

The Distinctiveness of Church Schools

Church schools offer an approach to education that is distinctively Christian.

The distinctiveness of an individual school will depend on the role of the school in its community, its category (aided or controlled), and the traditions of the local church. For example if it is the only school in a village its essential service will be to the local community.

Although there are variations between one Church school and another, certain core principles and values unite all Church schools. These are the gospel values of loving God and one's neighbour, and the practical outworking of this in a school context.

The distinctive identity is enhanced by the relationship with the school's parish church or churches and in secondary schools by access to a chaplaincy serving the school. Thankfully there are also strong links between many churches and non-Church schools. In a Church school this relationship is there by right, whereas in other schools it is by invitation. The relationship is at its best when local clergy and other members of the church are a welcome and familiar presence in the school, respecting and supporting the teachers, while the school seeks to involve itself in the life and worship of the church.

All Church schools in the Diocese have adopted an ethos statement similar to the following:

Recognizing its historic foundation, the school will preserve and develop its religious character in accordance with the principles of the Church at parish and diocesan level.

The school aims to serve its community by providing 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 all its pupils.

As a minimum, every Church school should:

- ensure that the school is led by a headteacher who is committed, with the help of staff, to establish and maintain the Christian character of the school in its day to day activities and in the curriculum;
- engage meaningfully in a real act of Christian worship every day;
- offer a school life that incorporates the values of the Christian faith, for example within a child's development;
- provide a Christian understanding of the world and the place of humanity reflected in worship and the everyday life of the school;
- work within a framework of discipline that demonstrates a readiness to seek and offer forgiveness;
- have an explicit commitment to honesty and openness;
- begin to share the Christian's hope and the Christian experience that the greatest power in life and beyond it is selfless love;
- provide a knowledge of how to pray and of the liturgy (respecting those of other faiths who cannot in conscience engage in the full liturgy of Christian worship);
- provide an awareness of the challenge of the spiritual life within everyday experience;
- respect the beliefs of others and of other faiths, but is confident in its own faith, not actively seeking to convert children from the faith of their parents, but providing an experience of what it is to live in a community that celebrates the Christian faith. The school should avoid a sense of exclusion and involve the leaders of other faiths as appropriate;
- celebrate the identity and nature of culturally and ethnically diverse groups;
- be founded in a sense of the presence of God;
- ensure that religious education is given at least 5 per cent of school time and that the character and quality of religious education are a particular concern of the headteacher and the governing body;

- observe the major Christian festivals and in schools in which other faiths are present ensure that those faiths are able and encouraged to mark their major festivals with integrity;
- maintain and develop an active and affirming relationship with their parish church(es);
- proclaim that it is a Church of England school on its external signboard and on its stationery and make appropriate use of Christian symbols inside and outside the school.

Denominational Inspections have brought the distinctiveness of Church schools into focus and challenged Church schools to reflect on and develop their distinctiveness as Christian institutions.

The above is adapted from, 'The Way Ahead: Church of England schools in the new millennium', published by Church House Publishing.

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