

Give faith a face



RE is at its most powerful, says **Peter Greaves**, when it focuses on the lives of real people...



If you asked pupils in your class to describe what RE was about, I wonder what they would say? Perhaps they would talk about the great stories they have heard from around the world. Maybe they would even talk about some major beliefs of the faiths they have studied. All of this is great and you would probably be happy that they had remembered anything! However, RE is at its most powerful, both personally and educationally, when learning is focused on people and the way their lives are changed by belief.

We naturally do this as teachers in subjects such as history and geography. We would instinctively focus children's learning on what life was like for a child in Victorian days or in a far off country, because we know that childhood gives an instant point of reference for our pupils that they can hang their learning onto. In the same way, it is important to make sure that our RE studies allow pupils to put stories, places of worship and beliefs in the context of real people – both adults and children. The extent to which you can do this first hand will, of course, depend on the context of your school, but here are two ways that you can make sure you are putting people at the centre of your RE learning, whatever community your school is a part of.

Create an RE 'family'

One of the problems pupils can have with RE is tying together all the different strands of learning they may gather over a number of years. In other words, what belongs to who. One way to solve this is to ensure that whenever the pupils are studying Christianity, Sikhism, Islam or any other faith, they see a familiar face each time. Schools can create an RE 'family' that has children representing every faith studied at the school. This is something many published RE schemes have now embraced, but if your school hasn't got one, it's fairly easy to put together your own, either by creating simple drawings or using photos from the RE resources you will already have in your school. Try to find a boy and a girl and then choose appropriate names. These children can appear on PowerPoint slides when introducing new learning and used as 'clip art' by pupils when recording their understanding.

Using these drawings or photos on a regular basis will provide a reference point for children in your class and, if used consistently across the school, can allow pupils to transfer their knowledge from one year to the next. So now, instead of saying 'We're going to look at the five Ks of Sikhism', the teacher can lead with, 'It's time for our Sikh friend Tajinder to teach us something about his family and their beliefs. Today he's going to share some very special objects with us.' This instantly personalises the lesson and gives a hook for pupils to make links with their other learning – 'Who can remember where Tajinder goes to pray?' 'Can you remember the story Tajinder told us about Guru Nanak?'

In cases where there are no representatives of a particular faith, this approach can prevent beliefs and religions seeming as abstract as the Victorians. In schools with children of faith, it avoids placing those pupils in the position of being a spokesperson for a complex belief system that many adult believers would find hard to explain.

Visit a place of worship

Visiting a place of worship, irrespective of which faith worshipers there, simply opens children's minds to

bigger questions than they normally consider. Whether it be very old or newly constructed, pupils get a sense of the 'specialness' of the building, and this helps them understand the 'specialness' of belief in the lives of those who go there.

Before doing any work on places of worship, it's important to explain why these buildings play such an important role in faith communities. Here's one way.

Explain to your class that a really important visitor is coming to your house and you want to give them a glass of water to refresh them when they arrive. Show them a coffee mug and a crystal glass. Ask them which one you should use to give your special guest their drink. They will all say the glass. You could, of course, use the coffee mug, but the glass would show your respect for the visitor. This is the same for faith communities. Although most faiths believe you could meet and pray in any building, having a special place to think about God together is a way for people to express how much their beliefs mean to them.

It might be that your visit will have to be virtual. There are many websites that offer virtual tours of churches, mosques, synagogues, Gurdwaras and temples. If you are nowhere near any of these in reality, then this allows pupils to encounter places they might otherwise never experience. Even so, try to set up these ICT sessions as special. Create an atmosphere as suggested above, so that there is a contrasting mood to other research.

It is this purpose that causes places of worship to exude a 'specialness' that is tangible and inspires the minds of those who visit.

If at all possible, I would highly recommend you give pupils the chance to visit a local place of worship. Start with the most obvious - perhaps the one nearest to you, or somewhere attended by a staff member or parent. Your local authority may have a list of 'school friendly' places in your local area and even a curriculum advisor who could come with you.

