

# Re-framing collective worship in Plymouth schools

## Guidelines from Plymouth SACRE to Schools and Academies following the Plymouth Agreed Syllabus and to all schools promoting the value of collective worship

'Our fragmented society needs a whole series of reflective pools, places where the very deepest issues of life and death may be explored and understood away from the market place'. Terry Waite

### Background and Context

SACRE hopes that this document will provide schools with a timely reminder; some useful guidelines and a summary of best practice to support them in the planning and delivery of good quality Collective Worship. Collective Worship which offers a unique contribution to the preparation of our young people for the opportunities and challenges they face in twenty-first century Britain

Questions and issues around Collective Worship remain complex and often contentious. The aim of this short guidance document is to provide support and encouragement for all schools. Enabling them, within the busy school curriculum, to provide a vital and unique opportunity to celebrate and reflect upon the School or Academy's ethos and values. Timeless and eternal values which contribute to the Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) development of all pupils and the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and respect for all.

Three years ago, Plymouth SACRE, through some creative and innovative work at Hyde Park Infants School, produced an excellent Collective Worship resource Programme which contained a wealth of material and advice.

From more recent local research, we know that approaches to Collective Worship in Plymouth schools are variable. Some schools provide a daily act of worship, which may be whole school, key stage or in individual classes, whilst other schools struggle to maintain a regular programme.

The aim of this document is not to set out the history and detail of the legal status of Collective Worship but to examine some key issues which may lead to misconceptions about the nature of Collective Worship and misunderstandings about its practise and application in schools today.

## The legal position and legislation

The current Government continues to direct those enquiring about Collective Worship in schools, to the now famous, Circular 1/94 (January 1994).

The Circular states on page 20, under paragraph 50...

*Aims: "Collective worship in schools should aim to provide opportunity for pupils to worship God, to consider spiritual and moral issues and to explore their own beliefs; to encourage participation and response, whether through active involvement in the presentation of worship or through listening to and joining in the worship offered; and to develop community spirit, promote a common ethos and shared values, and reinforce positive attitudes"*

And under paragraph 51...

*"All registered pupils attending a maintained school should take part in daily collective worship." Education Reform Act 1988*

The Circular goes on to define the character of Collective Worship as needing to be *"wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character"*.

Over the past three decades these short, statements have become increasingly challenging and problematic for many schools across the country.

We hope that by clarifying some of the key terms and re-framing them, we can support schools towards Collective Worship programmes that provide meaningful and stimulating experiences for all pupils; celebrate the values and ethos of the school and, importantly, that are in line with the latest Government advice on the status of Collective Worship.

The most recent statement was issued by the Department for Education in April 2102;

*"The Government believes that the requirement for collective worship in schools and Academies encourages pupils to reflect on the concept of belief and the role it plays in the traditions and values of this country. We have no plans to change the current requirement for the daily act of worship...The law is both inclusive and flexible in allowing schools to tailor their provision to suit their pupils' needs and provide a unique opportunity for schools to develop and celebrate the school's or Academy's ethos and values."*

## The Meaning of Collective Worship – some key extracts

Paragraph 57 of Circular 1/94 states:

*"Worship" is not defined in the legislation and in the absence of any such definition it should be taken to have its natural and ordinary meaning. That is, it must in some*

*sense reflect something special or separate from ordinary school activities and it should be concerned with reverence or veneration paid to a divine being or power. However, worship in schools will necessarily be of a different character from worship amongst a group with common beliefs. The legislation reflects this difference in referring to “collective worship” rather than “corporate worship.”*

Today, creating a special time in the school day for all pupils and staff to come together to celebrate, share and reflect on universal and enduring values is precious indeed. At such times we can remind ourselves of eternal principles which highlight what is of value and importance and what is ultimately worth doing. When we direct all of our attention and being to that which is worthy and praiseworthy; hoping and trusting that these very values and truths will guide and unite us, it can be regarded as worship.

Traditionally and for many people today, the source and focus of such worship will be found in God, Jesus, the Prophet(s) the Buddha but for others it might be in the natural world and in Humanity itself.

For Collective Worship to be truly collective and not corporate, we must ensure that our focus allows for this breadth and depth. When we gather we do so as a group of individuals, with different beliefs, views and theories. We are not a single group united by a common faith and set of beliefs as within a religious services in a church, synagogue, mosque or temple.

