

LIFE IN ALL ITS FULLNESS

The Free Churches and schools: a report and
recommendations from the Free Church Education
Committee

Free Church Education Committee

I have come in order that you might have life - life in all its fullness.

John 10.10, Good News Bible

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Preface

In 2010 the Free Church Education Committee published *A Free Church Voice on Education*. This discussion paper challenged Free Church Christians to think about the nature, purpose and role of a nonconformist Christian voice on matters to do with education.

The paper argued that the Free Churches were:

1. FREE *FROM* the Establishment, working to nonconformist convictions
2. FREE *TO* put forward Christian perspectives
3. FREE *FOR* the promotion of the good of all
4. FREE *FOR* the future.

In exploring the theological and historical underpinnings of these principles, the Free Church Education Committee set out to enter into creative dialogue with those in the churches who have an interest in education.

A Free Church Voice in Education stated:

A Free Church voice in education should include the maxim ‘what is to be valued is worth measuring, rather than valuing only what can be measured’. Education is about the whole person, not just literacy and numeracy, important though they are. Every good gift and potential in a child should be developed. Jesus said that he came so that people could live life in all its fullness (John 10.10). Much of what is of value defies any kind of measurement; this includes spiritual development, yet without such development what can be measured loses much of its importance.

Equipping children and young people to live life in all its fullness is, we argue, the most important purpose of education. The document explores the theological starting-points for our interest in schools, the context in which schools operate, the structures and accountability of schools, curriculum, the place of religions, and how Free Churches might support schools in their work.

Recommendations are made for further work, with the aim of equipping the Free Churches for constructive and thoughtful engagement with schools, in the outworking of their distinctive vocation.

1. What underpins this document theologically?

There has been a long connection, and at times a partnership, between the Free Churches and the world of education. This relationship, however, is not without its tensions, particularly in present times. Those in schools know the pressure of financial cutbacks, of a drive to meet ever higher targets, of the emphasis on preparing young people for the life of work, but education has always had a greater, more holistic purpose.

Jesus talks about “Life in all its fullness”, or “abundant life”, and a Free Church understanding of education has this at its heart. We believe every child and young person is created in the image of God, has potential and God-given talents (many of which may not be recognised in any official accreditation), and each individual is so much more than a number on a spreadsheet.

Education that takes seriously the call to live life in all its **fullness** nurtures all facets of the person: the intellectual, the physical, the emotional, and has at its heart the spiritual. There is an understanding that children cannot learn if they are hungry, if their home is an unsafe place, if they are not loved. Education that espouses a vision of life in all its fullness has a concern for all aspects of the child’s experience and context. It is so much more than instilling knowledge, or an instrumental approach to preparing young people for the world of work.

Alongside the desire to see schools as places that are truly life-giving, there is a call for leaders and stakeholders to adopt an attitude of humility and to lead justly. Involvement in the education of children and young people calls for self-giving and sacrifice. The shepherd in John 10, knows that he may be called upon to lay down his life for his sheep, and to be prepared to do this not just for those who are favoured - the inner circle - but for all.

If the Free Churches follow God's call to serve the schools in their communities, and in the country, that service will not be without cost. The work is hard and may, at times, appear to bring no obvious rewards. Those who follow Jesus, however, know that the call is there to be answered, and the rewards are greater than any material ones could possibly be. Jesus came to bring life – life in all its fullness – and, in following Jesus, this must be the desire for every child and young person in our schools.

2. What are the influences on young people and their education today?

There is a temptation for every adult generation to think that it is harder for their children and young people to grow up and flourish than it was in their own day. Certainly the factors that influence young people and their education today are many, complex and powerful, even if some are constant in every generation.

If the Church and individual Christians do not engage with the various contexts in which children and young people live, then we are in danger of missing important factors that have an impact on the lives of children and families throughout the United Kingdom today. From the perspective of the Free Churches, human flourishing is part of the expression of God's kingdom which is offered to all. When the conditions in which people live are not conducive to human flourishing, and where poverty is real, then priorities other than education have a tendency to take over. One of the marks of the Free Churches' mission is to become the voice of the voiceless as they walk alongside those in need.

Family is arguably still the most powerful influence on how children and young people grow, learn and develop. We now know much more about the genetic factors underlying family characteristics and behaviour, but within those constraints, the ways in which parents, siblings and the extended family influence children and their development are enormously powerful. Young children learn by copying and by example, by hearing and talking, by interaction and stimulus. The range, frequency and quality of all these profoundly shape the habits, speech, opportunities and learning of children; how children develop the aptitudes, skills and dispositions which affect their education and life chances.

It remains true that the socio-economic context of families is itself influential in how well parents can provide for their children and their education. Inequalities of wealth and opportunity thus help to shape the nature of children's learning and development, including their health and nutrition, which are key factors in learning.

In the UK in 2013/14, nine out of every class of thirty children were living in poverty. According to *End Child Poverty* (www.endchildpoverty.org.uk), that is 3.7 million children. The rise and fall in employment, the quality of housing, even the geography of the UK, affect the extent and quality of opportunities that families can provide for to their children. Today, however, this age-old factor of family and social background is exacerbated by extra pressures of mobility, migration, changes in policy on benefits, the freer regulation of social relationships and policy changes in education.

Beyond the family group, the community also remains an influence on the development of the young. There is a saying, quoted by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, and Hilary Clinton - amongst others - that "It takes a village to educate a child". Expectations and standards of behaviour and language, what is regarded as the norm, the established boundaries of what is acceptable, all these condition a young person's spiritual, moral, social and cultural growth, and inform their judgements.

Within their community in general, many young people still find their faith community is also an important influence, often mediated or reinforced by their family's faith allegiance. Historically the Christian Church in Britain has provided a culture, a vocabulary, a narrative and social framework within which people have understood themselves and their place in the world, and this has conditioned the way in which they have brought young people up. The churches have provided educational institutions of many kinds to give children and young people knowledge and understanding, wisdom and grace, a faith and a purpose in life. Much of this work remains, particularly in the school system, but the wider impact of the churches and the range of their institutional work has diminished in the past seventy years, particularly in higher education. At the same time, the presence of other faith communities has reinvigorated aspects of faith community influence on the development of young people, and this is to be greatly welcomed.

Peer pressure is another constant influence. Children and young people are highly sensitive to what their friends and peer group think, say and do. They always have been. Today however the extent and depth of peer pressure is unprecedented

because of both the media in general - TV, music and magazines for example - and of social media in particular. The pros and cons of the effect social media has on all of us, and on the young especially, need no rehearsal here, but it cannot be stressed too highly how influential and new such pressure on young people is.

To return to policy, there have been recent and dramatic educational policy changes that influence young people and their education. The extent and nature of parental choice is one such change. The variety of schools is enormous compared with just thirty years ago. 'Academisation' - to use a shorthand term - has changed the face of what was once a more coherent and more easily understood and accessed education service. The capacity of parents to navigate the much more fragmented provision today, and its variable costs, nature and quality, highly influences the kind of educational outcomes a child achieves. The emphasis on achievement in certain areas of education, notably English and Maths, the introduction of the English Baccalaureate, and performance tables to measure school accountability are also highly influential factors. A combination of these factors serve to emphasise a utilitarian approach to education and its prime purpose in serving the economy. It is all about getting a good job. The curriculum is consequently narrowed with the result that the way in which some young people may be able to develop their own gifts and talents is inhibited. These factors can increase stress, cause mental health problems, and lead to a greater difference between winners and losers.

Ten percent of school pupils aged between 5 and 16 have a diagnosable mental illness, and 75% of children and young people with mental health problems are not receiving treatment (mqmentalhealth.org, 2017). The mental health of young people is a growing area of concern, a situation exasperated by the diminishing provision of support provided by State-funded agencies.

3. How are schools organised?

(N.B. This section, along with much of the detail in the report, relates to schools in England. The devolved Governments in Scotland and Wales have made different arrangements).

Since the early part of the 20th Century, the provision of schools in the maintained sector has been driven by the State, working in partnership with others, particularly with faith bodies. Over the last thirty years, the State's involvement in education has been characterised by a concern about the effectiveness of schools, not least when UK educational achievement is compared against international benchmarks. This has led to an increasing involvement by central Government in the provision of schools, the content of the curriculum, the assessment of learning and a much more prominent inspection regime.

People who went to school in the 1970s, or earlier, had a recognisably similar classroom experience to their parents and grandparents, with blackboards, talk and chalk. In the last few years, schools have been places of rapid and almost constant change such that it is now difficult for people who have been out of school for even only a few years to recognise much of the language of contemporary schooling; it is even difficult for parents to be able to help their children with their homework.

