

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

INTER FAITH IDEAS and ACTIVITIES



Nationwide, inter faith groups and SACREs (see below) and hopefully many of the faith communities too are often ready and willing to support any school-based activities exploring the inter faith dimension, for which teachers might ask advice and participation.

What is 'inter faith' and why is it important?

'Inter faith' is not a new religion or cult nor is it just teaching about other religions, although that is essential too. Nor is it really 'comparative religion', which implies making judgements. It is about speaking and acting together with people of different faiths and beliefs. It's about people listening to each other and finding common ground and respecting differences. And it's about doing things together – such as working on a community project, meeting socially, going on outings, visiting each other's places of worship, starting an art club, even political lobbying. Of course this includes the beliefs and positions of those without affiliation to any particular religion. And those of you whose schools are in areas without much religious diversity – please read on.

There is growing awareness of the importance of inter faith dialogue and encounter in making a real difference to the peace and harmony of our communities and inter faith groups are springing up all over the country, including in rural areas. This has been greatly inspired and encouraged by the **Inter Faith Network UK**, an organisation which operates nationwide and has a very useful website (www.interfaith.org.uk) and publications which include a directory of the locations and contact details of inter faith groups, and also a directory of places of worship nationwide with excellent up to date information about each religion. November 2009 was the first national 'Inter Faith Week'.

Every local authority has a **SACRE** (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education). It is likely to have amongst its members representatives of the different religions and increasingly SACREs are training their members to go into schools to speak and advise. As teachers you can contact your SACRE for advice and support (for the contact in your LA, see <http://www.nasacre.org.uk/members.html>).

There is a lot of ignorance and prejudice and stereotyping and misinformation around about religions, often made worse by media hype and bias. It's important to try and correct misunderstandings and discover the truth about other faiths, at a personal level, by getting to know better the pupils we are sitting next to, the parents at the school gate, our neighbours, work colleagues and the people whose countries we visit on holidays. Such misunderstandings can be reduced if people discover what they have in common and try to respect - and even enjoy - the differences and learn wisdom from each other's traditions. Then there will be a better chance that communities will live cooperatively and peacefully together and individuals will be better informed and may enjoy the process.

The activities suggested below could be used to address these matters.

PS Don't be inhibited by your own perceived lack of expertise in this area: you don't need to know everything about all the religions and beliefs! Often there is no right or wrong answer to a question; indeed it can be helpful if you as the teacher are willing to enter into the spirit of exploration with the young people. Do enlist the engagement of parents and SACREs and people in the local community from the different faiths if you can.

If your school is located in an area where there is very little religious diversity, you will still find ways of inter faith exploration in the ideas below.

Perhaps you could 'twin' / start up a link with another school where there is religious diversity – by internet communication (eg email correspondence, video conferencing, Skype) writing letters and occasional visits. Pupils are always fascinated to visit another school – it works both ways, both schools would benefit. The Schools Linking Network can advise you: www.schoolslinkingnetwork.org.uk

Interfaith groups

Research and action: Ask pupils to:

- look at the websites of two inter faith groups. For example, the South London Interfaith Group (www.southlondoninterfaith.org.uk) and a local one, if there is one in your area (see IF Network above).
- find out about their aims; how they operate/are organised; about their programme of activities.
- make notes on the differences and similarities between the two groups.
- draw up plans for an inter faith group for young people in your locality: considering aspects such as constitution, membership, objectives (eg educational? social? information? solidarity and mutual support?) and activities / annual programme (eg discussions and debates? joint activity / visits? community service project? festival celebrations? political pressure group? friendships/reciprocal hospitality?). Then ask pupils to design a leaflet to advertise it.

Media influence

Collect and debate: Ask pupils to collect current news-cuttings for a month or more on the topic of religion (they could ask family and friends to help). Pupils can then use them to make a display or scrapbook. Let the class analyse them to see what topics they relate to (e.g. education, legal, appearance and dress issues, political correctness, racial, blasphemy, faith schools, international, family matters, events and festivals etc). Is it good news? bad news? fair, objective reporting?

