

Presence & Engagement Guidelines: Practical Issues in Schools

The Church of England is committed to being a ‘Christian presence in every community.’ The increasing diversity of our country means that in some communities, questions arise which relate to the nature of that presence among people of other faiths. In order to ensure that Anglican clergy working in these areas are supported in their ministry, Presence & Engagement have put together guidelines addressing a range of frequently asked questions. These are intended to highlight some of the theological and practical issues which need to be considered in multi-religious contexts, and in doing so give clergy the confidence to make decisions which can be the basis of good relations with other faith communities.

The guidelines have been prepared by members of the Presence & Engagement task group and are primarily aimed at Anglican clergy, but may also be of interest to lay people and ministers of other Christian denominations working in diverse settings. Within most dioceses there is also a designated interfaith adviser, who can be consulted for further assistance. To find contact details for diocesan advisers as well as other information and resources, go to www.presenceandengagement.org.uk.

Introduction

The following are some basic guiding principles regarding practical issues in welcoming pupils of other faiths into Anglican schools. They are not intended as a definitive final word, but to form the basis of a discussion within a school senior management team or governing body.

Collective Worship

Parents do have the legal right to withdraw their child(ren) from an act of collective worship on grounds of conscience. In practise schools endeavour to ensure that this does not take place. There is a balance to be struck in ensuring that what is offered is Christian, whilst also recognising the variety of faith views of those participating. This raises a larger question about whether worship can ever be enforced and what type of opt-out (if any) you feel it is appropriate to give.

Some basic suggestions:

- Ensure participation is voluntary; this requires careful use of language.
- Speak of your personal experience as a Christian, but do not assume this is normative (“As I Christian, I believe that ... “or “As I Christian, I find that ...”)
- Invite people to pray using phrases such as “I’m going to pray, and if you agree with the prayer you might like to say ‘Amen’ at the end.”
- Invite pupils to reflect / think about a topic and then lead them in a prayer which they can participate in if they choose to.

- Recognise that within the Abrahamic faiths there are many different views about the status and function of Prophets. In particular the Islamic conception of a Prophet is very different from the Christian one. Compare, for example, the account of Nuh in the Qur'an with the account of Noah in Genesis.
- Avoid making negative statements about any other faith position, including atheism or agnosticism.
- If using music, think carefully about the lyrics of any songs you expect children to sing.
- Be appropriately honest about things you find difficult with being a Christian.

Religious Education

As with Collective Worship, parents have a right to withdraw their children for reasons of conscience if they so choose. It is important to recognise that within Anglican schools religious education is not a form of catechesis, that is to say whilst more time may be devoted to teaching Christianity that other world religions, it is not done with an expectation of persuading anyone to become Christian.

Meals

Many people of faith make conscious decisions to restrict their diet on religious grounds. When in doubt, the simplest thing to do is to ask what their particular needs are. A few points to note:

- Devout Muslims will only eat halal food; this includes ensuring permitted meat has been ritually slaughtered. Halal catering suppliers will have nationally recognised certification, which can be shown to parents if questions are raised.
- Devout Jews will only eat kosher food; a similar certification process is in place. A strict Jew may not wish to eat any food that has been prepared in a school kitchen.
- Many people of Dharmic faith (Hindu, Sikh, Jain) are strict vegans, not eating eggs, fish, onions or garlic. They may also prefer to provide their own food.
- Note the use of pork gelatine in many sweets; this would make them unsuitable as prizes for many people of faith.

Recent arrivals to the UK may not have the language skills necessary to explain all these concerns. Care must be taken to ensure kitchen staff are appropriately briefed and robust systems are in place to ensure equitable treatment and access to food.

Some people of faith fast regularly. Muslims fast during the hours of day light during the month of Ramadan. Jews fast during Yom Kippur. Hindus, and indeed people of many faiths, may fast on a particular day of the week. As children grow up they may wish to participate in such practices. Opening a dialogue with parents / carers over the advisability of this during school time is important.

Care should also be taken when arranging events involving parents. Many people of faith do not drink alcohol, for example, and may be fasting at particular times of year. The dietary restrictions noted above would apply to parents as well as their children.

Clothing

Some people of faith maintain a strict segregation of male and females. This is particularly relevant during physical education lessons when concerns about modesty would impact on choices made for clothing worn for physical education lessons or willingness to participate in swimming lessons. There is no provision of conscience to opt out of PE, but an open attitude to understanding particular concerns will help avoid this becoming a vexed issue.

Concerns about modesty are most clearly manifested in the desire of some women of faith to cover their hair. Women may cover their hair in Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism. Men may cover their hair in Judaism, Islam and Sikhism. Devout Hindus may not want to wear anything leather. School governing bodies need to come to an agreed policy regarding these issues. It is relatively straightforward to acquire appropriate head-coverings in school uniform colours.

Lessons

Some religious communities may have particular concerns about aspects of the curriculum. Theologically conservative Muslims believe that the only permitted forms of music are percussion and the human voice, for example. They may also have concerns about art lessons if pupils are asked to draw a human form. Some recent arrivals to the UK may find the curriculum overly Euro-centric and value opportunities to learn about parts of the world which their families originate from. It is difficult to make any definitive statements in this area, but an awareness that there may be issues and a willingness to initiate dialogue about them is important for ensuring harmony in a school.