School provision

Since the early part of the 21st Century, there has been a revolution in school provision, particularly marked by the 2010 Academies Act, which has led to the fragmentation of the school system, and the diversification of providers in State-funded education.

Local Authorities

Since 2008, the reduction in Local Authority funding in England has led to a significant reduction in the capacity of Local Government to offer an education function. This is partly due to the reduction in central Government funding but also an impact of the Academies' programme as Local Authorities can no longer top-slice the funding for schools which have moved outside their control. Some Local Authorities have embraced the change of role by creating high quality services which their local academies are keen to purchase. Others have floundered, even though they are still responsible for the performance of (their own) local schools, they are not resourced to support improvement.

Local Authorities still have responsibility for the strategic overview of education in their area, including pupil place planning, special educational needs and setting up a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE). In most Local Authorities, education is a subset of Children's Services and includes welfare and safeguarding. This can have an impact on the Authority's Ofsted rating. There is a good summary of the ongoing role of Local Authorities in education here:

https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/118245/Education-in-partnership-Local-Authority-education-duties-v2.pdf

Voluntary Aided (VA), Voluntary Controlled (VC) and Foundation schools

Local Authorities have run schools in partnership with others for over seventy years. Overwhelmingly, these are partnerships with faith bodies although there are ancient trusts, such as Greycoat or Skinners, which are still closely associated with the foundation of schools. VA schools have a majority of governors appointed by the foundation, whereas in a VC school, foundation governors will be in the minority. VA school governing bodies, or boards, have the responsibility for overseeing admissions to the school and for appointing staff, whereas in a VC school, these are both functions of the Local Authority. A VA school must follow the Religious

Education syllabus directed by its authority: in Church of England and Catholic schools, this is usually the Diocesan syllabus, but in a VC school, the Locally Agreed Syllabus for RE must be followed. The school's foundation is recorded in its Trust Deed and this informs the funding agreement if it becomes an academy.

Academies

Academies are State schools which receive their funding directly from the Government and have greater freedoms with regard to staffing and curriculum. They were originally introduced by the Labour Government, through the Learning and Skills Act 2000, as a strategy to improve the most challenging schools by giving head teachers more flexibility and the opportunity to enter into partnership with willing experts from the worlds of business and industry. In 2010, the coalition Government extended this possibility so that most schools could become independent of the Local Authority either as stand-alone academies, if they were already successful, or under the sponsorship of another school or Multi Academy Trust (MAT) if they needed to improve. Because of the protections and economies of scale, individual schools and small groups are increasingly forming larger MATs. One of the advantages to the school of becoming an academy is that the funding comes directly from central Government. Academy budgets gain approximately ten percent funding which Local Authorities otherwise topslice from the Designated Schools Grant for the area. By January 2018, almost 8000 schools had converted; this represents most secondary schools but only 25% primary schools in England.

The evidence as to whether the academies' programme has improved schools is complex, contested and often politicised. It is not clear that it has done so but equally it is too simple to assert that it has not. As the academies' programme has grown, so have the mechanisms for oversight and accountability. Although originally promoted as trimming the fat from the expensive Local Authority model, academies have generated new oversight structures of National and Regional School Commissioners with teams of staff across the country. Additionally, groups of academies are expected to show that they have a strong focus on school improvement through their design of structures and designated staffing. At local level, further challenge is added through the layers of reporting: the school reports to governors (now sometimes called a 'council' or 'committee') who report to Board of Directors who, in turn, are

answerable to the Members. In addition, Ofsted holds Trusts accountable when it inspects a group of their schools concurrently, publishing a report about the Trust as well as about the individual schools.

Free Schools

About a quarter of a million children in England are educated in Free Schools, which are similar to academies in their funding and organisation, but set up by individuals and interest groups. For example, a group of parents may feel that other local schools do not address their children's needs; a group of local schools may feel that there needs to be better alternative provision; a religious group may want a school to educate their children within the aegis of the community. Free Schools are intended to draw heavily on the support of the people who set them up and some groups have struggled to sustain the necessary levels of commitment.

University Technical Colleges

This is a type of Free School distinguished by its close association with a university and often another major industrial or business partner. For the university, they create a practical opportunity for education students and, for pupils, give access to advanced university facilities for both study and extra-curricular activities. They often have a focus on science and technical subjects and access to higher education. There are about fifty UTCs; some are close to an established university (e.g. University of Birmingham School), some are tied to a major employer (eg. JCB Academy) and some represent the outreach of a university into a location with a history of low attainment and low educational aspiration (eg North East Futures).

Studio schools

These are designed to take a small number (max 300) pupils from 14-19 and provide a supportive environment in which youngsters can continue a broad programme of learning while emphasising more practical skills through links with local employers and NVQ-type courses, for example, a school based in the grounds of a local hospital and focusing on opportunities and qualifications in the care sector. Some studio schools are very specific (eg. catering) while others offer a broader range of vocational opportunities. There are proportionally very few Studio schools and a number have closed.

The Independent Sector

Around 2,600 schools in the UK are independent of State control. They educate approximately 6.5% of the total school population of the UK (around 7% in England), well over half a million pupils and the numbers are rising. This average percentage is slightly misleading, as fewer children are educated in the primary phase compared with post-16, which accounts for more than 18% of school-age children. About fifteen per cent of independent school pupils are boarders, with a significant proportion of those from overseas.

The point of the independent sector is to be 'independent', but schools are members of various associations and oversight bodies, the largest of which is the Independent Schools' Council (ISC) covering about 80% of the sector. This is reflected in the inspection and reporting regime; most independent schools are inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate which reports on pupils' achievement and personal development with additional sections on boarding, where relevant, and a strong emphasis on safeguarding. Examples of ISI reports can be found at: <https://www.isi.net/reports>.

A smaller proportion of schools sit outside ISI and are inspected by Ofsted. This often includes the small religious schools about which concern is sometimes reflected in the media. Current issues troubling the sector include the affordability of fees and the viability of boarding. There is also concern about the impact of potential changes under future Governments of differing political hues, such as the imposition of VAT on fees or the loss of charitable status.

Many independent schools were established by the Christian churches in the centuries before the State was much involved in the provision of education; this means that they often take faith more seriously, through worship and religious education, than in the maintained sector. In Free Church history particularly, there was a need for schools for dissenters while they were excluded, by the Established

Church, from other educational opportunities. Although there are voices in the Free Churches today which query our involvement in the independent sector, the national and international reach of these schools should not be overlooked.

4. How are schools held to account?

Education is one of the most fundamental human rights and an essential element in human flourishing. It is an entitlement for all children and young people. Education happens in many settings, formal and informal, and young children learn in many ways, but most readily by copying the example of others. Parents are the prime educators of children, but other home influences, the extended family, social groups and other organisations to which children may belong also play a very large role.

Formal education is most often associated with schools, and children are required by law to receive full-time education between the ages of 5 and 18, though most will also have attended pre-school settings such as nurseries or play groups. The role of schools in educating children and young people should not be underestimated, as the quality of the education they receive is of the utmost importance in later life.

Standards and Accountability

It is not much more than a hundred years ago that politicians had to be persuaded that it would be valuable for the State to get involved in education, an involvement consolidated in the landmark 1944 Education Act. Over the last 30 years, the level of Government engagement in what happens in schools has been consistently high, beginning, perhaps, with the 1988 Education Reform Act. This reflects debate over the purposes of education, who should determine them and how well schools are doing at delivering them.

Curriculum

The 1988 Education Reform Act introduced the 'National Curriculum' to determine what children should learn and, to an extent, how they should learn it. Schools received huge lever-arch files and extensive training to approach conventional subjects in more prescribed ways. The language of year 1 to year 11 was introduced to increase the sense of continuity between the disparate locations through which children pass in their educational life. There was a shift of focus to 'literacy' and 'numeracy' rather than just 'English' and 'maths' and the language of assessment started working in levels which, combined with expectations of attainment at each stage, concentrated schools' commitment to delivering the curriculum effectively. At the turn of this decade, the Government began working on a new National Curriculum for primary schools which was fully implemented in September 2015. The watchword of the new curriculum could be said to be 'rigour' as it was designed partly as a response to England's slipping down the international educational league tables. There is much more of an emphasis on traditional skills, such as knowing times tables and grammar. Reading is strongly founded on phonics which, research suggests, better supports the development of weaker students (see, for example, <https://teachingbattleground.wordpress.com/2017/12/09/dont-let-phonics-denialists-move-the-goal-posts-after-pirls-2016/>).

Assessment is no longer by incremental levels but in relation to the 'expected' standards, which is much more about coverage and mastery. 'Mastery' is an important word in the new curriculum and reflects a new approach to classroom practice; teachers now do not prepare topics 'blind' but assess what children already know and how they could most valuably develop their learning on a subject. In subjects like maths, children are grouped and coached to try to make sure all of them have 'got it' rather than simply moving on to the next topic in the hope that the slower learners will catch up when the topic comes up again in the future.

