

Whose Responsibility?

The balance between local and national in RE

St Gabriel's Conference

Proceedings

**St Gabriel's Trust
2001**

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Foreword

Whose Responsibility? The balance between local and national in RE was held at Church House, Westminster, on 23 October 2000. It was the fourth national conference sponsored by the St Gabriel's Trust.

In the morning Stephen Orchard (Chair, RE Council of England and Wales) discussed the qualities of RE today and gave some historical background to the subject. Ian Berry (Head of the National Curriculum Division of the DfEE) described the government's position on RE on behalf of the Education Minister, Jacqui Smith MP. From the other side of the political divide, Baroness Blatch provided her views on the present state of RE as the Conservative Spokesman on Education in the House of Lords. Barbara Wintersgill was scheduled to give her standpoint as an HMI with Ofsted, but unfortunately she was ill and could not attend the conference. Instead, John Gay (Culham College Institute) read Mrs Wintersgill's speech with her permission. Afterwards, John Keast (QCA) offered his perspective on the position of RE and suggested a possible way forward. Marian Agombar (NASACRE), Dave Francis (AREIAC) and Linda Rudge (Keswick Hall RE Centre) then voiced their support of the local framework in action.

After lunch the delegates divided into discussion groups to debate the issues brought up by the speakers, and reported their findings to the rest of the conference. Graham Lane (Local Government Association) then spoke of the value of RE, followed by Lord Dearing's summing up and conclusions.

On 14 December 2000 the St Gabriel's Programme held a follow-up seminar to enable organisations to discuss further the issues raised at the conference.

The text that follows was provided by the speaker unless otherwise noted.

The St Gabriel's Programme

The St Gabriel's Programme supports Religious Education, especially through action research, in-service training and seminars. It is a collaboration between the St Gabriel's Trust and Culham College Institute.

The St Gabriel's Programme:

- promotes national collaboration
- identifies and addresses unmet needs
- brings RE teachers together
- develops skills
- builds on good practice in RE
- benefits teachers, trainers and learners.

Since 1997, the St Gabriel's Programme has brought together over 200 RE teachers and co-ordinators annually for 'The RE Teacher Weekend', a weekend's in-service training. In 1999, the Programme also supported 'Raising Standards in RE', a residential conference for RE teachers in the North West. It also supports RE in-service training

through action research involving 20 organisations, and offers grants to clusters of schools undertaking teacher-led INSET.

Previous national conferences have made significant contributions to RE. 'RE: The Way Ahead?', held in 1992, led to the development of model syllabuses. The 1995 conference saw the announcement of short-course GCSEs in RE and the National RE Festival. The Centenary Conference in 1999 provided an opportunity to discuss the essence of RE, consider recent developments and present a confident future for RE within the curriculum.

The programme has organised and supported a wide range of seminars, intended to facilitate collaboration, share best practice and develop the subject. Recent work in this area includes:

- Sharing Ideas: RE and the Millennium
- RE Futures – in collaboration with Professional Council for RE
- Clergy and RE in Schools
- Christian content in PGCE courses
- Research in RE
- RE 16–19
- AREIAC (inspectors and advisers) regional seminars on attainment
- Christian Theology and Education.

Additionally, the St Gabriel's Programme supports the Engaging the Curriculum project and a national distance learning MA in RE. It has also produced a register of research in RE. Publications include *The RE Directory*, a first-stop resource document for teachers; *Teaching about Science and Religion* by Michael Poole; and *Collective Worship Reviewed*, the report on a national consultation, part-funded by the programme.

Part 1: Conference Proceedings

1. Introduction

The conference was opened by Priscilla Chadwick, Chair of the St Gabriel's Trust, who welcomed everyone and expressed her gratitude to Lord Dearing for agreeing to chair the conference.

