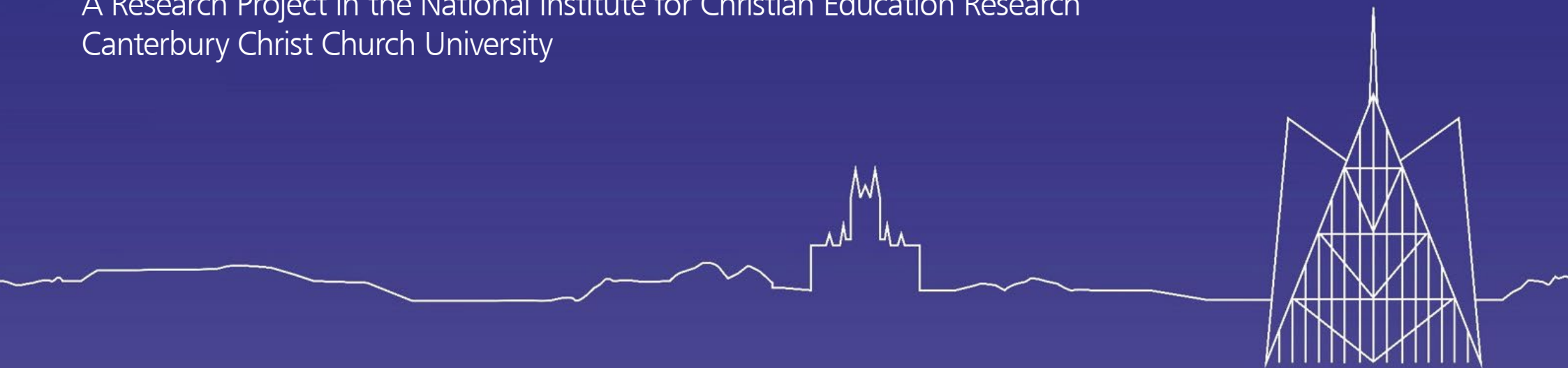


FAITH IN THE NEXUS: CHRISTMAS 2018 BRIEFING PAPER

A Research Project in the National Institute for Christian Education Research
Canterbury Christ Church University



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
CHRISTIAN EDUCATION RESEARCH



In what ways do church primary schools (working in collaboration with churches and interested stakeholders), facilitate opportunities for children's exploration of faith and spiritual life in the home?

The Faith in the Nexus project is working with twenty church primary schools in England¹ who actively encourage children's exploration of faith and the spiritual dimension of life, and recognise that a fruitful school, home and church relationship² is key to this.

As the research project reaches the midway point, a narrative is emerging that is a compelling indication of the critical issues affecting this relationship. This briefing paper draws on interviews with parents, pupils, staff, governors and clergy and has been informed by two major consultation meetings with a range of experts, and leading organisations in this field who are currently working with church schools.

An initial analysis of this data illuminates:

- What is happening in church primary schools that actively encourages and supports a child's exploration of faith and spiritual dimension of life in and out of school
- The major challenges encountered by church primary schools seeking to work in collaboration with families, churches and others to support/sustain a child's exploration of faith and spiritual dimension of life outside of school

This report highlights what is happening, the diversity of ways in which these twenty church primary schools support children's exploration of faith and the spiritual dimension of life inside and outside school. Secondly, attention is drawn to the challenges and obstacles identified in supporting this exploration. The next stage of the research (Jan-Dec 2019) will explore the why, the rational underpinning these approaches and consider what is required to further support church primary schools in this endeavour.

WHAT IS HAPPENING?

A diversity of fruitful ways were identified by which church primary schools encourage a child's exploration of faith and the spiritual dimension of life in and outside of school: provision of reflection time and space; Religious education; collective worship; role modelling Christian values and strong, visible relationships with local church community or others.

Reflection spaces are provided for quiet reflection and prayer in classrooms, corridors and outside, for some they also include the local church space. This approach may influence behaviours outside of school.

For example:

- In the classroom, a child may say a prayer and put a pebble in the water, at home a corner of their bedroom becomes their reflection corner with a changing display of 'special things' and a Bible.
- Children spoke of reflecting in the spiritual garden, thinking about homeless people and then writing a prayer in the book provided. Others explained how they had made a spiritual garden at home, or 'reflected' on a particular bench at their local park, or whilst out walking.

Religious education, which is often woven through the whole curriculum, was seen to offer a variety of opportunities to encounter beliefs and attitudes and was characterised by curiosity and an openness to the exploration of all faiths. The inclusion of opportunities for pupils to become spiritual leaders

1 7 Church of England Voluntary Aided primary schools; 2 Church of England Voluntary controlled primary schools; 6 Church of England Academies; 3 Catholic primary schools; 1 Methodist & Church of England and 1 Ecumenical primary school

2 For further reading on the importance of addressing this key relationship now, please see O. Marks,(2016) Passing on Faith, Theos

and/or engage with courageous advocacy through the Archbishop of York young leaders' award was noted and appreciated by both pupils and parents. Some Church of England schools spoke of the benefits of adopting the 'Understanding Christianity' approach to RE and the enthusiasm with which pupils engaged with 'I wonder' questions in school and at home.