The curriculum is certainly more challenging and there have been criticisms that it does not properly take account of children who have different abilities and needs, but the Government is unapologetic, insisting that all children should have equal access to something better than before. It is both more traditional and more modern. It is more content than skills-focused and aspects of the content would be more familiar to someone who was a child of the 60's rather than the 90's; yet, at the same time, children have more focus on design, technology and computing. There is a good, simple overview here:

<https://www.schoolguide.co.uk/blog/the-new-primary-national-curriculum-a-parents-guide>

Secondary schools have not been given a new curriculum, but their freedoms in teaching are constrained by the requirements of the new syllabuses for public examinations. These are marked by the same 'rigour' and more traditionally-focused content as the reformed primary curriculum. Although vocational courses, such as those offered by the Business and Technology Education Council (BTECs), are still an option, more able children are being steered away from them, before the age of sixteen, to discourage youngsters from deciding they are 'not academic'. Financial constraints have also had an impact on the curriculum for older learners. With money tight for post-16, a small group (approximately under fifteen students) is not financially viable. This means that subjects like music and languages can be squeezed out of the curriculum or that school 6th forms close as learners are drawn to larger providers either in colleges, very big schools or consortium arrangements. The group of more prestigious universities (The 'Russell Group') requires entrants to pass certain of the more traditional A' levels, referred to as 'facilitating subjects', for particular courses; for example maths and physics are usually required for engineering courses. These subjects tend to dominate 6th form curriculums. There is more information about these here:

<https://successatschool.org/advisedetails/204/facilitating-subjects>

Data and assessment

Assessment serves a number of purposes, intrinsic and extrinsic to the school. It is probably the aspect of their job which teachers in England spend most of their time on: marking children's work, assessing the extent of their learning and reflecting on what this information is telling them about how to teach next. Assessment generates data, which is now shared through schools' digital systems so that people beyond the individual teacher can also analyse it to determine whether children are reaching their potential through hitting expected milestones en route. Are they making different rates of progress on different topics or different teachers? Are children from disadvantaged backgrounds succeeding alongside their peers? Which children need some extra help? To what extent is the extra help working? At micro level, data is used to talk to children and parents about the child's journey through the education system. At macro level, it is used to make judgements about and comparisons between schools, Local Authorities and Academy Trusts. It is used by Ofsted to make judgements about schools and by schools to make judgements about the performance-related pay of individual teachers.

Since the focus on data was established, it has been transformative in establishing the future potential of learners and challenging schools (and pupils) to be appropriately ambitious for learning. That is not to deny that this has sometimes been done in clumsy ways. The downside of this is that the penalties to schools and individual teachers have sometimes led to a distortion of the school experience in order not to get 'bad data'.

The testing regime.

The end-point of the school assessment system is GCSE (at age 16) and GCE Advanced Level ('A level' at age 18). For 16 year-olds, a grade 5 is shorthand for a 'good pass' and is generally required for a youngster to be accepted for formal 6th form studies and for University admission. The year 2017 saw the first results of the new GCSEs in English and Maths and 2018 extends the system across all subjects. Not only have the new syllabuses been marked by a higher level of challenge but the

end-of-course assessment is also more searching. The option of coursework has been removed so that everything stands or falls on the final examination.

The gradings have been changed from A*-C to 9-1: note that the higher number comes first - the higher the number the better the grade - with the suggestion that, in future, 10 or 11 could be added to keep raising the bar. The benchmark of the old grade C as a 'pass' has been raised to the '5' rather than the '4' so children who managed to cross the border into the C grades in the old system would have 'failed' under this system. A/B/C is replaced by '9/8/7/6/5' and some of '4' to create more differentiation in the higher grades and show just how good a 'pass' a student achieved. The grade boundaries are now fixed year on year; in the past they were more fluid based on percentages of successful entrants not the percentage pass mark. BTECs still exist in some vocational subjects, and there is a grade equivalency with GCSE, but they do not count in many of the performance tables in the same way as before.

At A' level, there has been a similar focus on rigour and end of course assessment. AS levels have not been discontinued but they no longer count as part of the final A' level grade, so many providers are discontinuing them. BTECs are not facilitating subjects but they remain popular; recent research suggests that over 25% entrants to Higher Education have at least one BTEC subject and that they are particularly important for black students (50% entrants) and young people from economically and educationally deprived areas, particularly the North and the Midlands.

At primary level, the new curriculum has not meant the end of SATs (Standard Assessment Tools). The new curriculum was introduced as 'getting rid of levels' but without prescribing a replacement model of assessment. At the end of Key stage 2, SATs have been retained but now give an individual numerical result and a judgement with regard to 'expectations' instead of a broad level. The tests are marked externally but parents also get a teacher assessment in some subjects. At the end of Keystage 1, children are assessed by their teachers. However, this is not a 'pencil and paper' test but a portfolio approach which maps achievement against a full set of descriptors for 'expected' and 'greater depth' over the preceding months. This is quite complicated and demanding for schools to administer.

In addition to SATS, there are further tests for the youngest children. They are designed to identify children who are not making expected progress at the earliest point of their education so that they can receive additional help. Children at the end of year 1 now have a phonics baseline test, which is repeated in Year 2 for children who did not achieve. There is also a baseline test in reception which is generally not reported to parents but gives an overview of each child's individual starting point across a range of skills including social and physical as a pre-cursor to beginning formal learning. This enables schools to know where they are starting from and to evaluate how effective they have been in moving children on.

Performance and accountability measures

When the importance of using data in education first became apparent to schools it was as a carrot with which to lead the educational horse rather than as a stick with which to beat it. A lot of people in education would argue that the thrust has changed to the latter and that this has a distorting impact on children's experience in school. Schools and Heads are judged by their results and ranking. Every year Head teachers and Senior Leaders are sacked by schools and academy chains because the outcomes did not meet targets. On the one hand, it is good that there is so much emphasis on children not being short-changed in their education; on the other, some would argue that the accountability measures don't reflect that which is best for children. The same two sides might also argue about the inspection regime, through Ofsted and the Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS).

School performance measures.

Examination and test data is used to make judgements about the performance of schools and has been made widely available so that parents and the community can also have informed conversations about their local schools. Agencies of Government such as the DfE, Ofsted, Local Authorities and the Offices of the Regional schools Commissioner all use the detailed information to inform their judgements and actions with regard to schools.

Each school receives a detailed analysis of its data internally through the Department for Education's ASP (Analyse school Performance). This is confidential to the school, its providers and the DfE but you can see from the log-in page how many varieties of school information it covers.

(<https://sa.education.gov.uk/idp/Authn/UserPassword>). The ASP replaces a similarly weighty document called RAISE and latterly RAISE online. These not only give detailed analysis of school attainment, context, attendance, spending, etc, but also allow the school to make comparisons (and be compared) with other schools.

The public face of the data is at: <https://www.gov.uk/school-performance-tables>. Here you can see the range of measures by which a school is judged and make comparisons between schools or organise schools in various rankings.

For secondary, at age 16, maybe only one of the figures is readily understood by the lay person: the percentage of children achieving both GCSE English and Maths at grade 5 or above. The national average in 2018, the first year of the 'more rigorous' assessment, was just under 40%. The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) figure shows how successful children were in a narrow suite of traditional subjects. All schools are judged by how many children they enter for the EBacc but it is best suited to children who respond well to a more traditional academic education. Religious Studies was excluded from the EBacc and this has led to a major drop in RS exam entries. The other two performance measures have the word 'eight' in them. This refers to the fact that the score is based on pupils' attainment across a carefully constructed field of 8 subjects: mathematics (double weighted) and English (double weighted), three further qualifications from the EBacc pot and three other qualifications on the DfE approved list of GCSEs and BTecs. The Progress 8 measure takes these scores and, individually, works out how each pupil has moved on from their Keystage 2 SATS at the end of primary school. Each pupil is given their own Progress 8 score and the school's outcomes are headlined with a cumulative score so that observers can make judgements as to how much of an impact each school has had on its learners over the five years a child is there. There are other dropdowns on the page which merit further study; an interesting one is about the

proportion and (comparative) performance of economically deprived children in the school (those who attract funding through the Pupil Premium).

Most schools might have hoped to be judged by the amount they have contributed to the lives of their children over the time they have been with them. Apart from the fact that the accountability measures do not say anything about the child's personal development and human characteristics, the Progress 8 measure itself is not as helpful to some schools as they would like it to be. For example, a school in an area of economic and educational deprivation might have a huge impact on the lives of some young people who face many challenges. However, as the progress score is weighted towards academic subjects and English and Maths are double counted, it is often the selective schools which shine here too. Exams which are taken out of year group (for example, the whole year group sits RE in year 9) and resits are largely not counted in the school's figures although they do count for the child. Again, this tends to favour schools with more academic and high achieving learners, even though the school could have put in considerable effort and resource to enable the child to succeed on their second sitting.