Worship comes from the Old English word, Weorthscipe. Weorth means worth, merit, honour and respect. Scipe is the old suffix - ship, the state of, formed and shaped by.

We shape and form ourselves by turning to and revering that we deem to be worthy and honourable.

Giving time for meaningful reflection through words, music or silence can create the opportunity for worship. Through Collective Worship we invite pupils to share, in their own way, the inclusive meaning and message we offer. There can be no compunction or subtle persuasion to induct children and young people into an act of faith. Our planning and approach must be inclusive and not exclusive. When planning, content, resources and format must be carefully tailored to meet the needs of all children.

Without Collective Worship a precious opportunity is missed to bring the school together, united in the promotion and celebration of shared values. Enabling everyone to feel and know that we matter, intrinsically, as human beings. To appreciate that each one of us is unique and that each has something to offer can be both grounding and transcendental.

When we touch the humanity we all share we also come closer to that which is defined as spiritual. And when we come to experience that place within ourselves where we know, deeply, that we belong to something greater than ourselves, we may also discover a source of inner strength.

Viktor Frankl, the eminent psychotherapist, humanist and Auschwitz survivor said that, “An essential element of the good life is the feeling that you are the captain of your soul, and that in the end things can be all right inside you whatever happens outside.”

To negotiate this complex and challenging world our young people will need to become resilient and wise; captains of their souls! Collective Worship can help bring our lives into focus, allowing us to see ourselves within a larger and more enduring reality.

*“Wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character”* This phrase continues to create for some, limitations and obstacles but it need not cause us undue concern if we understand and appreciate the possibilities it affords us.

To begin with, the law states that, *“the majority of acts of worship over a term must be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character.”* This natural bias towards the principal faith of this country should also be reflected in the balance of the Religious Education Agreed syllabus. Just over half the syllabus should be concerned with exploring Christianity, in a broad diversity of forms. Collective Worship too, should reflect the broad traditions of Christianity and not be distinctive of any one particular denomination.

There is also mention in the Circular of the special status of Jesus Christ. This can be acknowledged too, with appropriate skill and sensitivity; drawing out teachings, stories and wisdom, although rooted in Christianity, yet speaking to pupils of all faiths and to those with none.

As a balance to these statements, which may, for some, imply a narrowing of the scope of Collective Worship, the following paragraph is worth pausing to consider. Under paragraph 63 it states that;

*“Provided that, taken as a whole, an act of worship which is broadly Christian reflects the traditions of Christian belief, it need not contain only Christian material. Section 7 (1) is regarded as permitting some non-Christian elements in the collective worship without thus depriving it of its broadly Christian character. Nor would the inclusion of elements common to Christianity and one or more other religions deprive it of that character. It must, however, contain some elements which relate specifically to the traditions of Christian belief and which accord a special status to Jesus Christ.”*

To illustrate a possible response along these lines, a leader of Collective Worship might say something like...

”As we know Jesus is a very special person for Christians and for people of other faiths or no faith, too. For Christians he is the Son of God, for others he is often regarded as a great teacher and leader. Our whole way of life in this country, even our public and school holidays are ordered around important events in his life. He taught about serving and loving others. On the night before he died he taught his followers about another commandment or rule to follow. He washed the feet of his disciples and said that they were to love one another and that their love for each other would be a sign that they were true followers.

Now, I know some of you are Christians or from Christian families but whether we are Christian or not, this is a very special way of living that Jesus spoke about. I wonder how easy or difficult you think it is for us to be kind to one another, even for a day!?

From Islam, The Prophet Muhammed said that to offer a smile to someone is an act of kindness and generosity. As we have a little time for silence now, I would like you all to think about what I have said and then we are going to sing a song about it.”

### **Introducing Prayer – some examples**

It is extremely important that those leading Collective Worship or inviting others to do so, should understand the place of prayer.

The introduction of prayer is often seen to be at the heart of Collective Worship. However, not every session needs to include it. Prayer can be used in a variety of ways and may, for some, be more akin to wishes, hopes and a vision for the future. This is fine. Whatever we call the activity, in drawing upon sources of prayer the words we use will require skill and sensitivity.

So, something like...

‘I am going to read a prayer from the Christian faith, which may be very familiar to some of you but I would like us all to listen and think about what this means for each one of us today’. At the end of the prayer Christians often say, “Amen” which means, “I agree” or “Yes, indeed”. So, if you would like to say that out loud, or quietly to yourself or just remain thoughtful; these are all suitable responses.”