Lord Dearing, Chair of the Conference

Today's gathering takes me back to a day in 1994, when representatives of the six main faiths gathered to proclaim and celebrate the launch of Stage II model curricula for Religious Education. It was, I think, a very remarkable achievement, and one can imagine few countries in the world where six faiths could come together, sit together and jointly say, 'Yes, go for it.' I am glad to say that over the years that have followed, those model curricula have had a very strong and very beneficial influence on what goes on in our schools. That event had much to do with a lady who can't be here today: Barbara Wintersgill. She was the official in SCAA, as it was called at the time, who put this piece of work together. There are people on the platform today who are equally to blame or equally to acclaim for that achievement, but I wanted particularly to mention Barbara. I know how much she put into it, and without her it would not have happened. The precedent to that 1994 initiative was a conference organised by St Gabriel's: what was great about that conference was that it led to some action, to something being done, rather than just learning from each other. That's good, and I hope today's conference will be equally successful in prompting some action.

So I began to think about the kind of issues that might be in our minds. One that occurred to me was that I was involved in some work with SCAA back in 1993–4. At that time RE got 5% of curriculum time allocated to it (and people have welcomed that anchor). I am just a bit concerned that the commitment to introduce citizenship might erode that allocation. Now I do believe that RE is the pin of civilisation. At that conference in 1994 I remember Jonathan Sachs, the Chief Rabbi, saying 'Frontiers are defended by soldiers, civilisations are made in schools.' I believe there is a profound truth in that and underpinning it is, I believe, Religious Education. So 5% of curriculum time is one of my agenda items.

A second issue for me is a concern that Religious Education should be of a good quality. I have been a touch concerned to read in a document put out by Culham – maybe some of you have seen it – that the number of the references to RE in LEA inspection reports have been diminishing, and diminishing very sharply. I haven't got my glasses on, so I'm probably not going to read the figures properly, but I remember that they showed that in the first year (I think it was 1988) round about 80% of them did, then it came down to 30%, and so far this year it has been about 15%. Why, I ask myself, is RE not getting the attention it should have in these LEA inspection reports? We have Graham Lane coming this afternoon from the LEA world, and he may wish to say something about that.

Another area of concern is that QCA seem to say in their Year 2000 report that the amount of time available for RE advisers for LEA has been diminishing, not necessarily full-time or part-time, not necessarily an employee, a consultant. Is this an issue of concern, that there isn't the kind of support that we would wish? QCA says that not all the SACREs are equally effective, and for a subject like RE, which is the

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one that is taught by statute and is not covered by the National Curriculum, it seems to me to matter that the SACREs are effective and they are well served.

But you know, at a conference like this it is tempting to concentrate on what has not gone as well as we would wish. I am conscious that some things have gone very well, including for example the way the model curricula have been taken up, and the extent to which the take-up of the short-course GCSE in RE seems to grow immensely stronger. That's good news, and there is of course a lot of dedication from people in SACREs and local conferences. So there are things that are good, and I think it is important to endorse and enthuse about the good things, as much as to come up with ideas for improving things, in an agenda for possible action.

Well, those are my thoughts for the day. After some of the speeches you'll be breaking up into groups and you will have an opportunity to create your own agenda and to feed it back to the conference later in the day.

2. RE and the National Context

Professor Stephen Orchard, Chair of the RE Council of England and Wales

I am here to speak about the characteristics of Religious Education at the present moment: I think I might be entitled to have as a subtitle 'A Personal Perspective', and you must tune into it in the way that seems right to you. I'll try to sound the notes of what is happening nationally in Religious Education and perhaps as the day goes on we can reach our own evaluation of the significance of these events.

I want to talk about three characteristics of Religious Education as we see it today, and the first is its inclusiveness. This has emerged over the last ten years, and this inclusiveness works at various levels. It seems to work in the classroom as far as anecdotal evidence tells us. No one, of course, thought to keep statistics of withdrawals from RE where parents exercise their option, but anecdotally I think it is true to say that those withdrawals are fewer and fewer, and some of the religious groups who traditionally have withdrawn their children from school Religious Education are now persuadable that those children should actually share in that enterprise. That inclusiveness may seem a small thing, but I think it is vitally important to the good of the subject at the school level.

The next piece of inclusiveness is the content. Lord Dearing has already spoken about the content that we have provided in the model syllabuses. There is a body of content – some of it, of course, not in the model syllabuses but elsewhere in professional papers which have emerged over the last ten years – which is identifiable right across the country in all kinds of local syllabuses. There is an inclusiveness of all kinds of topics, of all kinds of religious belief, and one of the things which to my mind is very interesting after this exercise of the last ten years is that the variety within Christianity has emerged within syllabuses. I think we were standing back a bit from conviction, and that now looking at a range of conviction has helped that inclusiveness to develop. That inclusiveness is not restricted to the sector which falls under the regulations affecting Agreed Syllabuses, it is something you will also find within the Church school sector and within the independent sector – not universally in any of these places, but growing and increasing.