The analysis of A' level figures is similarly searching but more self-explanatory. The performance data for Keystage 2, again, gives priority to pupil progress. Here the progress is calculated against children's scores at age 7 in their Keystage 1 SATs. For primary school pupils, all assessment is now registered against 'expectations' rather than marking incremental steps in learning. Keystage 1 assessment is not a 'pencil and paper test' but a more portfolio approach where evidence is gathered against each expectation, for example, the ability to use a full stop appropriately. The data is available to inspectors and the school but is not published by the DfE. Parents receive a verbal summary but do not receive the school's more complicated numerical analysis unless they specially request it. Keystage 1 SATs are optional and due to be phased out in 2023 when all children in Keystage 2 will have had the new Reception Baseline Check so that their progress can be consistently plotted across the whole of their primary education.

Ofsted and Section 48

The Ofsted system of school accountability was introduced in 1992 and, compared with the previously rare HMI inspections, raised the scrutiny of schools to a whole new level. In the 25 years of its existence, Ofsted has changed its focus and methods many times, as can be seen from a cursory comparison of inspection reports old and new. In the early years, the school was given a number of weeks' notice, a large team of inspectors came into the school for a week, every subject was separately scrutinised and the published judgement was graded from 1 to 7. Now, Ofsted is a much sharper operation and the visit to the school is to affirm or modify a hypothesis which has already been reached based on an analysis of the data, other publically available information and the schools' own self-evaluation. Schools receive a phone call to say they are to be inspected on the afternoon before the team arrive, although no-notice inspections are also possible. This happens roughly every three years, depending on the outcome of the last inspection. The new 'short inspection' takes one day but, if inspectors feel they do not want simply to confirm the previous grade, they will announce that they are converting to a full inspection. Originally this was supposed to happen the next day, but this has been changed (except in cases of behaviour and safety), not least because it was difficult to get a full team of appropriate inspectors mobilised so quickly. Under the new system, a full inspection is promised within one or two years.

Ofsted judges a school under four key areas: effectiveness of leadership and management, quality of teaching, learning and assessment, personal development, behaviour and welfare, and outcomes for pupils. There are four categories: outstanding, good, requires improvement (which was previously called 'satisfactory' and 'inadequate'). The last category has two alternatives – a 'notice to improve' where the inspectors believe there is capacity in the school to make things better and 'requires special measures' where they believe that something different needs to happen in a school to make the necessary change. It is in these circumstances that the school is put through enforced academisation and Heads, senior staff and governors are removed. Ofsted has announced that it will be making further changes in the near future and it is possible that these grades will change.

Schools with a religious character also have mandatory inspections of their faith ethos and the mechanisms by which that is secured in the school. This was introduced alongside Ofsted but the idea goes further back in history, to the agreements between the churches and the Government in the early part of the 20th Century about how their religious foundation could be preserved as the church's schools were incorporated into the new State system. Some denominations were particularly strong in asserting that there were aspects of their schools' lives over which the State could not have any authority. As inspections were introduced in the 1990s, they further insisted that these were not aspects of life in faith schools about which an Ofsted inspector could make a judgement. These inspections are often referred to by the legislation which governs them: 'Section 48' (of the 2005 Education Act) or previously 'Section 23'.

The funding comes largely from the DfE but each religious provider is responsible for devising their own inspection schedule which reflects the priorities of their community while meeting the DfE's requirements for rigour. Most faith communities have a centralised system to manage this. The Methodist Church has worked with the Church of England to develop a SIAMS framework (the Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist schools) which evaluates the Leadership, Ethos and Worship in their schools along with Religious Education if the school is Voluntary Aided. The style and grading have previously adopted the Ofsted model but there is now a move to a more bespoke stand-alone model. The area of Section 48 inspection is proving an interesting challenge to new schools that have been set up by independent religious groups. You can see examples of SIAMS reports here: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/education/siams-inspections/>

5. What are pupils learning?

The quality of an education depends on many factors; among the most important is the competence, skill and role of the teacher, so the training of teachers is of great concern (see below). Another factor is the quality of the curriculum and its overall purpose.

Currently every state-funded school must offer a curriculum which is balanced and broadly based, and which:

- promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society; and
- prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life.

There are several important elements in this description of the curriculum. First, it must be broad and balanced. This is vital for several reasons: it allows every pupil to find and excel at aspects of learning which they are naturally good at; it ensures that every pupil has a good grasp of the diversity of human achievement and knowledge; and it means that no element of the curriculum should over-dominate others.

Second, the curriculum must provide for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC) of pupils, among other things, thus ensuring that education deals with the whole range of the dimensions of human life, nature and character, often described as “the whole child”, alongside aspects of cognitive and academic development.

The development of pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) capacities, along with their physical and cognitive growth, is vital to human flourishing. In its broadest sense, promoting pupils’ SMSC development is nurturing the spirit, recognising the uniqueness of each individual and his or her humanity and potential.

It is about developing a sense of identity, helping pupils to know themselves and reflect on their beliefs and values. In the best practice, it helps pupils to be creative, to transcend the limitations of the physical world and to cultivate imagination. It creates opportunities to consider questions of meaning and purpose of life, universally and personally, and to recognise diversity in the world they inhabit; it fosters positive attitudes, a sense of hope and feeling of self-worth. It concerns a young person's growing ability to relate to others, to flourish in family and social groups and to recognise the benefits of working towards the common good, acknowledging the need for justice and equity. It goes further than what the individual knows, understands and can do, to what she or he is and is becoming. Promoting SMSC development is not the responsibility of any one curriculum area; it is a statutory duty placed on the school, to be fulfilled through every learning opportunity, both in formal lessons and informal interactions and experiences.

The statutory curriculum

The school curriculum encompasses all the planned learning activities of a school, but many also refer to the 'hidden curriculum' – what pupils learn in unintended ways in school. The school curriculum is the responsibility of the head teacher and governors, but it must include what law prescribes. The nature and purpose of the statutory curriculum in schools in England currently harks back to the Education Reform Act 1988, but has been modified in some details by various Acts of Parliament and regulations since then.

The National Curriculum

Until 1989 schools were free to devise their own curricula, other than under the 1944 Education Act which stipulated that they had to provide religious education (RE) for all pupils, except those whose parents withdrew their children from it. From 1989 all State schools were required to teach the National Curriculum in addition to providing RE. It is impossible to overestimate the significance of this development, for with its accompanying assessment regimes, qualifications, accountability, training and support, the National Curriculum has transformed the understanding, content, and delivery of education in State schools, much of it for the better. The National Curriculum brought consistency, entitlement, clarity, rigour and transparency to the school curriculum, and embodied, at first anyway, the breadth and balance that the law required. The tragedy is that the National Curriculum and its assessment apparatus have been changed so often and so used as a vehicle for school and teacher accountability that its original purposes have been lost, and its breadth and balance has been eroded.

The areas of study that have now come to suffer from an over-dominant National Curriculum and accountability measures include the arts (especially music and drama), sport and RE. Again the reasons are manifold. The arts and sport suffer from exclusion from accountability measures and a suffocating squeeze on time, despite being included within the National Curriculum. Budget constraints have forced schools to make unenviable choices in the recruitment and retention of staff, the use of time and allocation of resources, all of which have damaged these subjects.

6. What is the place of religion in schools?

Collective Worship

For Christians and other people of faith, collective worship in schools is a key part of the wider curriculum, for it should stimulate, reflect and reinforce the values that underpin the role of education and the nature of the curriculum, and enhance the community and ethos of the school that are so closely linked with the aims of the curriculum. By statute, all pupils not withdrawn from it by their parents (or themselves if they are 16 or over), should take part in an act of collective worship every day in a school group of some kind. Such worship should be wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character, and reflect the ages, aptitudes and family backgrounds of the pupils. This requirement is increasingly honoured in the breach rather than the observance, particularly in secondary schools, for a wide variety of reasons. Ofsted has ceased to inspect it, and rarely reports on schools' compliance with the law. This aspect of school life is in dire need of reform, but it is one in which the Free Churches have historically been involved and still have an important part to play.

Religious Education

RE has suffered from the cuts to local authority status and budgets, the academisation of schools, and the impotence of SACREs to support RE in their areas. GCSE Religious Studies has been excluded from the EBacc, and RE as a whole suffers from a debilitating lack of trained teachers.