Debate: 'Are the media a creative or destructive force in inter faith harmony? Do they reinforce prejudice and stereotypes or do they celebrate diversity?'

Perhaps you could invite a reporter from a local newspaper to come and join in.

Scriptural exploration

Study and discuss: What do the different scriptures say about particular issues (eg charity, death, forgiveness, reconciliation, compassion, greed)? The Three Faiths Forum runs inter faith workshops for schools. One of them is built around a method for reading passages of the different scriptures together and discussing the implications, common ground and differences – it is very carefully thought through to encourage generous listening and find ways of avoiding conflict and misunderstanding during the discussion. Go to www.threefaithsforum.org.uk and look up education/Tools 4 Dialogue. Note: the three faiths are Judaism, Christianity and Islam but the method can be extended to other religions.

Annual festivals display board

Research and action/events

Obtain a calendar of religious festivals. Commandeer a display board in a prominent place (entrance, school hall, library, ICT suite). Make it into a 'Festivals Information Board' that changes at the beginning of each month, to announce the main festivals of that month with pictures and information. Identify aspects of celebrating festivals that are shared by different religions as well as aspects that are particular to individual traditions.

Research six of the festivals (different religions), one in each of six different months. Prepare six presentations to make to another class or (if done electronically) to email to another school), one for each half term in the year.

Talking together

Dialogue and discussion

How can people talk to each other about their differences without falling out? If possible, obtain a class set or at least six copies of the book *Talking Together*¹. It contains six imaginary 'take-part' conversations between young people of different religions (and none) talking about topics of interest to them – names, food, dress, journeys and death.

Each 10 minute conversation has six characters and starts off with an ordinary question such as "Why aren't you eating the beefburger, Hansa?" (Hansa is a Hindu) or "Satvir, I've always

wanted to know how you keep your turban from falling off when you play football..." or "What actually will happen when your baby brother is baptised?"

The talking gets deeper as the conversation progresses. It's illustrated with informative captions and a potted general information section and glossary at the back. There are thought provoking questions at the end of each conversation and ideas for further research and activities.

¹'Talking Together' by Sarah Thorley ISBN 1-84298-110-2 from John Hunt Publishing. Or direct from thorleysarah@yahoo.co.uk (£4 plus p&p).

A sample chapter can be seen on the Lambeth SACRE website /syllabus/KS3/inter faith unit pp13-16.

RE Trail

Dialogue and discussion: Look at the RE Trails website, devised by the REC (Religious Education Council of England and Wales) www.retrails.org.uk. Is there a trail near you? If not, could you make one for your own locality? You could even send it in for possible inclusion on the national REC website. The purpose of a trail of this kind is to help pupils develop understanding of the impact religious and belief traditions have had in a particular community. The construction of a trail could provide a lasting legacy in terms of both the RE curriculum and the links you build with local faith communities.

If you are unable to do this in your own area, you could still take pupils on a 'virtual' trail online. Take, for example, the Streatham Trail and look at the websites of the various places included and ask pupils to talk about the trail - as a group activity. Ask pupils to reflect on differences between the religions and the similarities and things they have in common.

Ask pupils to identify some differences within the same religion (if you visit more than one church, for example). Include an activity which helps them to think about stereotyping and to realise that not all Muslims are the same, nor are all Christians the same - nor are they how the media often portray them.

Get pupils to research the activities of the faith communities from their notice boards, including thinking about how and why people's religious ideals inspire them to serve their communities.

How do they help people in need? People in the neighbourhood? People in distant countries?

Faith schools

Research and debate/action: Ask pupils to look at your school's prospectus and make contact with or explore the website of two faith schools (or if yours is a faith school, another faith school and a 'secular' school) and examine their prospectuses. What are the differences between the three school prospectuses? Ask pupils to look particularly for the 'faith' aspects. If possible, arrange a visit to a school that is different from yours. What do pupils think about single faith schools? Debate for and against.

