

## ***A School Multifaith Audit***

In a large majority of rural East Anglian schools there is no significant multiethnic presence. Schools may therefore be unaware of the practical problems which may be faced by believers from different faith communities as they join the school. Why not conduct a school faith audit to discover if you are “faith friendly”?

### **METHOD**

You must first determine whether you are conducting a full faith audit, or researching a specific faith. The audit can be a useful way of summarising work undertaken on one faith. Pupils need to gather as much information as possible about how beliefs affect lifestyle (taking care, if possible, to distinguish between beliefs and national customs). This should then be applied to their knowledge of the school. At the end of the process pupils could be encouraged to produce a school faith audit for the attention of the headteacher and governors. The following areas of school life can be researched:

**(a) School Uniform.** Would distinctive forms of dress be permissible under school regulations e.g. Muslim girls wearing a shalwar or trousers instead of a skirt, Sikh boys wearing a patka, Plymouth Brethren girls wearing a headscarf? Would a Sikh be asked to remove their kara in the mistaken belief it was merely jewellery? Some colours may not be appropriate for different faith communities e.g. Muslims tend to avoid wearing red, while white is a colour of mourning for Hindus. Sometimes a Hindu boy may be found to be wearing a sacred thread of his caste under his clothes, and this could be a potential danger during PE.

**(b) School Meals.** (see also the page on food). Is there any type of meat (pork, beef) your chosen faith community will not eat? Does meat have to be halal or kosher? Remember meat and milk dishes

cannot be mixed at one meal in Jewish cookery. Are special kitchen conditions needed for preparing food (especially kosher kitchens)? What fats are used in cooking ( e.g. vegetable fats should be used rather than animal fats). Is there always a vegetarian option available which has not been “contaminated” by contact with other dishes (such contamination may simply be using one ladle for several dishes, or putting a meat based gravy over vegetables)? Can you guarantee that any other foodstuffs which include fat, (biscuits, crisps, ice-cream etc), have “pure” ingredients? Is there a preferred method of eating e.g. Indians at home may eat with their right hand rather than cutlery, and young children may be confused by this.

**(c) Collective worship and RE.** Would pupils from other faith communities be able to stay in your assemblies or RE or would their parents withdraw them? What would happen to them if parents did withdraw them? How do you store and treat the sacred artefacts of faith communities which you use in RE?

**(d) The building itself.** Is there anything in the layout of the building which could cause problems e.g. Muslims would not wish to use toilets which faced in the direction of Mecca. Some faith communities have a different sense of hygiene, and believers would wish to wash their private parts after going to the toilet - is this possible without causing embarrassment? If you have showers, (or are visiting the swimming

pool) are these facilities communal or individual?

**(e). Curriculum.** (see the separate page on Art). Christian groups such as the Plymouth Brethren would not wish to use ICT. What problems could PE lessons cause ( e.g. sportswear, changing facilities, boys and girls doing PE together, swimming)? Some Indians find body contact sports such as football repugnant - are there alternatives available? Would believers be able to participate in Sex Education lessons? What are your school displays like (e.g. an alphabet frieze with "P is for pig" could be very offensive)? What do you make during food technology sessions?

**(f). Religious Festivals.** What are the main festivals and fasts of your chosen faith and their worship practices? What would happen if a major religious festival fell on a school day? What would be the problems if older Muslim children were fasting during Ramadan (although this does not usually begin until the age of twelve it is possible this would happen in a primary school)? What about Jewish children who would want to get home before sunset on winter Fridays for Shabbat? Would there be facilities for Muslim children who wished to follow their pattern of Salah (prayer five times a day)? What would be the reaction if girls came into school with their hands covered in irremovable henna patterns?

**(g) Language.** Be careful not to make ethnic assumptions here! Faiths are complex and one may meet up with e.g. Christians from any nationality - do not automatically equate nationality and faith! Many young believers will spend time after school or at weekends learning the language of their sacred scriptures and worship (Hebrew, Arabic, Gurmukhi). However, it is also true that English may not be the first language in their homes (Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi and Gujarati are the most common languages spoken at home) . What problems may this cause the school and the child? Do

forms etc ask for "Christian names" rather than "forenames"? Do those people who will be looking at pupil admission forms know about the variety of proper names? (For example Sikh personal given names are both male and female, whilst males all have the name Singh and females the name Kaur which they may use as a surname or a middle name. So Mr Dandi may come to register his children with you as Manjit Kaur and Khushwant Singh.)

## POSSIBLE PITFALLS

- Do not inadvertently promote racism. The audit aims to help pupils empathise with children of their own age from other faith communities, not point them out as strange and different.
- Don't just keep asking what the believers are doing or needing, find out why. The "why" is the RE!
- Be careful to distinguish between beliefs and national custom e.g. Islam requires grown-up girls to keep all of their body covered except their face and hands, but national customs will dictate the *style* of dress that is worn.

## RESOURCES

You need access to as many books on your chosen faith and its practices as possible for this exercise.

Some books will actually deal with the audit questions for you in a very clear way; an extremely helpful resource for **Islam** is: "**The Muslim Guide**" by Mustafa Yusuf McDermott & Muhammad Manazir Ahsan, published by the Islamic Foundation ISBN 0860370577.

A general guide for teachers in multifaith schools which is helpful, but I suspect far too complex in layout for your pupils to use, is "**Religion in the Multifaith School**" edited by W. Owen Cole. Hulton Educational. ISBN 0717511596.