All this, despite the legal requirement dating from 1944 (and reaffirmed in 1988), that RE should be provided to all pupils, as described above, in accordance with either:

- a. locally agreed syllabuses that reflected the fact that the religious traditions of Britain were in the main Christian but also to take account of the teachings and practices of other religions represented in Britain
- b. or the trust deeds of schools with a religious foundation.

Apart from this complexity, changes to the inspection regime have resulted in an almost total lack of data on RE in schools for local SACREs. The State of the Nation Report on secondary school RE published by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE), and RE Today Services in September 2017 illustrates the consequent declining prospects for RE, and the high level of non-compliance with legal requirements. It also exemplifies the ominous drop for the first time in entries for full course GCSE Religious Studies.

GCSE Religious Studies saw an enormous increase in entries from 1995 when the Short Course was established. In round figures, GCSE entries in total rose from about 110,000 per annum (nearly all Full Course and mostly in schools with a religious character schools) to about 400,000 per annum in 2011 (mostly Short Course and mostly in schools with no religious character). A rise in A-level Religious Studies followed this pattern and they more than doubled in the same period. Since 2011 GCSE entries have begun to decline, with a collapse in Short Course entries following the decision that their results would not count for performance table purposes, and although the Full Course entries continued to rise a little, these too have now begun to fall, so that entries in 2017 stood at about 284,000. A-level entries at just over 23,000 have also showed a drop for the first time in decades.

The Religious Education Council

The Religious Education Council, founded in 1973 and of which the Free Churches Federal Council was a founder member, has repeatedly drawn attention to the importance and state of RE in England and Wales. It has tried to form a lasting partnership with the Department for Education and/or its agencies to support RE outside the National Curriculum through a co-operative approach from faith communities and other RE stakeholders. This led to the publication in 2004 by the DfE and QCA of A Non-Statutory National Framework for RE along the lines of the National Curriculum programmes of study for other subjects, which was very influential in improving RE for several years afterwards.

The REC also established an all-party Parliamentary Group for RE (APPG), and its Review of RE published in 2013 created a revised national framework for RE to match changes in the National Curriculum in 2014. The RE Review also recommended a review of the statutory requirements for the subject as they had not changed in any fundamentals since 1944. In 2016 the REC established The Commission on RE to carry out this review, and it published its full report in September 2018. Implementation of the recommendations put forward by the Commission on RE appears to be the only realistic means of redressing the problems from which RE suffers.

The final report of The Commission on Religious Education can be found at:

<https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/final-report-religion-and-worldviews-the-way-forward-a-national-plan-for-re/final-report-of-the-commission-on-re/>

7. What are Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education and what do they do?

Background

The acronym SACRE stands for Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education. The Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) is a permanent, statutory body unique to the subject and only found in England and Wales. It is part of the local Government structure.

The earliest idea for what was to become the SACRE goes back to the 1920s and 30s when, with growing ecumenism, the churches began to co-operate informally with teachers to decide what should be taught in RE. Informal local committees were established by interested parties to give support to schools and advice to LAs. From these early beginnings, the body that developed was enshrined in law in 1944 when SACREs were first officially recognised, but they remained optional until 1988 when they became mandatory. The legal duty on every local authority (LA) to have a SACRE remains.

Role and Responsibilities

The main duty of the SACRE is to *'advise the authority on such matters connected with religious worship in county schools and the religious education to be given in accordance with an agreed syllabus as the authority may refer to the council or the council may see fit'*. (Education Reform Act [ERA] 1988. s.11/1a). This broad role of supporting the effective provision of RE, includes, when appropriate, prompting or even requiring the LA to review its current agreed syllabus.

The SACRE must consider appeals from schools wishing to modify the legal requirement for collective worship to be *'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character'*. By law, every SACRE must hold its meetings in public and also publish an annual report of its work, specifying any matters on which it has advised the LA, including descriptions of the nature of and reasons for that advice.

Effective SACREs also give advice to schools on methods of teaching agreed syllabus RE; they advise the LA on the provision of training for teachers; monitor the quality and provision of RE and collective worship in schools, as well as the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC) of pupils. They also consider complaints referred to them by their LA.

SACREs are set up to represent a balance of all the interests of the local community. There will be elected councillors, representatives of faith communities, and members of the education community, including teachers and head teachers, at a SACRE meeting. There may also be people representing teacher training in RE. Some SACREs also choose to co-opt additional members from minority faiths with a very small local presence or those with a specific expertise in religious education. Many SACREs include those professing a non-religious world view. Representation from schools other than those under the jurisdiction of the local authority may also be invited.

The structure of the SACRE is defined by law. It is made up of four groups, sometimes referred to by some SACREs as committees.

Group A is made up of representatives of Christian denominations, (other than the Church of England). It may include, for example, representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches, the Free Churches (e.g. Baptist, Methodist, United Reformed Church, Pentecostal, The Salvation Army) and The Society of Friends. It also has representatives from other faiths in the area, e.g. Buddhists, Baha'is, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Parsees, Sikhs. The make-up of Group A will vary from SACRE to SACRE as it reflects the diversity of the various faith communities in the locality.

Group B is made up of representatives nominated by the local Church of England diocese or dioceses.

Group C is the teachers' group, usually representatives of teacher associations. It is usual for there to be representation also from the head teacher associations. It is the local authority that decides which associations will be invited to be represented. They will usually approach the teacher unions, but local associations of RE teachers

may also be asked to provide a representative. Sometimes someone from a local teacher training establishment is also invited to be a member of this group.

Group D is the local authority group, usually comprising elected members or other political nominees. The LA may wish to have all parties and viewpoints from across the political spectrum represented on the SACRE. In some LAs, a representative of school governors may also be in this group.

Details such as the specific numbers of members in each of the groups will usually be set out in the individual SACRE's constitution. These are usually decided by the LA, depending on local circumstances and in collaboration with the organisations and communities represented.

Provision

The SACRE's most significant responsibility is to provide a locally agreed syllabus (AS) which is the statutory document for RE within the local authority. It sets out what should be taught to pupils in all phases and the standards expected of them at the end of each key stage. It is produced by an agreed syllabus conference (ASC), set up by the LA under the auspices of the SACRE.

The agreed syllabus should be reviewed every five years. If, at some other time, a majority of the committees of the SACRE asks the LA in writing to reconsider its agreed syllabus, it must convene a conference for that purpose.

The agreed syllabus conference (ASC) is a statutory body brought together in order to produce an agreed syllabus for RE. Although it has the same committee structure as the SACRE and can be made up of SACRE members, it is a legal entity separate from a SACRE. Many SACREs also provide support in AS religious education for teachers across all key stages, as well as material to resource collective worship in their schools.

Effectiveness

Overseeing and influencing local provision and practice in RE is a considerable workload for a committee of volunteers meeting usually three times a year, i.e.: once a term, although a minority meet more frequently, especially when a particular task demands it. Despite this, many effective SACREs act as a powerful local voice for communities with a stake in RE. They also provide a valuable bridge between faith and other communities and education.

Although SACRE members each represent a particular constituency, they are all there to further the interests of pupils' learning and development, rather than address their own concerns. It is often remarkable that so diverse a group of individuals can work together for the common good and, in most SACREs most of the time, there is discussion and agreement about issues resulting in consensus, without the need for a vote.

For all SACREs, if a formal vote is required, it is each constituent group rather than every individual that is entitled to a vote, so the members of each group have to decide between themselves how that vote will be cast; this will be after discussion. Since they are not full members of any group, technically co-optees do not have the right to take part in the discussions prior to the decision about a vote. In SACRE matters it would be sufficient for there to be a majority; in decisions of the ASC, there must be unanimous support from all four committees for a decision. All groups have to register a vote for a decision to be made.

To provide the necessary leadership, SACRE members must believe in the importance and value of the subject as the opportunity for pupils to raise and reflect on questions about life, in an open and safe environment. They must maintain a commitment to the best kind of RE which challenges pupils to question and explore their own and others' understanding of the world; raises questions of identity, meaning and value and encourages pupils to reflect on their experiences, behaviour and opinions; contributes positively and powerfully to the SMSC development of pupils; provides opportunities for pupils to develop key skills and thinking skills and promotes understanding of and respect for different beliefs and life-styles.

SACREs do not seek to urge religious beliefs upon pupils, nor compromise their family beliefs. They commit to a religious education which has the potential to play a central role in enabling pupils to achieve and to prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life.

Resourcing

Individual SACREs have their own constitutions so there is wide variety of practice, some more effective than others, but much hinges on the support the SACRE receives from its LA.

Every Local Authority has a duty to ensure that there is a SACRE; that all four groups are represented on it and support is in place to enable SACRE to fulfil its duties, which includes providing appropriate clerking and specialist advice. It is the LA's responsibility to ensure there is an agreed syllabus and it is reviewed every five years. It must also take note of and respond to advice from the SACRE.

