

Introduction

Summaries of the legal requirements governing school worship in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and religious observance in Scottish schools, together with advice that has been issued is given on pages 1-3. These are complex, particularly in the case of England and Wales, and much ink has been spilled in trying to help schools in developing viable policies. This is not the place to pursue the intricacies of the debate, but one issue is emerging which is of such central significance that it is worthy of comment. I shall suggest that the Book of Proverbs provides a surprisingly fruitful resource for resolving a key conundrum.

SOLVING THE CONUNDRUM

The legislation applying to England and Wales and the advice issued by the Department for Education (as it was then called) in Circular 1/94 and the Welsh Office in Circular 10/94 have served to focus attention on a particular conundrum which arises out of the attempt to conduct religious worship in schools. Although this legislation and advice does not apply in Scotland and Northern Ireland, the debates that go on in these two countries show that the conundrum certainly does apply.

The heart of the puzzle lies in the fact that schools are required to fulfil two expectations at once. These are:

Firstly they are required to provide pupils with the opportunity to worship as understood in the normal and natural sense of offering reverence or veneration to a divine being or power. Furthermore the majority of the acts of worship must be of a broadly Christian character, which particularly means that they should reflect the traditions of Christian belief and must contain some elements which accord a special status to Jesus Christ. In Scotland all religious observance is meant to be of this broadly Christian character.

Secondly they are required to provide acts of worship which are appropriate for all pupils whatever their own family background. As the two Circulars put it: 'Pupils who do not come from Christian families should be able to join in the daily act of collective worship even

though this would, in the main, reflect the broad traditions of Christian belief' (paragraph 65)

What is more the joining in that is required is more than passive attendance, but should entail eliciting a response from pupils. Hence the insistence in the Circulars that worship in schools is of a different character from that taking place within a faith community. It is therefore collective, not corporate.

The conundrum is therefore this: how can worship be provided in schools that both entails worship of the Christian God, and accords special status to Jesus Christ, whilst at the same time being such that all pupils can join in whatever their family background, be that Christian or non-Christian? The tension is between providing an act of worship which is a celebration appropriate for the whole school community and, at the same time, ensuring that worship is clearly Christian in character.

The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) have recognised the difficulties this creates and have suggested that schools may need to think in terms of two separate activities. In the first the emphasis will be on broadly Christian worship and in the second the emphasis will be on the spiritual and moral development of the pupils, understood in terms that apply to all human beings irrespective of religious commitment. OFSTED inspectors have therefore been encouraged to comment positively on events which promote spiritual and moral development understood in these broad and inclusive terms of reflecting human shared values, even though they may not fulfil the letter of the law requiring an act of broadly Christian worship.

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS AS A WAY FORWARD

Perhaps surprisingly, I am going to suggest that another way of resolving this conundrum is to look to using wisdom literature like the Book of Proverbs. This makes possible one act in which the twin goals of providing opportunity for broadly Christian worship and of

promoting the spiritual and moral development of all pupils can be brought together. The reason for this lies in the very nature of the Book of Proverbs (see pages 7 and 8 for further details) as containing wisdom, most of which is shared by all human beings, but which is set in the context of the celebration of a relationship with God.

This book provides ideas for broadly Christian worship using individual proverbs from the Book of Proverbs to provide the themes. In developing these I have sought to highlight the shared wisdom and used this as a focus for spiritual and moral development. This has been done by using the proverb to promote self-knowledge on the part of the pupil and by employing reflective techniques which engage the emotions and feelings in responding to the proverb. At the same time I have, where appropriate, developed the fact that, as far as Christians are concerned, each proverb has its proper context in a relationship with God. So the seventy acts of worship in this book seek to bring together the aims of promoting the spiritual and moral development of pupils and of providing the opportunity for broadly Christian worship. In order to fulfil these two goals it is important to take account of a number of key issues.

KEY ISSUES

1) The importance of atmosphere

The atmosphere created is crucial to the success of an act of worship. The 'feel' will affect pupils' ability to reflect on what they see and hear. The atmosphere can be influenced by a number of factors:

- a) the way pupils and staff are addressed.
- b) the ethos and relationships within the school generally.
- c) the room, its physical atmosphere (e.g. stuffiness), size and arrangement.
- d) the use of music, drama, poetry and art as a focus for worship.
- e) the presence or absence of members of staff, and their degree of involvement.
- f) distracting noises.