---

‘This morning I am going to share some words by Mahatma Gandhi. He was a very famous and inspirational leader from India, and was a member of the Hindu religion. I know we have some children in our school who are Hindu but whatever our faith or beliefs I think we can all learn from these wise words. So I want us all to think about them quietly...’

---

Perhaps with the introduction of a bell, gong or the lighting of a special candle, (safely at the front!) a period of silence can be established. Then...”While we are quiet, I would like you to listen to a song, it comes from the Jewish religion and is about the importance of peace. I think this is very important to us all in the world at

the moment, so whilst we listen let us all think about what we can each do to make our school a more peaceful place where everyone feels welcome.”

---

Following a Buddhist Faith Speaker who took a whole school Assembly on the life of the Buddha. Mention was made of the importance of kindness and compassion for all beings, even animals

“Even though we are not Buddhists and I don’t think we have any Buddhist children in the school I know we can all learn from what we have heard about being kind to one another. In fact one of our school rules says that....

So let’s all either say a quiet prayer now, to ourselves, or think quietly about what we have heard this morning. Jesus also said that being kind to each other was very important.”

We need to remember that it is the private response of each participant that constitutes worship. If each person has the opportunity to make their own response then no one is excluded by their religious or non-religious stance.

*“I do not pray in order to change God’s mind, but to change my own.” C. S. Lewis*

---

With older children especially, Humanist or atheist sources should also be considered especially when universal, human and shared values are promoted.

The Dalai Lama once said that it is far better to be a compassionate Humanist than an angry Buddhist!

Albert Einstein offers us this for reflection, he said, “It is everyone’s obligation to put back into the world at least the equivalent of what he or she takes out of it.” He went on to declare that, “I am a deeply religious non- believer; this is somewhat a new kind of religion!” We might explore that today this “new kind of religion” has a wide appeal and many followers.

---

### **A brief word about withdrawal**

Schools should ensure that parents are made aware of the legal right to withdraw their child(ren) from Collective Worship, in the same way as they do from Religious Education.

However, SACRE would hope that parents, aware of the value and profound educational contribution of Collective Worship to SMSC development, would choose to opt in!

The following extract summarises the key aspects and characteristics of a re-framed and re-visited approach to Collective Worship. It comes from an important, much longer paper, written by Julie Grove, an Independent RE Consultant.

Plymouth SACRE hopes that in providing the above clarification, together with the following guidelines, schools, teachers and pupils will gain a deeper appreciation of the value and importance of Collective Worship.

### **Collective Worship:**

- is collective and educational rather than corporate and religiously devotional;
- offers opportunities to pupils that are different from other learning experiences;
  - promotes pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, encouraging them to know themselves and have respect for others;
- creates opportunities for pupils to consider their own beliefs and values, both religious and secular;
- encourages a reflective approach to living and deepens every individual's capacity for emotional response;
- helps pupils to consider what it means to be human;
- offers a school opportunities to articulate its ethos, shared values, (British values) and build a sense of community;
- should draw on a rich variety of religious and spiritual sources, reflecting diversity whilst recognising the significance of Christianity and the position of Jesus;
- can include elements of conventional worship, if used appropriately, including prayer, music, drama, but does not have to do so; however, time for reflection enhances the potential for SMSC development;
- should interest and inspire young people, whether from religious backgrounds or not;
- should not undermine or compromise the values of the family from which the child comes;
- should not be actively intended to promote religious faith or commitment.

It is noted that **best practice** in the provision of Collective Worship depends on:

- a commitment from senior leaders to the value of collective worship;
- thorough planning to meet the needs of the particular school and its pupils and community;
- educational use of religious and other material, ensuring variety in its form and presentation;
- an open approach that gives pupils opportunities to respond and get involved, without compromising them in any way;
- taking advantage of the freedom to provide collective worship at any time of day and in any school group;
- taking every opportunity to interest and inspire pupils.

*Extract from; "Collective worship Re-visited – a Paper for all who are or should be interested in Collective worship" a joint document from the National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (NASACRE) and the Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants (AREIAC) by Julie Grove, 2012*

For further information about Collective Worship or any of the issues raised in this document, please contact Plymouth SACRE.

Email: [sacre@plymouth.gov.uk](mailto:sacre@plymouth.gov.uk)

Or telephone 01752 304163 - Democratic Support Officer for SACRE

**Plymouth SACRE Collective Worship working party - November 2017**