SACRE's remit, however, does not cover all schools in its local area. There have always been some exemptions, depending entirely on the category of school but, with the diversification of provision, a SACRE's responsibility covers far fewer schools now than it did in previous years. Some schools have a specific religious character, either voluntary controlled (VC) or voluntary aided (VA), the latter being aided by the LA but controlled by a religious body, with the prerogative to offer RE according to their faith or denomination. There are also some categories of schools for which SACRE has no responsibility, including academies and Free Schools, although some of these choose to stay connected to the SACRE.

The proliferation of new categories of schools has undermined the role of SACRE, although the legal charge on LAs remains. However, since fewer schools are bound by the requirements of the local AS, funding for both SACREs and AS revision is meagre in many areas and denied completely by some LAs.

Recruitment

All SACRE members are appointed by the LA, but they are sourced from their constituent groups, so faith communities have the prerogative to nominate potential members.

In the case of Free Church representatives on Group A, it is the Free Churches' Group, through the FCEC, that is responsible for nominating new members.

According to their constitutions, some SACREs have places for named, individual denominational representation, others have one place for one generic 'Free Church' representative. When a vacancy occurs, the SACRE clerk informs the FCEC secretary who contacts the relevant local denominational office, ie: Methodist District or URC Synod, inviting suggestions of appropriate names. Sometimes there is a need to go to the most appropriate local church directly. These approaches, if successful, are then followed up with a nomination going back to the SACRE, so that a formal approach can be made to the LA for appointment. The service offered by the FCEC office is purely one of facilitation; no vetting of potential candidates is undertaken.

The Chair of the SACRE is sometimes appointed by the LA or, in the majority of SACREs, elected by the membership. The ASC Chair can be appointed by the local authority or the LA may similarly allow the ASC to choose its own Chair.

To be effective, SACRE members need training. Although it is clearly an advantage, there is no expectation that they will have experience in education, let alone have an expertise in religious education. New members, therefore, face a steep learning curve and some SACREs are better than others at providing induction. In the past, the FCEC has offered training for all FC representatives on RE and collective worship but the take up has been disappointing and the last conference had to be cancelled for lack of interest.

Conclusion

The future of SACREs is now in doubt. There is pressure to change the law to accommodate a move to central control of RE, which would threaten the existence of SACREs since currently their principal responsibility is to determine the subject locally through an AS. This is not new and remains controversial. It is driven by a conviction that RE would gain greater curriculum security if it were in the National Curriculum. The FCEC is conflicted on the issue, wanting to improve the provision of good and effective RE, but also recognising the contribution made by those individuals who serve on SACREs, with a good heart and an enthusiasm for the subject, recognising what it offers children and young people.

Members of the FCEC fully realise that diversity in school designations and a myriad of developments in educational thinking have impacted significantly on the role of SACREs. But, as a microcosm of the local community, SACRE has the potential to become, if not already, an agent for cohesion, encouraging understanding and respect. Such a body, inspiring a common vision and promoting a sense of belonging for all, has never been needed more than it is today.

In the future, SACREs might also have a role to play in the local implementation of a national syllabus. Members of groups A and B could then continue to bring the voice of their religious communities to decision making about the RE syllabus and help teachers to understand their faith. Importantly, they also help their faith communities to understand the nature and purpose of RE in schools and the contribution their faith can make to children's understanding of the world. Whatever changes may come to the subject in the future, it is crucial that there continues to be an understanding of the way religion is used in education, as well as the contribution it makes to society.

It would be a great pity to lose this institution which could not now be invented or, perhaps, even imagined.

8. What are the Free Churches' interests in education?

The historical relationship of the Free Churches with schools

The involvement of the Free Churches in the field of education dates back to the very first years of the existence of the Free Churches in this country. Of the five Acts of Parliament that made up the "Clarendon Code", the legislation passed in the early years of the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the "Five Mile Act" of 1665, properly known as "An Act for restraining Non-Conformists from inhabiting in Corporations", included a section excluding nonconformists from schools and universities. While the various Declarations of Indulgence issued by Charles II and James II attempted to reduce the effect of this it led to the creation of a number of schools and academies run by nonconformist groups and individuals. Although the actual Act itself was not repealed until 1812 it was never particularly successful, and it has been argued that the freedom of the Dissenting Academies to teach outside the standard curriculum of the universities and their feeder schools produced a better and more rounded education which was better suited to the preparation of their students for the developing worlds of commerce and industry.

Under the later Stuarts the strength of the nonconformist educational system was recognised and feared and in 1714 the Schism Act was passed which required all schools to be licensed by the bishop and all owners and tutors in schools to be communicant members of the Church of England. The death of Queen Anne on August 1st 1714, the day on which this Act was due to come into effect meant that the law was never enforced and it was repealed by the Religious Worship Act of 1718. Nevertheless, the effect of this was that education in England and Wales remained divided on religious lines until the beginning of the 20th Century.

In the Universities, religious tests remained a major problem until well into the 19th Century. Although great pressure was brought to bear by the nonconformist churches, membership of the four English Universities (Oxford, Cambridge, Durham and London) remained restricted to Anglicans until the passing of the Universities Tests Act of 1871.

Membership was defined differently in all four Universities, so that while Oxford would not allow non-Anglicans to matriculate, Cambridge merely refused to allow them to graduate.

The 19th Century saw a massive increase in the number of schools in this country, most of which were religious in their foundation. Two major bodies, the British and Foreign Schools Society, founded in 1808 as a nonconformist body, and the National Society for Promoting Religious Education, founded in 1811 as an Anglican body, provided most of the elementary education, with several thousand schools each. After 1833 some State aid was available to these schools but only after 1870 were wholly non-denominational State schools created. The 1870 Elementary Education Act provided that religious teaching in Board schools was to be restricted to non-denominational instruction, or none at all. Parents had the right to withdraw their children from religious education. This applied even to church schools. Rate-supported schools were prohibited from using distinctive religious formularies. All schools would be inspected, making use of the existing regime. The individual schools continued to be eligible for an annual Government grant calculated on the basis of that inspection.

While it was expected that this would result in the demise of church schools, and eventually nearly 4000 were incorporated into the State system, the initial effect was to encourage the founding of more Church schools using the monies available from the State. Nevertheless, the abolition of school Boards by the 1902 Education Act, the increasing cost of maintaining schools and the demands imposed by the system of school Inspectorates led most Free Churches to give up their elementary and secondary schools and concentrate on the training of teachers. Colleges originally founded for other purposes e.g. Homerton and Westhill, reinvented themselves as teacher training colleges, and others were newly founded for that purpose. By the end of the 20th Century most of these had either closed or became part of the University system and the formal role of the Free Churches in education had changed and developed.

The Free Church Federal Council, now the Free Churches' Group (FCG), always had an Education Committee which was in many ways the direct descendent of the bodies that had fought for the rights of nonconformists and for religious freedom in the field of education.

While a part of the work of the Free Church Education Committee (FCEC) relates to Higher and Further Education, it has, for many years, focused on primary and secondary education. The Free Churches' Group encourages local congregations to maintain and develop links with schools in their community both through the formal appointment of church members as school governors or SACRE members and through more informal links like leading collective worship and assisting with individual pupils' reading.

The aims of the Free Churches in this area have been summarised in six points contained in a document produced in 2010 which considers:

- how distinctive the Free Church voices are and how they differ from the voices of other Christians and people of other faiths;
- how this distinctiveness can be emphasised as a positive feature of Free Church identity;
- how nonconformist Christians can express better what they have in common;
- who is marginalised today and whether the FCEC could speak for and with them more effectively;
- whether there is wisdom from the Bible or Christian teaching that can help to strengthen the Free Church voice;
- how presence in local communities might be used to strengthen active Free Church engagement in education, with the present emphasis on involvement in schools belonging to particular faith traditions.

A Free Church Voice on Education, 2010, p. 5

The paper from which that list was taken also considered what is the distinctive Free Church voice in education and commented that “If the Free Church message lacks clarity or distinction, maybe it is because what has historically been said by the Free Churches about education has filtered into the State system and is now taken for granted. The FCEC is seeking to clarify the message and what is distinctive about it; it may not be a different perspective, but a different emphasis.” p.10

The Free Churches’ Group felt that even if this were true, and not all agreed that this was the case, there was still a need for a voice arguing for minority rights and dissenting opinions, particularly one which was able to do so from a serious academic, theological and educational perspective. Therefore it produced a second shorter list which, unlike the first, primarily addressed itself to the constituency of the Free Churches, attempted to address a wider audience, setting out its role there as a body which sees its role as a voice for the Free Churches on education; a body, prepared, as necessary, to be ‘grit in the system’, which seeks to establish how space and opportunity can be found to engage with and critique the values espoused by the present education system, seeking to establish how to connect with the immediate concerns of the day; and lastly a body which will seek to bring educational concerns to the forefront of a wider audience both in and beyond the Free Churches.

