

AGREED SYLLABUS FOR *religious education*

Launch of the Local Agreed Syllabus
for RE in the Humber area

31 March 2011



**Welcome and introduction by
Dr Bob Duerden, Chair, East Riding of Yorkshire SACRE**

Our new syllabus is recognisable, retaining much of what was recognised as good about the old syllabus, yet it successfully brings the RE curriculum into line with those recent developments in our understanding of learning that have influenced other areas of curriculum development and have moved us towards a more skills-based approach to learning. As a result, this new Agreed Syllabus will make it so much easier to build bridges with other areas of the curriculum. Also, this new Agreed Syllabus is the product not just of the ongoing cooperation between the four local authorities but it also reflects a shared development that has taken place across some 50 other local authorities in England and so draws on a much wider pool of expertise and understanding.

These are challenging days for religious education... why does RE matter? Yes, it does provide an important opportunity for personal reflection and for the development of personal values; and yes, it does provide opportunities for young people to think through some of the big questions of life – purpose and meaning, life and death, justice and forgiveness; and yes, it also provides a vehicle for exploring spiritual values such as, why do I matter? Why does my neighbour matter? Why does my attitude to the place I live in matter? What difference does my view of God make to all of the above? And yes, effective learning and understanding in RE has a critical role to play in the development of community cohesion - understanding of others and how what they believe makes them 'tick' - and, dare one mention it, in developing the 'Big Society'.

We should be taking all the necessary steps to equip our young people and our society with the means to engage constructively and intelligently with the 21st century world. Not to do so will see our country consigned to the margins of world affairs. Good teaching of RE is the best means that we have to develop these global survival abilities. If the blind continue to lead the blind, then both, inevitably, will fall into the ditch... So I commend this new locally agreed syllabus for the Humber area authorities, not just as an adjunct to the curriculum, but as a veritable survival manual for our nation's future.

**Keynote by
Professor Julian Stern, Dean of the Faculty of Education &
Theology, York St John University**

I want to talk about **irreplaceability**. I want to do it because there are some people who are – rightly – concerned about various aspects of religious education and education generally. Some have said that in recent months ‘RE has been hit by a crisis so profound that we are now fighting for ... the continued existence of our subject, in the recognisable form in which it has evolved since 1944’ (Chater 2011). I want to do it because there are other people who wait for government policy to know what to think. I want to do it because religious education is not in the hands of government. It is in the hands of the people here, in the hands of teachers and pupils, supported by the friends of religious education – including the people who have produced this wonderful, lucid, and thoughtful Agreed Syllabus. And teachers and pupils, and friends, are quite simply *irreplaceable*.

As the government itself declared, no-one forgets a good teacher... or a bad one. When I have worked with new trainee RE teachers, half of them say they are training to be RE teachers because they were inspired by a superb RE when they were at school; the other half say they are training to be RE teachers because they were appalled by bad RE teachers. Recently, I worked with colleagues in this region, researching the *spirit of the school* (Stern 2009). We asked pupils, teachers and headteachers, who are they closest to, when they are in school. It produced one of the most interesting of all the findings in the project. Pupils, teachers, and headteachers all had people close to the centre from amongst both the children and the adults in the school... if you simply ask about closeness, rather than friendship, you get this remarkable picture of intergenerational closeness. This is, I believe, an indication of the irreplaceability of pupils and staff in schools. It is something of central importance to religious education. As the Agreed Syllabus wisely says, “Religious education for children and young people: enables pupils to **build their sense of identity** and belonging”.

As Martin Buber says, a real lesson... is, neither a routine repetition nor a lesson whose findings the teacher knows before he starts, but one which develops in mutual surprises (Buber 2002, p 241). And as the Agreed Syllabus says, religious education

should provide such surprises: "Religious education for children and young people: **provokes challenging** questions about the meaning and purpose of life, beliefs, the self, issues of right and wrong, and what it means to be human."

For Early Years, the Agreed Syllabus suggests these challenging – surprising – questions which will I am sure elicit challenging and surprising answers: "What is important to me? Why do people do things differently? Why does my family/community celebrate events like this and your family/community celebrate events differently or not at all? Which is the 'right' way? What do I believe? Why do people have different opinions and views to me? What happens to people when they die? Where was I before I was born?"

The Agreed Syllabus is being launched today, on the last day of Celebrating RE month. It is a first day, and a last day, then - as every day is. I would like to join with everyone, in the four local authorities launching this Agreed Syllabus, in celebrating the religious education being encouraged and supported by this Agreed Syllabus. Yes, it is worth celebrating even as policies drift off into fantasy worlds (and I don't mean that as a compliment), as spending cuts leave many people without jobs, as young people are left out or stressed. It is worth celebrating because good religious education – and good education in general – is not and has never been a creature of politicians, it is a personal matter, a matter of you, me, and every member of the school community. We are there, treating each other as whole human beings.

An event earlier this Celebrating RE month was attended by a new teacher, who described the event the next day to her pupils. She wrote, later, to say: 'After a brief explanation informing the pupil that we were celebrating the best of RE, the pupil turned to me and said "Miss, we know what the best bits of RE are, it's a subject which values our opinions and allows us to be right and wrong." I finished the class with a wonderful feeling of accomplishment and without sounding too tacky, yes, I really do believe RE can and does change lives.'

Well, that's not bad. Thanks very much and good luck to all who sail in her.