

Celebrating Religious Education RE Festival

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Archbishop Barry Morgan

I am always impressed at the ability of young people to take centre stage and perform with genuine enthusiasm. When children sing, the words they speak seem to come from their hearts and as the children of the three choirs sang the Festival Song that has been written for the launch of 'Celebrating RE', they have laid down a particular challenge to us all. We could write a headline for today that reads "Children's choir sing about community cohesion"; although it's not exactly the catchy strap line that would sell many newspapers! If the headline read "Children build trust between faiths and cultures" then it would certainly grab my attention; and that's the purpose of this RE Festival.

This event, formally called 'Celebrating RE' is a month long celebration of religious education in England and Wales that has drawn on the expertise and enthusiasm of the RE Council for England and Wales, working in collaboration with representatives from the Wales Association of SACREs and the National Advisory Panel for Religious Education. A great deal of work has gone into planning and preparing for this event and those of us who have a

passion and an engagement with Religious Education owe you all a debt of gratitude.

So, we have a month of events to celebrate Religious Education, which is just one subject in an extensive and complicated curriculum in schools that offers every pupil in Wales a core of main subjects (English, Maths, Science and the like), that will develop key skills for learning), backed up with a variety of other subjects that can be explored. If we ever need to make a case for RE having a unique and special place within that curriculum, then the words of that Festival Song give us an inspirational starting point.

The choirs have sung to us that wherever religious education happens is the 'Place of Trust' and it is the place where learners with many different world views can meet in an open and safe environment. That might sound like a utopian dream for the world, yet this festival is underpinned by a belief and commitment that high quality Religious Education, that is well prepared and carefully delivered, can help to make this vision a reality. Let's be blunt – our vision and aspiration should be backed up by a commitment and a determination to see Religious Education of the highest quality delivered in every school in Wales.

We all carry the memories of our school days through our lives. For some of us, that will be a memory of good times and new experiences, while for others it will be quite the opposite. But those experiences of school and, often, the role played by a particular teacher, can also foster an interest in a subject that can become life-changing. An interest in science can create a generation of industrial chemists, medics and nuclear physicists, while a passion for humanities can generate those who will delve into our social history, rediscover our literature and find expression for our age through art and design. But how many of us are brave enough to say that our Religious Education helped to shape us into the people that we are today?

For some people, RE is a 'Cinderella' subject, foisted on the curriculum by legislation as long ago as 1944, to enable a core of religious knowledge to be embedded in the minds (if not the hearts) of the children and young people of our nation. The hindsight of more than half a century leaves me in awe of the vision of the legislators of the 1940's, and their far-sighted understanding of the role that RE might be able to play in moulding and shaping the future of Wales. When the legislation that gave due regard to Religious Education was formulated, there was no discussion of community cohesion or religious extremism, and the Wales that we all know today with its rainbow of colours and spectrum of faiths and cultures

was a world away. Yet that vision to provide an appropriate religious education for every school child in Wales, in a state-maintained school, whatever their background, is a commitment to the wellbeing of our nation as much as to the wellbeing of each and every one of our children.

In 2011, we can say with confidence that this is a good time to be a person of faith in Wales. Issues of faith are discussed openly and there is a welcome for faith groups to speak with Welsh Government to the highest level, with a shared commitment to work in partnership to give our children and young people the very best start in life, and equip them with knowledge, values and meaning that will equip them for the journey of their lives.

In practical terms, at local level, parents can choose education with a religious character for their children across Wales, while there is non-confessional RE in every school curriculum, appropriate to that context, reflecting the broad ranging and fundamentally inclusive nature of modern Wales.

That's why this RE Festival is so important and why it is deserving of every support and encouragement that can be

mustered, recognising that a commitment to the highest standards of religious education, is an investment in all of our futures. For those of us called to lead the faith community of Wales, our support for RE should never be seen as self-serving; rather, promoting vibrant, creative and imaginative religious education should broaden the minds of a generation, helping them to be inquisitive searchers, whose hearts and minds deserve to be fed. That's why I have such hope that this event, reaching across Wales, will inform and give richness to the curriculum that our teachers deliver and that it will help our schools to become places of exploration, humanity and shared endeavour, rather than places of narrow personal attainment.

You see, this is where high quality religious education can start to make a serious impact. We have to be honest and face up to the fact that it's possible to coach pupils through a tedious version of Religious Education which is little more than imparting a body of religious information and, despite the relatively good grades that can be attained in this way, it undermines the purpose and integrity of the subject. That's because RE can also be taught in ways that develop thinking skills and stretch pupils, bringing them to the threshold of understanding, so that they experience things that are a profound and fundamental part of human experience.

