

Presence & Engagement Guidelines: A Theology of Hospitality for Anglican 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.

Why hospitality?

This document is based on PhD fieldwork conducted in an Anglican Primary School where most of the pupils were Muslims of Somali and Yemeni heritage. A fuller exploration can be found in the Grove Booklet of the same title, available from <https://grovebooks.co.uk/products/ed-20-a-theology-of-hospitality-for-anglican-schools>. One pupil described the school as one which “hosted loads of religions.” While he was generous in the use of “loads,” as the vast majority of pupils were Muslim, with a few Christians, many atheists and one or two Hindus, his metaphor was insightful.

The metaphor of hospitality is helpful for describing how an Anglican school might welcome those of all faiths or no faith. There are, of course, limitations to the metaphor. First, the metaphor of hospitality is used here specifically of those who are not Christian in a Christian school, and moreover that hospitality is by no means a uniquely Christian gift. Second, hospitality implies a temporary relationship and an imbalance between host and guest. Extrapolating to the context of a school, it is clear that the staff, both as a body, and often as individuals, are permanent fixtures, by contrast with pupils and parents who change very rapidly, perhaps only staying for a few weeks in some schools where there is high pupil mobility. The temporary nature of hospitality is apposite to a school context. But there is no superiority between guest and host; the distinction is functional, not hierarchical, one of role not of status. Third, hospitality does not mean anything goes. Racism, bullying or discrimination in any form are not welcomed. Thus within certain limitations, hospitality is a good metaphor to use of the welcome offered by Anglican schools.

Old Testament hospitality

There are numerous stories of hospitality within the Old Testament. Abraham is hospitable to three unexpected guests (Genesis 18), dropping everything to ensure their needs are met. This may be taken to imply that inconvenient guests are to be given priority, rather than brushed aside as a nuisance.

The story of Naaman (2 Kings 5) provides a further paradigm for hospitality to foreigners. Naaman is an Aramite general, who is afflicted with leprosy and healed by Elisha. He hears of Elisha from his Israelite slave girl, is initially reluctant to obey Elisha's instructions that he go and wash in the Jordan, but eventually complies and is healed. Returned to Elisha he offers gifts, which are refused. He then requests that he be allowed to take home earth on which to build an altar to the Lord and he requests that the Lord forgive him when he bows in the house of Rimmon, having entered with his master the king. This episode raises questions about exactly where the boundaries of the people of God lie. Is Naaman "soundly converted" or "still on a journey"? Does it matter? Who sets the terms by which God is worshipped, and how does this apply to a context such as school where attendance at collective worship is presumed but not legally enforceable?

Jonah's experience reminds us of divine freedom, but also of God's character. God shows compassion and mercy on those who repent, and also to Jonah, who stubbornly refuses to repent and accept God's plan. The book presents a great challenge to those who are secure in their own faith community. The sailors' prayer for forgiveness and the Ninevites' repentance suggest some sort of relationship with the God of Israel. It seems that those who are expected to have no faith teach the one who should have faith how to relate to God. Jonah himself is a complex character: he is willing to be thrown to his death in the sea to spare the sailors, but refuses to accept the divine right to be merciful to the city of Nineveh.

Jesus' Hospitality

From birth to burial, Christ himself was dependent on the hospitality of others and his teaching emphasized the centrality of hospitality for all. Jesus presents a paradigm of one who was both guest and host, who depended on others but also offered gracious welcome to those normally regarded as outside the people of God.

When Jesus healed the Centurion's Servant (Matthew 8:5-13), he is arguably demonstrating a practical outworking of his teaching that his followers should bless their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (Matthew 5:43-48). It seems to be quite common for Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs to deliberately choose to send their children to Anglican schools, reasoning that at least God is taken seriously there. They are behaving a bit like the centurion in this passage: coming to the Christian institution because of what they can get, but particularly expecting there will be some sort of an encounter with God as a result.

Luke 14 contains a series of stories that develop teaching on the welcome and inclusion of everyone. The stories recount Jesus' experience at the house of a Pharisee, where Jesus teaches the importance of humility not self-promotion (Luke 14:1-14) and the parable of the great banquet (14:15-24), which likens welcome into the kingdom of God to a celebratory feast. An important theme runs through both these stories: hospitality is extended to the undeserving, the unexpected guests.

Doctrines for hospitality

The doctrine of the incarnation reminds us that God values physical humanity; our bodies are important as we are not just spiritual beings. Whilst there is much more that could be said, in a school context, this concern for physical well being can be extrapolated into ensuring the heating works, the toilets are clean, that is to say, that we are acting as good hosts. Moreover, if we believe all human beings are made in the image of God, then this includes everyone, regardless of their faith background. Do we welcome Sikh pupils as uniquely made in God's image?

Paul's point about the body in 1 Corinthians 12 is that the Corinthians should recognise that those who appear on the surface to occupy positions of lower social status are actually more essential than those of higher status, and so should be accorded greater honour. This understanding, of the importance of weaker members of a community, is one that can readily be applied to the organization of school life. Those who find it harder to achieve the primary aim of the school, namely learning, are to be given greater support and assistance in order to facilitate their progress. Those who are weaker in another way, for example in terms of health, similarly should receive special provision. Paul's frequent metaphor of the family can also be an important organizational principle for school life, although it applies differently to a small rural primary school and a large urban secondary.

The shape of hospitality

First, just as Naaman was unconditionally welcomed and cared for and Jesus engaged with all who came to him, so too a Christian school should unconditionally welcome any who avail themselves of its services, provided those services are not abused in any way.

Second, this unconditional welcome should arguably extend to an active search for those outside. There are clear examples in the Bible of outsiders actively seeking the people of God (so the Centurion whose servant was ill) or of God's people being sent to outsiders (Jonah).

Third, in the school context, Christian hospitality cannot be coercive. The host should be clear in his commitment to Christianity, but this cannot be forced on the guests. Thus a school is not a place for coercive proselytizing, but one that welcomes people of all faiths and none. Christians in an educational context should be confident of their own identity, but should not force that on others, although if questions are asked, they should be answered.

Fourth, true learning takes place not in isolation, but in community. I learn more about self, others and the subject of enquiry when I am not left to learn alone. We cannot remain isolated in ghettos, leading parallel lives insulated from each other; we must leave our comfort zones behind, and engage in meaningful activities together. The task of education lends itself naturally to such engagement.

A hospitable Anglican school will be an effective learning community: if staff and pupils feel secure and safe, they will be better equipped to encounter difference, to take risks, to make mistakes, to learn. Hospitality is not just good Christian discipleship, but also an effective pedagogical tool.