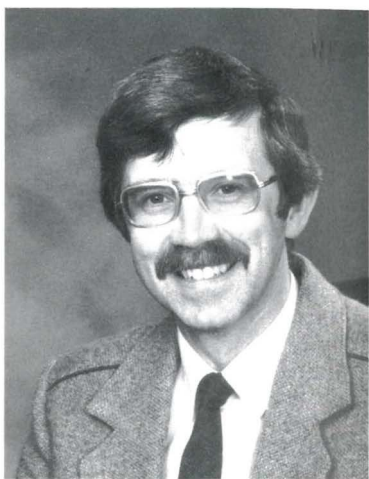


Can our Children Worship?

by Trevor Cooling

Dr Trevor Cooling is Head of The Stapleford Centre, an institute which promotes Christian developments in education through publications, research and training. He is also a Special Lecturer in the University of Nottingham School of Education. He is author of A Christian Vision for State Education (SPCK).



Worship in schools has been the subject of much recent debate in which strong feelings have been expressed by faith communities and educational professionals. The complexity of the legal requirements has caused confusion and uncertainty and OFSTED reports show that many schools are still not fulfilling their obligations in this area. In this article Trevor Cooling defends school worship from charges that it is counter-productive and calls for the Church to support those who endeavour to provide opportunities for young people to experience spiritual depth.

Five hundred teenagers sat listening to their Head of Biology in assembly. As part of a series focusing on disability, he was sharing his experience of the reality of God in his family's life. Eight weeks earlier his seventeen-year-old daughter had died.

All her life, she and her parents had struggled with her spina bifida. As he gave his Christian testimony, the silence was such that you could have heard a pin drop. The atmosphere was electric with a sense of the presence of God.

It was the week before Easter. Five hundred teenagers were packed into the local church for worship. Traditional hymns celebrating the victory of Christ had been selected for their message and their musical appeal. This was a great moment in the life of the church, a chance to share the gospel with a generation that rarely heard it. Everyone stood for the first hymn. Again you could have heard a pin drop. A few loyal adults sang to the best of their ability, but their efforts were overwhelmed by the resistant silence of the bored teenagers who had been marched to the church by their school to experience "Christian worship".

The Silence that Divides

Both these stories are drawn from my own personal experience of running the assembly programme in a large secondary school. The common factor was the silence that was generated by my attempt to create an experience of Christian worship for my students. However, this silence was of a totally different nature in the two cases. In the first, it reflected a sense of the reality of the Christian experience of God beginning to impinge on a secularised audience. In the second, it reflected the irrelevance of a particular form of Christian worship for secularised young people. It should surely be of the greatest concern to the Christian Church that the worship that happens in schools should create silences of the first kind and not of the second kind.

The Law

Britain is unique in requiring that its schools provide a daily act of worship for every pupil. The legal obligations schools have to fulfil are extremely complex, but the main requirement is that what takes place should "be concerned with reverence or

veneration paid to a divine being or power". Furthermore, the majority of these acts of worship should be "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character".

However, this is balanced by a requirement that what is done should be appropriate for every pupil in the sense that they can all worship with integrity, irrespective of their own personal faith background, be that Hindu, Muslim, Christian, atheist or whatever. This has led many people to ask which God can actually be worshiped in schools? In considering this question, a High Court judge concluded that the Secretary of State for Education has, in the case of each school, "to be satisfied that the being or power was God with a broadly Christian character". One wonders whether David Blunkett had been informed of the need for such theological insight when he was first offered the Education brief!

A Contentious Issue

The law on school worship is highly contentious. In recent days, the Church of England and the National Association of Headteachers have locked horns over it, with the Church defending it and the headteachers wanting radical reform.

The headteachers are angry at being required to achieve the impossible by hopelessly confused legislation. They also see school worship as counter-productive in its effects. Their spokesperson recently wrote that the "march in, sing, pray, listen, march out" experience will only trivialise worship in our young people's eyes.

On the other hand, the Church emphasises the spiritual vacuum in so many people's lives today. In its eyes, it is desperately important that this unique opportunity to offer young people space for deep reflection and for experiencing the power of worship in human life should not be lightly thrown away. The Church recognises that running school worship is not easy, but argues that the difficulties are exaggerated. As the General Secretary of the Board of Education recently put it: "Problems come not with the

law itself, but with comparatively narrow interpretation of the law".

A Way Forward?

Following the Dunblane massacre, a short article appeared in the Baptist Times. In it, John Drane described being at the gates of the primary school with a group of teenage boys. They were fumbling and awkward, unsure how to handle their emotions. Seeing John Drane's clerical collar, they said to him, "you know what to say". So he led this huddle of secularised youth in prayer. Here the Church and the world of youth met in meaningful interaction.

This encounter is a symbol of the challenge facing the Church in its relationship with the wider society. Increasing numbers of people are finding the forms of traditional Christian worship irrelevant and unhelpful. It is not that these forms are in themselves wrong or inadequate, but rather that the culture of most people makes them seem irrelevant and distant. Put starkly, people simply don't know how to approach God through the traditional forms. However the spiritual needs of people are as great as they have ever been and will surface in powerful and unexpected new forms at moments of crisis. So, the experience of the lads of Dunblane was replicated millions of times in the spiritual angst that followed the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. The challenge is to find ways of creating meaningful interaction between the traditional forms of Christian worship and a generation which has lost touch with the culture of the Church and its trappings of worship. Perhaps more than anywhere else, the opportunity is there in school worship.

So I want to support the Church of England in its attempt to prevent us losing school worship. It is, perhaps, the last context where all youngsters have an opportunity to experience spiritual depth in an increasingly trivial world. At the same time I have great sympathy for the concerns expressed by headteachers. Relying on the rituals of the past in the nostalgic hope that it "will do them good" will only reinforce the cultural divide

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between Church and society. Ritual is important in everyone's life. But meaningless ritual is the death of the spiritual life.

The challenge for those leading school worship is to be able to engage with the cultural world of modern youth in a meaningful way. Their goal is to create an awe-filled silence through which God can speak, rather than the bored silence that is so often found in school assembly halls and which drowns his voice. Fortunately there are increasingly numbers of gifted Christians, including teachers, clergy and schools workers, who can cross the cultural gap between Church and young people and lead school worship. We should be offering them all the support we can in their pioneering work.