The best way by far though, is to go on a visit yourself. Make contact and arrange a visit, asking if someone could show you round. I have never known any faith community do anything other than welcome teachers with open arms.

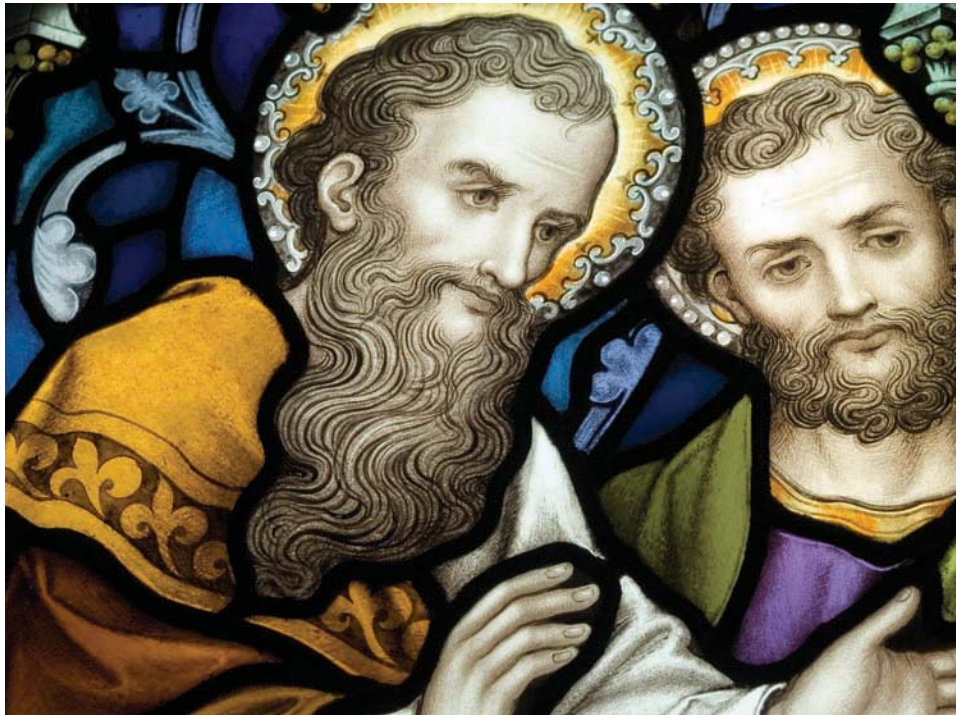
On your visit, think about which aspects of the building and the community would be most interesting to your class, taking account of their age, their knowledge and their understanding of the faith that worships there. You can talk this over with your hosts and you will then be able to take the children with a greater degree of confidence.

My final top tip about visits is to keep them tight and snappy. An hour of interest and excitement is much better than two hours of marking time.

Common bonds

USE RE TO FOSTER COMMUNITY COHESION...

Ofsted frequently comments on the contribution of RE to both community cohesion and to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. More importantly, class teachers see this too. By using names and photos, and by visiting special places, we are focusing pupils on people, not just beliefs. If we can do this consistently, it will help to make sure that long after the stories are forgotten, the common bond of humanity that joins all children together will be remembered.



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4 virtual visits

IF YOU CAN'T ARRANGE A TRIP TO THE LOCAL MOSQUE, THESE WEBSITES PRESENT THE NEXT BEST THING...

1. <http://pow.reonline.org.uk>

The excellent Places of Worship website provides advice on planning visits, and includes tips on appropriate conduct within different religious buildings. You can also view a selection of virtual video visits.

2. www.ict.oxon-lea.gov.uk

The Oxfordshire LEA's ICT website includes examples of places of worship for all major faiths. Just select Weblinks...Primary...RE from the menu.

3. <http://tinyurl.com/yb2wvug>

Take a tour of the Bhatra Gurdwara in Cardiff on The National Grid for Learning Cymru website (ngfl-cymru.org.uk). Notes are provided for pupils in both FS and KS2.

4. www.surreyplacesofworship.org.uk

Annotated images and interactive, panoramic views of a cathedral, synagogue and mosque can all be accessed on this website.

