lord Boateng, who Chairs the Archbishops' Racial Justice Commission.

Themed 'Flourishing Together' the Conference explored themes of equipping and inspiring leaders to meet the challenges of the modern Education landscape.

100 student leaders from Church of England Schools around the country hosted and chaired the conference, which saw musical contributions from schools around the country, and St Paul's Cathedral Choir.

Education Secretary, Gillian Keegan, opened by telling the Conference she had attended 'fantastic' faith schools as a child.

"They got me where I am today, but they also instilled faith in me and it's a core part of who I am today," she said.

"And I want you to know how much I really value the role the Church of England plays in educating our children. Its reputation for excellence in schools speaks for itself and you are one of my Department's most valued partners.

"Your schools are more likely to be 'good' or 'outstanding' than those without a religious character.

"You are transforming lives and you should be really proud of the work you do; and on behalf of the children you teach, I am eternally grateful.

"Put simply, without the Church of England, pupils across the country will be learning less and doing worse. And a big part of that is that you have used the Academy trust model. This is the structure that we think is going to make the biggest difference for our children. And we know it only works if focused on improving quality all the time; always striving for excellence."

[Read the Education Secretary's full speech](#)



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Dame Rachel de Souza, Children's Commissioner for England, spoke on 'Flourishing Children' and provided statistics from 'The Big Ask', the largest survey response in the world second only to the US census. With the help of Manchester United's Marcus Rashford, 557,077 children responded – six per cent of all four-to-18-year-olds – from all demographics.

She said: "Whilst most children told me they were are happy, some were really struggling. One in five talked to me about being worried about their mental health or their mental wellbeing, and I think that was about coming out of isolation, not having seen friends and families.

"There is particular concern with the mental health of teenage girls aged 14 to 17 - nearly twice as likely than boys to be unhappy with their mental health. With the added complications of the online world, I think there's something serious there.

"Children told me they wanted simple things to help – someone to talk to when they are worried and before things got worse. They look to school for the support that they need, to teachers that they trust, and that's where they wanted to be signposted or seek help. And that's why I've always been a real fan of the longer school day."

She added: "There is no shortage of ambition amongst England's children. I met the next Elon Musk, I met the next two prime ministers, this is a generation that's ambitious and it wants to get on in life. But having a good job was the top choice when children were asked for their priorities for the future.

"Children love their teachers. And they recognise the transformative power of education; they see it as the thing which will help them achieve their ambitions and live the lives they dream of.

"Now we are back in classrooms, and those empty corridors are full again, we can help make life in schools like the ideal of family so many children seemed to seek in the Big Ask - where nothing feels like a trade-off or a compromise, because they are held together by something greater. Because they are places of love."

[Read Dame Rachel's full speech](#)



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Lord Boateng spoke personally about the impact of individual teachers on people's lives and laid down a powerful challenge to schools and the Church on the need to combat racism and increase diversity at every level.

Reminding delegates that today is Holocaust Memorial Day, he said: "We need to remember it not just as a piece of history but as part and parcel of our present – what's happening now. There is racism now. There is racism now in our world, in our country, in our schools, in our communities."

Singling out the experience of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community in particular, he said members of many minority groups are more likely to be excluded from school and less likely to achieve their potential in education because of disadvantage and discrimination.

He spoke of a range of measures which the sector could take from ensuring that more people from minority communities teach STEM subjects to reviewing the curriculum.

He said: "We all have a responsibility to do something about that, we all have a responsibility to understand the complexities of racism and bigotry and the price of the absence of love - love not simply as some soft sentiment but love as the strategy that tells us we've got to do something about it.

"And we've got to create partnerships in our schools in our communities that address this issue. And the good news is that it can be done; that there are things we can do. We can look at our curriculum and ask how do we teach history, how do we teach the holocaust – do we teach the holocaust?"

[Read Lord Boateng's full speech](#)



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The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell then spoke about adult flourishing, recounting a time when as a young curate visiting a school he had been summoned to speak to the headteacher, feeling like he must have done something wrong.

“But no, of course not. She started speaking to me about the pressures she was under; about the demands of leading a staff team; about the projections and the endless suffocating expectations that go with leadership.

“Now she was an absolutely brilliant headteacher. She wasn’t having a breakdown. It was just a bad day at a bad time, and she need someone to talk to.”

“I learned something about myself and about leadership, and about what it is to be a headteacher. And I realised how important it is, that we support each other in the responsibilities we carry, that we work hard to ensure that people in positions of leadership have spiritual and pastoral as well as professional support.

“And I realised, perhaps, for the first time, that in order for any of us to lead well, we need to pay attention to our own flourishing and our own replenishing.

“It is about taking responsibility for the resources and replenishing each one of us needs. Building our house on the rock, as Jesus put it. So, I’m going to say to you this morning what I say consistently to all the clergy that I serve: the most important thing that I do each day is say my prayers.

“You’re probably thinking, ‘Is that all he’s got to say. Is that it? Say your prayers. Pay attention to your own need for rest and refreshment. Love one another. Yeah, that’s it. But with these things, we can change the world, starting with our own hearts.’”

[Read the Archbishop of York's full speech](#)



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The Conference took place at Union Chapel, North London, and St Mary Magdelene Academy in Islington. Following the keynote speeches, delegates attended a range of workshops held at the Academy.

The first Church of England National Education Conference was held in 2017, and was an annual event until COVID-19 restricted in-person gatherings. The most recent event was held in 2020.

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