The current generation of young people in our schools will immerse themselves in a world where boundaries of nationality and culture are breaking down. Surely we have a duty to prepare them for that experience and to have a confident understanding of why their friend, work colleague, team mate or partner places such an emphasis on their faith.

Religious Education has always reflected and responded to the needs of society in Wales over the decades and great changes have taken place. This RE Festival in many ways draws attention to where we are with RE today, and the vital contribution it plays in the education of the whole person.

We are fortunate in Wales that the value of Religious Education has been recognised and supported by the Welsh Assembly Government. RE has played its part in the review of the school curriculum and is benefitting from the Exemplar Framework for Religious Education published in 2008. This is also backed up with excellent guidance documents and resources being produced by DCELLS that support the effective delivery of RE in the classroom. I would also note the work of the Church schools in Wales, with 250 denominational schools working in close partnership with local and national government to set faith at the heart of learning.

You see, all of us who know the worth and value of RE must keep emphasising that it provides an explicit context for learners to ask fundamental human and religious questions, to engage with the responses found in the beliefs and practices of others, and to consider their own personal responses. These three things are the fundamental skills of Religious Education as found in the Exemplar Framework for RE in Wales, and give a clarity and focus to the subject.

Other contributions of religious education might include preparation for the world of work, where an understanding of different religious traditions is an essential component for many jobs which interact with others from a range of backgrounds - catering, the police, teaching, nursing and medicine...the list is endless. Even at the heart of government in Wales, how better to support the Welsh Assembly Government objectives in their community cohesion policies that to equip our young people with knowledge, understanding and skills that can make such aspiration a reality.

Our Festival has been a long time in the planning and a great deal of time and effort has gone into the many events being held across the country.

This is important, because taking time now to celebrate RE means renewing our commitment to develop its impact on the children and young people we serve. We are fortunate that so much energy and enthusiasm supports the work of local SACREs in every part of Wales, playing a valuable role in ensuring that religious education meets the needs of the locality; different parts of Wales obviously have different needs – Cardiff is very different to Carmarthenshire or Gwynedd both in terms of religious traditions represented, language, and types of local resource. The work of the SACREs enables this to be addressed carefully, sensitively and appropriately.

Looking around at those of us gathered today, I see a richness and variety of faiths and traditions. That alone gives me encouragement, that we all have a shared aim and common purpose in making religious education as good as it can be. It also means that we have to take up the challenge to be part of the solution, committing ourselves to prayerful and practical support for RE in schools, at both national and local level. Let's not forget that this festival will enable us to celebrate the work of Religious Education

through to early April; the real test will be to see that continue to next year...to the next decade...to the next generation, and beyond.

In 2009, the Church in Wales completed a major review of our work in schools and education and we were bold enough to commit to encouraging high quality Religious Education that aims to enable children to learn about and learn from world religions and the distinctive Welsh inheritance of religious practice and commitment. We deemed this to be an entitlement for all children in all schools in Wales, simply because for children who are growing up within families or communities where faith is important, Religious Education should enhance their understanding of their beliefs.

For children who are growing up in families or communities where faith is not important, Religious Education can help them to understand what is significant in other peoples' lives and this should lead to better understanding within and between communities. For every pupil, it has significance in terms of understanding the heritage and cultural richness that surrounds them in Wales and in the world, and those who deny the importance of Religious Education risk denying our children and young people access to this heritage.

‘Celebrating RE’ is an opportunity for the faith community of Wales to acknowledge with gratitude the tremendous work that is going on in schools across Wales, to lead our children and young people to the threshold of a new understanding of faith and culture. It should also give us an opportunity to pledge our support in every prayerful and practical way to this cause.

That’s why I find myself returning to the Festival Song that opened this launch and which we will all have the opportunity to join in at the end. I’m inspired by the notion that the place where religious education happens is the ‘Place of Trust’ and because of that trust, it is the place where people with many different world views can meet in openness, acceptance and safety.

There are few things more inspiring than the potential that can be witnessed in a young person, with their life opening up before them. At that time of life, all things are possible and a knowledge, understanding and even an experience of faith, can inform our view of what life means to our brother, sister, friend or colleague, and that could make the difference to everything from a lifelong friendship to a business deal.

Today we can rightly 'Celebrate Religious Education', because enabling a generation of children and young people to be willing and able to share a few steps on the journey of faith and fellowship is something well worth celebrating.