9. What difference can Free Church members make to schools?

Why the Free Churches should maintain and develop support for schools

This section considers the various ways of articulating the Free Church voice in the local school, in the conviction that this forms the foundation to how we speak at a regional and national level. It identifies some of the ways to build an effective partnership with their local schools, including helping with RE and collective worship programmes. In order to do this, it is necessary to explore the various opportunities that exist for groups and individuals from Free Churches to engage with schools.

Education for all

The case for Free Churches' involvement with broader aspects of education has been established, but one of the most significant aspects of this involvement must be in the relationship between local churches and their neighbourhood schools. The quality of that relationship, with its impact on the children, staff and parents, underpins any influence the churches wish to make at a regional or national level. To put it simply, just one negative report could be sufficient to damage the reputation and ambitions of so many.

Whilst the theoretical and structural aspect of the influence and involvement of Free Churches can be explored and explained, it should be made clear that any impact will only be achieved because there is an understanding of, and relevance to, the issues that impact the local school. For, in the same way a church or denomination is nothing without local membership, so too our voice in education will be greater the more we are seen 'on the ground'.

The primary task of this whole paper must be to raise the awareness of what the Free Churches can do, should do and, in many cases, are being asked to do by teachers, schools, local authorities and even Government.

Raising awareness

It is recognised that visitors to a school can enhance the contribution that RE and collective worship make to the school ethos and curriculum. Ofsted reports have drawn attention to the insufficient opportunities that pupils have to encounter members of faith communities.

“.. more attention needs to be given to make this learning more meaningful, through, for example, visits and visitors.”

Examples of good partnership between church and school are sometimes noted, and not just in relation to church schools:

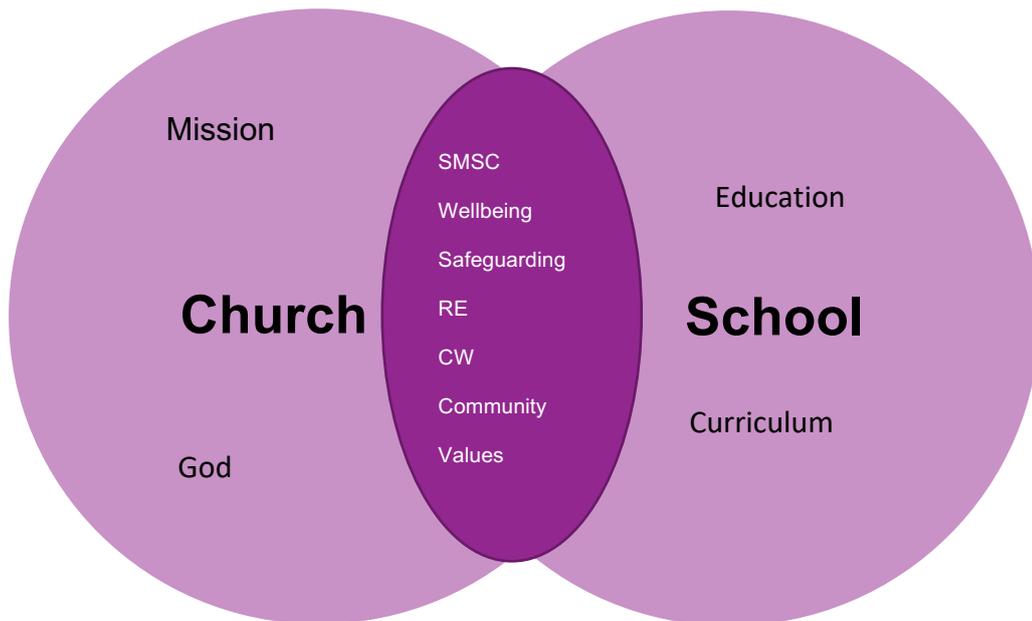
“There are sound links with the local Church, and the local minister and a member of another Christian organisation visit regularly to support teaching in the classrooms and undertake (collective) worship.”

“On one day each week, the young people of a local church visit and provide excellent assemblies, which enhance the schools’ religious education programme.”

The aim should be to raise awareness of this and motivate those within all Free Churches not only to seek to enrich the provision of religious education and collective worship, but also to support schools in the broader task of education, such as in the social, moral, cultural and spiritual development of their pupils.

Exploring the boundary between church and school.

The Free Churches need to be made aware of both the scope and the privilege that we have to contribute to the life of their local schools.



The diagram illustrates examples of the shared concerns and objectives of both the local school and the local church. In other words, building a partnership between Free Churches and schools is dependent on having shared agendas.

The starting point is to identify what is the agenda of the Free Churches. If they aspire to have a voice in education, then there is a need to determine what *can* be said and where it *might* be said. There must be an acceptance that within the realm of education, the Free Churches do not have the right to say anything that is outside the agenda of education. Or as someone once suggested, there is a need to earn the right to be heard. However, there is much that can be said, and since Christ's commission is foundational for the Free Churches' vocation in education, there is a need to discover the common ground, and work alongside the aims and purposes of schools.

There are three reasons why a local church might get involved in schools:

- schools have a requirement to deliver aspects of curriculum and life skills and will accept an offer of 'expert' support from local churches;
- schools are under significant pressure and having caring, praying and concerned visitors really does make a difference. Many school staff have commented on the impact and quiet influence that Christians have made to the life of their school;
- getting involved in local schools is an appropriate missional expression of the vocation to serve the community of which a church is part.

If schools are open to local Free Church involvement, what are the limits of this overlap in agendas?

In October 2017, a church primary school was brought to national attention. Some parents had complained that a Christian group that had been visiting the school to lead worship for 16 years had overstepped the mark. The article suggested that their content had been somewhat explicitly evangelistic. The head teacher, whilst defending the group's reputation and integrity, had no option but to exclude them for further involvement.

It is not possible to know the motive of the parents or the reaction of staff of the school, nor are we aware of all the various parties involved. Certainly, in this case, there was a lack of clarity in the overlap of agendas, which highlights three key issues:

- a. The value, appropriateness and conduct of the visiting group:
Did the church's agenda (i.e. why they were doing it) overstep the mark?
Were they aware of being held accountable in any way? An effective contribution of a church, organisation or individual must operate within legal and acceptable parameters.
- b. The need for proper preparation for the visit:
Were the school and staff suitably aware of their own 'agenda'? Did familiarity with the visiting group cause them to neglect to monitor and assess the appropriateness of the material being delivered?

c. The need to be aware of perceptions:

The parents who complained obviously had specific concerns. Any individual or group cannot hide behind the relationship they have with the head teacher. Presumably, however, there were also other parents who would be totally happy with the school's judgement on the quality of the work. It might be the case that the 'silence of the majority' is a more significant factor in the outcome but potential reactions must be monitored.

Communicating more effectively

These three issues contribute to an understanding of the critical nature of the overlap between church and school. In order to explore this further, there needs to be an understanding of two significant points:

Firstly, there should be a concern to raise awareness of the opportunity and gain a response from local churches, leading to the development of an effective partnership/relationship with local schools.

Secondly, churches should be supported in offering what is appropriate to the needs of the school, and ensuring it is always of high quality.

The negative impact of social media use by parents and pressure groups often challenges any form of Christian influence on aspects of education, both at a local and national level. High quality support from churches, alongside good relationships between churches and schools can help to present a positive image.

The role of denominational national forums/platforms/outlets

It is important that each denomination affiliated to the Free Churches group assesses how they can inspire their churches to build a relationship with their local schools. Many churches will not have the personnel or capacity to get involved, but all churches can be encouraged to pray and demonstrate a concern and care for all children and families in their community.

It is equally important for churches to understand that Christian 'schools work', however it is perceived or framed, will not be the long-term answer to a falling church roll. Since most churches long to see more families find faith in God, by linking with a local school can be a way of getting the church 'out of its buildings'.

Churches should be seed-sowing communities, but not just in their own back garden. If this approach or vision is to be carried by denominational national forums, platforms and outlets, it will be the task of the Free Church Education Committee to develop and signpost resources and material that denominations can use to inspire their congregations.

With denominations

The case study at the start of this section illustrates the point that getting a positive message out is far harder than the prospect of gaining a poor reputation through the media. Whilst local schools can always get good press locally for various activities, they are also frequently the target of various secularist and anti-Christian groups who assume any church based activity showing an interest in a school doing so with essentially evangelistic motives. It is vital that the Free Churches develop a press-release strategy that is positive in outlook, rather than appearing critical of others. The most effective way of developing this would be to actively promote initiatives that are making a positive impact within the realm of education.