- Parents reported with some surprise that RE is their child's favourite subject and gave examples of how this encourages children to ask profound questions at home, with resulting conversations about faith or spirituality.

Christian values: embedding values such as kindness, hospitality, humility and generosity, through all aspects of school life, and the role modelling by all members of the school community was particularly noted by parents. The nurturing community of these schools often supported the whole family, providing support that was not present elsewhere in parents' lives. Parents explained how values education influences their children's attitudes and behaviour outside school.

- Values language is adopted by pupils and brought into the home. Schools employ a variety of ways to share the values with parents/carers - through the websites, newsletters, inviting parents into worship where children were celebrated for expressing the value of the week.
- For some parents, the values promoted by the school provided their moral compass, one parent had the school values pinned up in her kitchen and would use that language to guide their children's behaviour at home.

Daily worship, in a variety of formats, and daily prayer within a community engenders a sense of belonging. It offers a space to encounter the Biblical narrative and for reflection and exploration of the school values and the spiritual dimension of life. A key element mentioned by many parents was music or singing, children sing the worship songs and hymns with enthusiasm at home.

- Parents spoke of worshipping with the school at key moments of the church's year, (Harvest, Advent – Christingle, Easter and the beginning and end of the school year, of note in only one school was their mention of the celebration of Pentecost)

- Worships celebrated by local clergy or Open the Book teams were particularly remarked upon by parents and pupils. One mother spoke of her child asking to watch Noah's Ark story on YouTube after one such worship.

Positive relationships with the local church community or others, were commented on by many parents and pupils, who appreciated members of the church community offering Godly play or Open the book, school and family worship in church. Many valued and noted a regular visible presence of clergy or members of the church community in school. Others spoke of experiences of Messy church which was promoted and supported within school.

- Parents and children spoke of 'our' church and expressed a sense of belonging developed through attendance at Messy church events, and school worships held in the church building. Parents and pupils told of how through this engagement the church community and/or local clergy had responded to their needs at times of bereavement and hardship.
- Experiences of church engendered positive attitudes to church visits and to engagement in church activities such as holiday or after school clubs.

THE MAJOR CHALLENGES

The school relationships with the local church community: There is compelling evidence of significant impact on church and school relationships when the lead clergy person at the local church does not positively engage with the local school, or is not confident about communication with children and families. This causes considerable disruption and presents a major challenge to supporting an exploration of faith and the spiritual dimension of life by children, which is sustainable beyond school. Several reasons were given for a lack of active support or engagement from a local church community.

- The local church had been closed or merged; there is no regular worshipping community or the community is small and elderly. A long interregnum can cause what is often a fragile link dependent on ordained clergy to become broken.

- A reluctance by the church community to engage because of a perception that the school families and/or the school staff were non-church going or non-Christian or non-practising Christians. This reason to explain a lack of involvement was offered by local clergy, clergy from neighbouring parishes or other denominations; head teachers; and staff.
- The many other pressures on ordained clergy time, such as funerals [staff] or for example a presence on the school gate in the morning is not possible if you are committed to celebrating a morning service at that time each morning [clergy]

Church primary schools have adopted innovative solutions. In cases where the relationship is broken one school uses the church building for worship on the 'vicar's day off', another school celebrates worship in church with a minister from a neighbouring parish or another denomination. Schools have focussed on strengthening relationships with

- ministers of other local denominations, such as Baptist, Methodist or Pentecostal
- church representatives such as churchwardens, lay readers,
- local religious communities such as local convent or ecumenical Open the Book teams, where a vibrant intergenerational relationship has developed

The benefits of these innovative solutions are mutual, for example, the local Pentecostal pastor enjoyed doing assemblies and noted that children are eager to attend his holiday club as they 'know' him. The mutual benefits of the intergenerational relationships with Open the Book or the Religious community is an area to be explored further.

Within the school community, a few head teachers and clergy identified teachers' lack of knowledge, interest and thus confidence in this area as an obstacle to supporting a child's exploration of faith and spiritual dimension of life. Some head teachers were pleased to note that the training for the Church of England Religious Education 'Understanding Christianity' syllabus had addressed this and resulted in increased confidence levels in staff.

Exposure to the rich environment of daily worship, reflection times, and experiences such as Godly play enables staff also to explore the spiritual dimension of life; several staff shared the effect this experience had on their attitudes and beliefs.

In the home environment, for some families the challenges revolved around the absence of a shared language to talk about faith or spirituality, minimal encounters with or interest in a spiritual dimension of life, and a lack of knowledge of any faith beliefs or practices. The next stage of the research will investigate further this crucial challenge and focus on identifying the ways in which church primary schools may increase the confidence with which families approach and support a child's exploration of faith and spirituality outside of school.

KEY QUESTIONS EMERGING TO BE INVESTIGATED FURTHER

- In what ways can church primary schools increase the confidence with which families support children's exploration of faith and spiritual dimension of life?
 - How can religious education and worship in school include opportunities to support school families and staff?
- What is required to enable church and church primary school relationships to be sustainable?
 - How can the local Christian community nurture church school families, particularly in areas of socio-economic deprivation?
 - What does the concept of church mean to church school families?