TEACHING CHRISTIANITY IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: STRATEGIC OVERVIEW

1) This project is intended to improve pupils’ understanding of Christianity. It explores and develops one important strand within existing religious education, rather than seeking to replace the current policy and pedagogical thinking.

   (1) The project is primarily aimed at community schools, which are regulated by the current statutory arrangements, rather than church schools, though these are not excluded.
   (2) It does not seek to replace the current approach to pluralistic religious education, i.e. the teaching of the major world religions. It focuses on the most significant religion, because it raises particular issues, but general insights into pupils’ understanding of religions will probably emerge.
   (3) It focuses on one strand of current RE – ‘learning about religion’. It is only concerned with pupils’ spirituality or their attitudes to Christianity to the extent that these can support this. It is simply about better understanding, though various other intellectual skills may be valuable in achieving this. If RE cannot ensure that pupils have an accurate in-depth understanding of Christianity then it is vulnerable to criticism. The ways that this is done need to be identified, recorded and promoted. It is not a re-writing of the current distinction between ‘learning about’ and ‘learning from religion’, though it should inform this discussion.

2) It is an intervention. It is about making changes to current practice, in order to improve it. This process needs to be monitored reflexively, both to improve it while it is happening, and also so that lessons can be learnt from such an intervention. Sustaining this intervention will need adjustment and regulation.

3) The project involves three main areas of activity:
   (1) The first is the world of teacher education. The project should develop new strategies for helping teachers develop their own teaching and learning. This is fundamental. It will focus on Key Stages 2 and 3, which are the critical stages for pupils’ core understanding. Key Stage 1 can be considered later, and Key Stage 4 is dominated by GCSE. This is where the impact of the intervention needs to be identified. Ways of supporting classroom teachers need to be developed, such as how to draw on their existing knowledge, how to avoid anxieties about being confessional, or how to avoid stereotyping
   (2) The second is the religious education community. The project needs to draw on and engage with the considered views of RE professionals, such as academics, advisors teacher trainers and researchers. This is both to ensure it has pedagogical integrity, and to allow different voices to engage with the project. RE educationalists may want to
develop different classroom strategies, to consider how the project may impact on a particular pedagogy, or to relate the project to wider debates.

(3) The third is the sphere of influence. This includes those who are interested in the state of religious education more widely, whether for religious reasons, through political processes, or through funding. These people may want to support particular elements within the first two areas of activity, or they may want to consider its implications for wider issues of policy.

4) The involvement of all these three areas is essential. If the project simply focused on the first, it would merely be a set of helpful tips for teachers. This would have some initial impact, but no long term influence. If it was only in the second area, it would have some influence at a theoretical level, but minimal impact in the classroom, or in policy. If it was simply in the last area, it could generate a strong voice, but remain ungrounded in practice and in pedagogy.

5) So far, the project consists of a variety of different elements
   a) A review of 20 years of research on teaching Christianity in England
      ii) A YouGov poll of the public’s view of Christianity in religious education: http://yougov.co.uk/
      iii) An online module for primary student teachers: in progress - to be launched September 2013.

6) Planned future elements:
   (1) Online training for primary teachers, including subject coordinators
   (2) Online training for secondary teachers, including non-specialists and heads of department.
   (3) Synthesis of teachers’ projects (www.farmington.ac.uk)

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