Ask them to design a prospectus for a 'School of Faiths'. It will be a school that invites applications from pupils of different religions and none, where there will be an ethos of taking faiths and beliefs seriously, but accommodation will be made to cater for the different religious and belief backgrounds of pupils and staff. Pupil task: to plan a prayer or quiet reflection/meditation room that could be used by pupils and staff of different faiths and none.



Harmony

Plan an event: Organise a week in your school on the theme of *Peace* or *Making Friends with your Other Faith Neighbour* or *Inter Faith Harmony in our community/country*. What could you do in history, geography, IT, art and drama? Circulate your ideas to all the teachers in your school (well in advance of the week). Depending on your locality, invite parents and/or leaders of different faiths to come in and contribute. Put up displays around the school. Inform the local press and invite them to visit and report or write up your own report and send it in with photos.

Perhaps you could create a monthly lunchtime discussion club. What are the things the different religions have in common? Ask pupils to identify some of the differences (without making value judgements) and to think about the question, 'Where do people who don't belong to a religion get their ideas and ethics and inspiration for living from?'

Stereotyping

Action and reflection

We can never say 'All Christians do this' or 'All Hindus believe this' or 'All agnostics think that'. There is a huge variety of belief and practice within each religion. Ask pupils to investigate/ devise a questionnaire (maybe 10-15 questions) and try to speak to 3 people of different denominations or branches of as many religions OR from different cultures, as you can, for example:

- An Anglican, a Baptist and a Quaker OR three Christians, one from Africa, another from the Caribbean, another from an Eastern European country.
- A Muslim from Africa, another from India and another from the Middle East OR could be a Sunni Muslim, a Shi'a Muslim and a Sufi Muslim.
- A Buddhist from Japan, another from Tibet and another from Sri Lanka.

The questioners should try to do this without making value judgements (ie without saying one way is better than another). Sample questions:

- *What is the building like where you go to worship?*
- *What are the most important parts of your worship?*
- *Do you have naming ceremonies for babies? What happens?*
- *What are your funeral customs?*
- *What do you think happens to us after we die?*

Write up your findings in a class scrapbook.

Note: try to be clear about the difference between a religious teaching and a cultural tradition (e.g. arranged marriages are common among Indian Christians as well as among Indian Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs – so that is a cultural tradition rather than a religious or scriptural teaching).

The meaning of words

Research and study - KS4 upwards

Ask pupils to write down what they understand to be the meaning of each of these words: prayer, worship, pilgrimage, shrine, heaven, soul (or spirit), prophet, priest, monks and nuns, saint. They should discuss their answers with a partner then pair up to share ideas in a group of four. Ask them to consider how these words may be

differently used or understood by different religions, for example the words:

- *Priest* to a Christian and a Hindu.
- *Pilgrimage* to a Muslim and a Hindu.
- *Monk* and *nun* to a Buddhist and a Christian.
- *Guru* to a Sikh and a Hindu.
- *Sabbath* to a Jew and a Christian.
- *Idol* to a Hindu and a Jew or Christian.
- *After-life* to a Muslim and a Buddhist.
- *Baptism* for a Sikh and a Christian.

Misunderstandings often arise between people because these words can mean different things to different people – it's always important to talk about such difficulties when they arise.

Team work: pupils to compose some entries for an 'Inter faith dictionary' giving the different interpretations of some of each word for the different faiths.

More possibilities

Food

In:

- religious practice
- hospitality
- religious laws and attitudes to abuse (alcohol, drugs, vegetarian etc)

Names

- names and their origins
- different names and symbols for God

Religion or culture?

Awareness of the difference between customs and tradition of *culture* and of *religion*. Symbolic meanings of dress and appearance and the misunderstandings . . . (Sikh turban, niqab, crucifix)

Inter faith activity nationwide

Look at the list of activities on the Inter Faith Week website . . .

