The Plymouth Centre for Faiths and Cultural Diversity at 20: a model to reproduce?

Jonathan Marshall draws some key messages from the first two decades of life for a Plymouth interfaith centre. Surely every area needs this kind of space-making for dialogue, in which learners can 'try on other people's glasses' and see the world afresh. Could your local SACRE or interfaith council learn a bit from this example in Plymouth?

Jonathan Marshall

It began in 1997 with a small group of RE teachers who came together to discuss the questions that had been occupying us for some time. How can we teach RE more skilfully and sensitively, to ensure young people recognise and appreciate the transformative power of the spiritual life, for themselves and as a source of community benefit – surely the true purpose of all the world's religions and humanist approaches?

With a small grant from St Gabriel's Trust, the project called 'Skilful Means' was born! Our meetings ran for a year; they encouraged us and, at their conclusion, encouraged me to start an interfaith group in Plymouth, to explore these questions further with our faith communities. Having already begun to build bridges of respect and trust as the prerequisites of good relationships with local faith communities and leaders, support came. Our meetings grew and a vision for a centre to focus the work emerged.[1]

As we approached the millennium, Plymouth City Council was involved and soon became committed to a centre. It generously provided support and initial 'pump priming' funds. Then, on 20 September 2001 more than a hundred people, mainly from different faith communities across the city, together with local councillors, council officials, school heads, RE teachers and SACRE members, gathered to open the Plymouth Centre for Faith and Cultural Diversity in an annexe on the Salisbury Road school site. This would create a resource base for the city and especially for schools and the teaching and learning of RE; the development of spiritual, moral, social and cultural dimensions; and other related curriculum areas. The centre would become a place where local faith groups and individuals would help us 'do RE better'.

The central aim remains to promote education about different beliefs, faiths and cultures and to explore their common values, hopes and visions for the future well-being of the community.

Our opening came just days after the terrifying attacks of 9/11, which changed the world forever. Anti-Muslim feelings ran high and local Muslim communities were anxious. Tension was already high following disturbances and riots in a number of northern cities and towns earlier that summer. These events and the resulting community cohesion agenda focused our work over subsequent years.

Therefore, the centre's approach, to build bridges of respect and understanding, seemed timely. Bringing people together is always vital if real change and growth is sought. Training courses for teachers and other professionals, exploring the impact of belief, faith and culture in the classroom and workplace, were soon underway. As one social worker put it, 'It's like RE for adults!' Regular programmes of events, discussions and celebrations, many organised by members of the local faith communities themselves, enabled people to meet across traditional boundaries.

The centrality of school RE in building respect

However, central to this work are the visits to schools by centre speakers, drawn from a wide range of Plymouth's faith and cultural communities. School pupils aged 6–18 meet with local people who are 'different'. Visits to local places of worship are also organised, with Plymouth's

YOU CAN ONLY BE SAFE THAT PRACTISES TOLERANCE, AND CAN CELEBRATE

famous and historic synagogue and the Plymouth Islamic Education Trust being the most popular.

Trevor Phillips, when Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, said, 'We seem to be living in a time when certain groups of people are only too quick and eager to believe the very worst about another group of people.' Part of the solution, he suggested, was to 'engage in a thousand conversations'. Over the past 20 years the centre has created many thousands of such opportunities, in schools and across the community.

Teachers report that the impact of these meetings has a profound effect on the children who may initially be apprehensive when meeting someone who may look and sound different and follow an unfamiliar religion and culture. But by the end of the sessions 'they' are no longer seen to be so different, as common values and concerns are explored and a deeper knowledge and mutual understanding unfolds about 'us'.

It is a simple process but one that takes a great deal of time to organise. Time that hard-pressed teachers do not have. Speakers are selected and offered basic training to prepare them for the RE classroom. Prior to the pandemic, the centre was organising and delivering around three hundred visits to schools and places of worship each year. Big work for a small charity that often struggles financially. Around 60–70 per cent of Plymouth schools subscribe to the centre's services each year.

The centre is unique across the southwest, extending learning opportunities for children not only for their religious education but for their spiritual and cultural understanding as well, preparing them for life in modern Britain.

What next with interfaith education?

The work in schools has grown exponentially and now takes precedence. The centre was recently re-located to premises kindly provided on the Plymouth Marjon University campus. What of the future? Old challenges remain but new ones arise too, of course. Ideologies, which seek to divide us into smaller and smaller fixed identity groups, are gaining ground across society. Such approaches threaten to divide us along the very lines that Dr Martin Luther King and so many others fought to overcome. So it is time for us to dig deeper into the rich spiritual traditions to which we are heirs.

Further confirmation about the transformative power of the spiritual dimension for children came some years ago, in a report by the Children's Society. It highlighted the need for children to experience two sources of wonder, both vital in our striving to promote and disseminate an authentic approach to RE:

> One is the feeling of belonging to something bigger than oneself – something that gives meaning to one's own small existence. Religious people experience this. Or it can come from music, dance, drama, painting – from anything that takes you out of yourself and makes you thankful for what you have rather than focusing on what you have not …
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> A second key element … is the astonishing fact that in the end no-one can determine your inner state except you yourself. Viktor Frankl said of his experiences in Auschwitz that "everything can be taken from a man but one thing, the last of human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances." An essential element in a good life is the feeling that you are the captain of your soul, and that in the end things can be all right inside you whatever happens outside.[2]

Each year, the centre has worked with the local authority to organise events around Holocaust Memorial Day, and over a 15-year period facilitated the annual visits to Plymouth schools of the late Solly Irving, a Jewish Holocaust survivor from London. We estimate that during this time Solly spoke to over thirty thousand Plymouth students, sharing his powerful testimony of unimaginable cruelty and inhumanity. Solly always concluded his talks with these words, which continue to inspire and guide our work today:

'When you go out into the world try to be friends with people, especially those who appear to be different; talk to them and respect them, even though their beliefs may be different. After all, we are all part of the same human family, aren't we? Try to create a better world than the one I had to endure.'

When meeting faith practitioners and visiting local communities, young people come to see, through the lens of interfaith dialogue, the spiritual treasures of each religion; intimations of who we really are and what is ultimately worth doing.

Thanks to trustees, staff, speakers and those past and present who have made all this possible by dedicating themselves to the work of the centre.

Jonathan Marshall, the former RE Adviser for Plymouth, was director of the interfaith centre for many years, and although now retired continues to be involved.

Notes

[1] Throughout this period and up until today we have used the excellent guidelines, produced some years ago, by the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom: *Building Good Relationships with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs*, **www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/building-good-relations-with-people-of-different-faiths-and-beliefs**

[2] Dunn, J., Layard, R., and the panel of the Good Childhood Inquiry (2009), *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age* (London: Penguin), p. 84.

AND SECURE IN A SOCIETY CHERISHES HARMONY DIFFERENCE. Rabbi Hugo Gryn