- g) the degree of comfort for staff and children.
- h) the separation of the notices and discipline issues from the act of worship.
- i) the way pupils enter and leave.
- j) the amount of participation or passive listening.
- k) the balance between talk and silence/music.
- l) the degree to which there is a relaxed but ordered and secure environment.

Attention given to these factors can greatly increase the quality of an act of worship.

2) Promoting spiritual and moral development

If acts of worship are to contribute to pupils' spiritual and moral development, the religious material must relate to their own experience but must also take them beyond everyday experience so that they can reflect on their own values and beliefs in the light of the religious stimulus. Ways of creating appropriate opportunities for such reflection are suggested in this book, see pages 9-11 for further details.

Part of the task of promoting spiritual and moral development lies in developing a sense of community. Integral to achieving this is using acts of worship as a way of celebrating and affirming the values of the school community. Proverbs, with its concern for relationships in the family and the community, offers an ideal source of themes which allow community life to be celebrated and affirmed. Using pupils' work and achievements as part of the content of the act of worship further enhance this, as will involving visitors from the local community.

3) Respecting pupil integrity

Acts of worship must be appropriate to the family background of the pupils. This is integral to showing respect for the children and their parents. If a school can conduct its acts of worship in a way that models such respect, then the children too will be encouraged to be respectful to each other. There are probably three main ways of achieving this.

Firstly care should be taken to ensure that the type of participation that is required of children is appropriate in each case. It is very important to encourage participation by pupils and staff alike and joining in with music, readings and drama as well as bringing in items relevant to the theme are effective ways of achieving this. However there are clearly varying degrees of participation that are appropriate and care should be taken in ensuring the position of each child or teacher is respected. For example it would normally be quite appropriate to ask a child from a church going family to read a prayer, but insensitive to do so if the parents are atheists.

Secondly the use of non-inclusive language is extremely important. By this is meant that phrases such as 'we believe' or 'we will now pray' are avoided in preference for ones like 'Christians believe' and 'I am now going to say a prayer which is special to Christians.' Such language leaves both pupils and staff free to identify with the religious content or not as is appropriate to them.

Thirdly, but linked to our second point, is that it should be clear from the way an act of worship is conducted that pupils and teachers are free to respond in ways that are appropriate for them. Variety of response rather than uniformity should be the expectation of whoever is leading. Appropriate responses might be anything from simply appreciating that what has been said is important to Christians right through to adoration of God. By definition, worship can only be freely given, it cannot be compelled. Schools are required to provide the opportunity for worship to take place, no more. Participants are less likely to feel compromised if it is clear that a variety of responses are acceptable. In practice this will mean allowing pupils the freedom not to join in certain activities, but to listen quietly instead.

4) The Importance of Planning

There is no doubt that forward planning increases the quality of worship. There are always times when instant improvisation becomes essential, but as a policy it will

not do. Certainly OFSTED inspectors will be looking for clear and well understood policy statements which are being implemented in practice. Themes which have been decided in advance and rotas that give leaders plenty of notice are also important

It is also helpful if a system of recording is instituted. Probably the best way to do this is to have ready printed forms available which teachers can fill in quickly for recording the content of each act of worship. In time the forms can become the basis of a long term plan, with ideas that have worked well being arranged into themes. The forms can be printed five to a page to make a weekly assembly diary.

AND FINALLY

Two other important points need to be borne in mind:

1) Worship and RE are not the same

Acts of worship can certainly stimulate follow-up work for RE. They can also incorporate and celebrate work done by pupils in RE. But they are not the same as RE and must not be confused with it. The law requires both RE and worship to take place in school, but at different times. The difference is that worship is concerned with celebration of, and reflective responses to, religious themes whereas RE involves study of them.

2) Worship and Assembly are not the same

The law requires a daily act of worship, or in Scotland a weekly act of religious observance. Assemblies can take place in addition, but these do not have a religious focus and include such activities as routine notices and disciplinary matters. The difficulty is that most teachers refer to the act of worship or religious observance as assembly, both because it is less of a mouthful and because it sounds a lot more friendly. In the rest of this book we shall embrace this custom and therefore refer to what are in fact acts of worship as assemblies. However it is not to be forgotten that we are meaning the religious and not the secular version.