Individual contacts/networking

The benefits of local networking are critical in giving strength and clarity to the Free Church voice within education. The significance of an approach by the local minister to the head teacher of their local schools cannot be overstated.

"X was the only person who came into my study to ask how I was. Every one else who came through the door wanted something from me."

There is a growing issue that larger churches, who can afford to employ youth and children's workers, or who financially support a local organisation to visit schools, frequently stand back from the task of building the partnership. There is great value in the local Free Church minister or leader building a relationship with the school's management team.

It was in conversation with Jesus, in Mark 12, that a teacher of the law heartily approved Jesus' call to 'love your neighbour as yourself'. In the time of Jesus the population gathered in villages and not distant farmhouses. 'Life was touched at every point by a wide circle of neighbourhood.' Such a concept might be alien to a church today, except in the case of the local primary school, which is a better expression of 'neighbourhood', since the local primary school seeks to serve all the families in the neighbourhood. The local primary school is the best place for the church to engage with its neighbours!

Encouraging involvement of groups and individuals

If groups and individuals from Free Churches are to be encouraged in this task, they should first be enabled to build an effective partnership with a local school. This is not always perceived to be straightforward:

'Located as the school is on the other side of town, it would difficult for any volunteers to attend there, and it would be highly unlikely that children or families from its catchment would be able to attend our church for clubs or services.'

Church growth must not be allowed to be the primary motivation for getting involved in a local school. The Free Churches have a far more inclusive mission than this. It is an unfortunate reality that someone from a Free Church might seek to exploit the invitation to visit a school regularly, and it is important for all to recognise that certain practices are not appropriate in any school. These include:

- making inappropriate demands upon the pupils;
- passing on overt promotional literature inside or outside the school;
- going beyond the brief offered by the school, for example encouraging contact with pupils after school or asking for email addresses;
- giving invitations to events out of school without seeking the school's approval beforehand.

It is vital to recognise that Free Church members and groups understand that they do not have a right to visit any school. It is also important to make sure any visitor understands that teaching staff, pupils and their parents have the right to hold negative opinions about faith groups.

Provided visitors to school do nothing wrong, the school management should be able to reassure both staff and parents that this visitor carries their confidence. Where groups or individuals have an open evangelistic background, they can still offer to support schools, provided they adhere rigidly to the school's policies and expectations. In the same way that a school's equal opportunities policy will allow a teacher to have a strong personal faith, there is no reason why they should refuse a group or individual simply because of their Free Church background, provided they follow all relevant guidelines.

Any person or groups visiting should be using resources that are appropriate for the age and general ability of the pupils. It may be necessary for some basic training so that individuals develop the skills to maintain an educational approach, make them aware of their audience and always use age appropriate language.

It might sound obvious, but any visitor in front of a group of children must seek to be engaging, with an enthusiastic understanding of the theme or topic they are presenting. It helps if they are not boring, but rather genuinely open to respectful questioning by pupils or teachers. Above all, a visitor must be in the school with an attitude of service, thus they should not be rude, intimidating, patronising or use pressurising language in any way.

Where these basic principles are adhered to, the school will not only have found a good friend, but the school's provision for RE and collective worship will be enhanced. Equally, if the visitors are skilled and experts in their field, the school will encourage their staff to learn from the visitor.

10. Recommendations for discussion by the directors of the Free Churches Group

Recommendation 1

The Free Church Education Committee recommends that *A Free Church Voice in Education* is revised, and promoted to member churches to encourage them to explore the theological and missional rationale for engaging with education.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that we explore further the issues connected with mental health in schools and ways in which churches may raise awareness of the problems and of the support available to those affected.

Recommendation 3

We recommend that FCG continues to promote the Reforming Christianity resources and explores the possibility of providing training or events to equip teachers to draw on the rich heritage and theology of the Free Churches in Religious Education.

Recommendation 4

We recommend that the recruitment process for Free Church SACRE members is strengthened, and that support and training needs are explored.

Recommendation 5

We recommend that FCG produces resources for churches to assist them in building relationships with local schools, and providing support to those schools in appropriate ways.

Recommendation 6

We recommend that FCG produces guidance for churches on hosting visits from schools, exploring the value of offering hospitality and education, as well as explaining practicalities such as safeguarding and risk assessments.

Recommendation 7

We recommend that FCG promotes Pray for schools to all of its member churches, to realise the aim of every school being a prayed-for school.

Recommendation 8

We recommend that FCG explores the promotion and development of school chaplaincy.

Recommendation 9

We recommend that FCG continues to engage with Government and other statutory agencies to promote a Free Church voice on current issues relating to schools.

Recommendation 10

We recommend that FCG forms strategic relationships with those who have similar or complementary interests in education, and explores joint working, and/or promotion of training and resources.

Closing Words

The world of education is fast-moving, and change is constant. Those who have contact with schools, and with young people, recognise the increasing pressure that is present in the system: pressure on resources, an unrelenting focus on results, but most especially, the pressure on the people who teach or learn, and those who support them. This is a crucial time to offer support to school communities, but also to keep abreast of policy developments, and to offer an informed critique that has human flourishing at the heart of its concerns.

Schools are the places where communities come together, the places where the majority of people spend a significant part of their life. Jesus came to bring life in all its fullness: the Free Churches have the opportunity to share in that mission, and through committed service, to bring God's love to teachers and learners, to those who struggle and to those who thrive.

Appendix (i)

Unlike the HE and FE reports, which had involved working groups of individuals nominated by FCG member churches, it was felt that the FCEC members had sufficient expertise and experience to do much of the work in the regular meetings of the committee. In areas where specialist knowledge did not exist within the committee, and in order to include a range of positions, the committee invited a number of “expert witnesses” to its meetings.

Members of the Free Church Education Committee volunteered to write sections of the report, with help and critique from others in the committee.

The witnesses were:

Paul Pettinger: The Accord Coalition

Deborah Weston: Former Director of Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development at Mulberry School for Girls, Research Officer for the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE), Board Member of the RE Council and Trustee of Culham St Gabriel’s Trust.

Patricia Hannam: County Adviser for Religious Education, History and Philosophy, Hampshire County Council.

In addition, the committee held a 2-day residential meeting, generously supported by the Westhill Endowment, and invited further speakers:

The Revd Neil Johnson: Minister of The Church at Carrs Lane, Superintendent Minister of the Birmingham Methodist Circuit and Chair of Birmingham Methodist Circuit’s Ministry to Education Group.

The Revd James Breslin: Director of the Free Churches Group and former Clerk to the United Reformed Church General Assembly.

Kate Christopher: National RE Advisor, RE Today Services.

Members of the Free Church Education Committee volunteered to write sections of the report, with help and critique from others in the committee.

Thanks are due particularly to Julie Grove, (FCEC Chair), Barbara Easton, John Keast, Graham Handscomb, Martin Sweet, James Breslin, Philip Wagstaff and Sara Iles.

Thanks also to Holly Hill Church School, Birmingham, for use of the cover artwork.

Appendix (ii)

The requirements for Religious Education in schools

Although there is not a National Curriculum for RE, all maintained schools follow the Basic Curriculum requirements to teach a broad and balanced curriculum, which includes RE. All maintained schools therefore have a statutory duty to teach RE. Academies and free schools are contractually required through the terms of their funding agreement to make provision for the teaching of RE.

The RE curriculum is determined by the local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE), which is responsible for producing the locally agreed syllabus for RE. Agreed Syllabuses used in schools (maintained or academy), which are not designated with a religious character must 'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain'. Schools with a religious designation may prioritise one religion in their RE curriculum, but all schools must recognise diverse religions and systems of belief in the UK both locally and nationally.

In brief, legislation requires that:

- in maintained community, foundation or voluntary schools without a religious character, RE is taught in accordance with the local Agreed Syllabus;
- academies and free schools must teach RE within the requirements for a locally agreed syllabus, set out in section 375 (3) of the Education Act 1996 and paragraph (5) of Schedule 19 to the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.
- for foundation and voluntary controlled schools with a religious character, RE must be taught according to the Agreed Syllabus unless, parents request RE in accordance with the trust deed of the school; and
- in voluntary aided schools RE must be taught in accordance with the trust deed.

RE must be included in the curriculum for all registered pupils, including all pupils in reception classes and sixth form, but excluding:

- pupils in nursery schools or nursery classes in primary schools;
- any person aged nineteen or above for whom further education is being provided at school;
- and any person over compulsory school age who is receiving part-time education.

(National Curriculum in England: Framework Document, DfE, September 2013, p.4)

Summary from The National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE).