

Report on the National Association of SACREs
Annual General Meeting
23rd May 2013
Birmingham

Challenging SACREs

Keynote address was shared by HMI Alan Brine (OFSTED national leader for RE) and Dr Mark Chater (Director of Culham St.Gabriel's Trust)

HMI Alan Brine

Alan started by telling the conference that there was a new OFSTED subject report on RE due out soon and he shared verbally the key headlines contained within this report:

- too much RE is not good enough and there is little evidence of improvement, with 60% of provision less than good (note: PSE being 40% less than good).
- there is still the need for significant curriculum thinking in order to address these concerns.
- there are additional concerns about the quality and provision at GCSE. Whilst there are high numbers taking GCSE, the quality is not good enough with far too much 'rote' learning.
- pressure is being placed on RE due to recent educational policies, and it is as yet unclear how much long-term damage has been done to RE by this squeeze.
- Government policy changes and ideology are threatening the rationale for some established structures such as SACREs.

In terms of how all this was impacting SACREs, he suggested that the recent NASACRE survey and OFSTED evidence indicated that SACREs were under increasing pressure, which was leading to an increasing variability in the capacity of SACREs to undertake their responsibilities effectively. This is being compounded by issues of inadequate funding and limited access to adequate expertise.

These reasons together, with the continued drive towards 'academisation', raise serious and immediate questions about the future of the local SACRE.

He used the Biblical analogy of Pharaoh's dream that Joseph interpreted. He suggested that Pharaoh's dream of the 7 fat cows and 7 lean cows (interpreted by Joseph as 7 good years of plenty and 7 bad years famine) was a good analogy to use and he went on to explain why.

From 1990 – 2010, SACREs functioned well with good national support from DfE and the then QCA (QCDA), their statutory duties were respected and undertaken seriously. OFSTED reports and regular subject reports provided the SACRE with evidence of what was happening in all their local schools. GCSE in RE (both long and short course) was booming and because there was a board consensus about RE, the subject benefitted from wider educational aims and government initiatives such Every Child Matters and Community Cohesion.

Alan went on to suggest that even in the 'good years', cracks were appearing. The key emerging issue was the subjects 'statutory' status as against its educational justification. The subject's 'odd' legal status needed to be addressed. The short course GCSE was successful but, whilst it had relevance, the subject did not have sufficient educational rigour. Finally, because SACREs were fragile and variable, on the ground, there was little improvement and, for all the success, the issues surrounding the purpose and status of RE remained unresolved resulting in a significant 'climate change'.

Since these issues were not addressed, the resulting 'lean years' were driven by the growing autonomy of schools to determine their own curriculum and ethos. The first change was the impact of the collapse of national support structures, such as QCDA, which meant that the Non-statutory framework had a limited impact due to a lack of support. At the same time there was a reduction in the LA support for SACREs, undermining both their function and effectiveness. Alan also questioned if there are grounds for RE, or any subject, having statutory status.

However, in the face of all this there is some good news (!). There is a lot of creative and innovative embedded in the thinking behind the new syllabuses. There are now some good models of SACRE/academy partnerships, with academy chains exploring new models of RE.

Another further bit of good news is that the threat that RE is facing has generated a lot of debate, not least in the formation of the APPG (all party parliamentary group). Plus several new networks and initiatives have been set up, such as Face to Faith, Three Faith Forum and the setting up of Faith Ambassadors.

Alan concluded his part of the presentation by offering conference some key questions. Should RE be aligned with the National Curriculum being developed? Or should the subject status remain detached, developing the capacity of the local SACRE in preparation for better days ahead?

He proposed that the most effective resolve conference can make is to continue to develop a concerted campaign but questioned if the current wide-distribution of responsibility for RE is too wide? We could try demanding a response from those who can influence the government's stance, but he questioned how can NASACRE or the local SACRE possibly engage with a government that refuses to engage in debate?

Dr Mark Chater

Mark continued this debate by talking about the Leviathan – a mystical beast first mentioned in the Bible, a huge sea monster and, used as expression by Hobbs in 1651 to represent the formidable nature of 'the state'. Mark suggested that today we associate the Leviathan with central government, but he went on to suggest that the many challenges facing SACREs are not necessarily the government's fault.

Could the real Leviathan be the very cumbersome nature of the RE animal? There are, after all, 154 (150 in UK) local authorities each producing an agreed syllabus. Is it right that the RE education each child receives is determined by a SACRE that is relatively unrepresentative; certainly not representing the children they are seeking to serve? There are national and local education structures seeking to determine the character of RE all the while putting pressure on teachers. And all this is surprising given that the local SACRE has considerable responsibility but with little power and insufficient resources and funding.

Mark then asked a telling question, which evoked little response, "If we had a blank bit of paper to design a system for RE, would it be like the one we have?" (one positive hand went up!)

He then went on to suggest a new definition of SACRE:

- S** **Semi-detached**, meaning not fully engaged with the rest of the curriculum
- A** **Antiquated**, in that each SACRE a limited membership that excludes other groups/faiths, which, in his opinion is indefensible. The inevitable growth of academies will render SACREs obsolete.
- C** **Compliance-fixated**. It might seem that the established stakeholders of RE are always winging about compliance , which is a very hollow argument considering the growing strength of school autonomy.
- R** **Rigid**. The whole system seeks a future by being inflexible and outmoded.
- E** **Extravagant**. There is a lot of labour, volunteers, paper.. and so on .. to make this rather inefficient system work!

Perhaps the biggest 'failure' of the system is that SACREs, by their very objective make RE a special case, isolating the subject from the rest of education development. And the continued demand for 'compliance' actually weakens the pedagogical rational for the subject.

The growth of academies has 'leapfrogged' the system and, in some cases, becoming in a sense SACREs in their own right, rendering the LA structure, with its statutory duties, impotent. Far from promoting the subject, the Agreed Syllabus system fragments the support the subject needs, embedding itself in underperformance and thus reducing the very impact the subject it is seeking to promote.

He also went on to explain further his allegation that the RE system is 'extravagant'. Is the locally agreed syllabus flawed? He questioned if the 'local-stake ownership' model actually works. There are, after all, a good many hours of work, support and costs that go into producing 154 relatively similar agreed syllabuses – many of which are not needed as the

LA does not have any non-academy schools. He went on to make a prediction that the national curriculum would be obsolete within 2 years.

He then wondered if RE were a 'protected space', suggesting that the system of local structures had actually done more to stunt the growth of the subject? In fact he suggested that it is far from protected, it is in fact a 'dying system'. The real monster of RE, the Leviathan, is in fact already dead!

Having started with this rather blistering analysis of RE and its future, he then asked what kind of future do we (delegates of NASACRE?) want? Is the future local or national?

At present, Charles Clark (probably the secretary of state that most engaged with the issue of the future of RE) is looking for a redefinition of RE and the role of SACRE. Mark went to start his own prognosis/re-definition and suggested replacing the term SACRE with the similar quasi-Latin expression FIDES (faith?).

F **Freedom** - not compliance driven but guided
I **Innovation** - making the subject so much better, driven by children's enquiry
D **Democracy** - with real openness to fresh thinking
E **Engagement** - linked with the wider curriculum, not set apart
S **Standards** - driven by content

But there is a real danger, that if one Leviathan is dead (or nearly dead), there are other monsters growing in strength. The growth of 'affluenza' is changing the life goals of children and we live in a period of continuing national tensions relating to issues of faith.

Some LAs now appear not to recognise the role of the local SACRE and consequently provide poor support. Consequently it was accepted that SACREs will need guidance if they are to fulfil their statutory duties.. but they are unlikely to get any!

One view is to see SACREs in terms of evolution. If it is to be 'the survival of the fittest', then SACREs will need to stop thinking of their own future, and instead of seeing themselves as 'protected', actually change to become leaner and fitter! But these changes will need to come from the ground up – not via top down support, which the government seem reluctant to give anyway! Innovative SACREs should seek to impact parents with the importance of RE, which is also essential we are to combat growing issue of parent bigotry.

Mark suggested that the question to be asked to parents is "do you trust your child".

Are there any ongoing positives regarding the local SACRE? Using another metaphor, Mark and Alan suggested that SACREs need to 'make the weather', and take the lead in RE reform and development. Indeed, the most effective SACREs are working beyond their statutory duties and provide a valuable local network.

He then quoted sociologist Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of well meaning individuals can change the world". So Mark and Alan concluded with the question to NASACRE: is there a new way ahead? What does a grass-root model of education development look like?"

(Perhaps it already exists and RE needs genuine 'localism' with a re-investment into re-invigorated current structures – after-thought by MS)

Note: Actual full quote: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has". Margaret Mead: anthropologist (1901-1978)

NASACRE business meeting

This year the business time was sharp and brief.

The most impressive point to report is that for all the 'negatives' that had been exposed by Alan Brine and Mark Chater, 120 SACREs were still affiliated and paid up, which is 80% of all LAs. Even more interesting was that all SACREs had at some point in the recent past been affiliated.

We were later treated to a preview version of the new NASACRE website which will have an open/public area together with a private area for those who are paid up/affiliated who will receive an annual password.

Group discussion

In the afternoon there was a series of questions for groups to discuss.

Question 1 What can SACREs do to work with academies?

Question 2 How can SACREs best press LAs to comply with their statutory duty to support SACREs?

Question 3 What should be the focus of RE syllabus review?

The various suggestions made by delegates will be published in the NASACRE report on the conference on their website.

Feedback relevant for Bromley SACRE

I felt that one outcome of the conference was to set out our own key 'next steps' for Bromley SACRE. These suggestions are based upon table conversations and the question/answer time.

- What kind of future do we want? Is the future local or national?
- Can we make better use of the secondary RE teacher's network?
- We could invite RE coordinators to visit and present something of their work to SACRE.
- Can SACRE encourage schools to cooperate in the sharing of resources?
- Should SACRE develop a stronger person specification for membership?
- We should arrange for the chair of SACRE to meet with the director of education on a regular basis.
- How can we encourage academies to buy into the local syllabus?
- Should SACREs make press statement from time to time to focus attention on their work?
- Can SACRE distribute information to school governors?