Perhaps the most significant piece of inclusiveness since the 1988 Education Reform Act has been in syllabus making and monitoring within the SACRE and within the syllabus conference. When I first came into Religious Education some fourteen years ago, there was a fear that the local aspect might disappear from neglect. The 1988 Act, as we know, made it mandatory for the LEAs to have their syllabus conference and to have their Standing Advisory Council, and reminded people of how that should be made up. That inclusiveness, which has been reinforced by legislation, seems to work very well indeed on the ground. My own visits to SACREs, my own contacts with those of you who are in SACREs, suggest that there has been a richness and a building of trust. It is no small part of civil life in this country that we can actually bring people of different faiths and of none together within a local Agreed Syllabus Conference and agree something which is for the good of the community and of the children and young people in our schools.

Finally, on inclusiveness, I would draw attention simply to the RE Council itself. When I first became a member it still had two categories of membership, and the frontiers were very carefully defended. You had to declare as an organisation whether you were a professional organisation or whether you were a faith community

organisation. We have now moved beyond that distinction – not that there aren't people who are professionals, not that there aren't people who are members of faith communities – but we have tried to work together, regardless of our discipline and of our conviction, for the good of RE.

The second thing I would like to draw to your attention is the increased credibility of RE over the last few years. We within the RE community have tried to bring RE in from the cold. I now say to my colleagues and to others, please don't keep referring to RE as the 'Cinderella subject', as that only reinforces the stereotype. It might be a good idea actually to keep speaking about Religious Education or Religious Studies in full, rather than reducing us to initials. Walk tall for the subject, because we have to be sure ourselves if we are going to make other people sure of that credibility. I think the credibility over the last ten years has been built around several things. First of all, following the agreement of the model syllabuses, the developing work of QCA, the appointment of an Officer, QCA's assumption of functions not statutory, but voluntary, have helped the subject enormously in schools. We still fight battles to make sure that Religious Education is included in the lists of subjects, but those battles are becoming more like skirmishes and less like major wars these days. The inclusion of Religious Education in documentation going to schools, the parity of esteem gained by trying to develop around Religious Education the same pedagogical disciplines as applied to the other subjects in the curriculum, have all undoubtedly helped to build up the credibility of the subject. It may have made other difficulties for specialists, but it has helped the credibility.

Ofsted and the inspection of schools in a rigorous way has clearly helped the subject: whatever you may feel as the recipient of an Ofsted visit, if you look at the profile of RE it has been raised by inspection. It has made Senior Managers in schools think about what they are doing in RE, if only to satisfy the inspection criteria. That somewhat reluctant coming to the table for RE might be criticised, but at least it is coming to the table and you can build upon it. What I think Ofsted has exposed above all is the 'your father was a church organist so you can teach RE' approach to the subject, which characterised it twenty years ago. It still happens, of course, but these days, if your father was a church organist and you get landed with RE and then Ofsted come and inspect your school, there is evidence to show whether the gene for RE actually descended to you or not. I think it has been very good for the subject to be subjected to the same criteria as other parts of the curriculum. That, of course, has spread within the voluntary sector: very often Church schools have combined their own inspection of RE with their Ofsted inspection, and in addition there has been great work done in training people to carry out inspections within Church schools.

The third point about RE's credibility is that the subject has become examinable in a way we never thought possible ten years ago. The local certificate attached to a syllabus, the short-course and the full-course RS have all been developed and we are now looking to a future with an AS RS qualification. Now who, in 1990, could have imagined the number of pupils involved – around 250,000. I think some of the people in this room did imagine it and that is why they pressed on with it. And of course we are not going to stop with 250,000; there are greater things yet to be seen. The schools are beginning to realise that not only can they use their legal obligation to supply RE to get some more brownie points on the GCSE table, but that the subject is becoming more credible, pupils actually want to do it, and they begin to see its relevance and get enthusiastic about it because its status has been raised, and that is a virtuous circle for building up the subject.

Now all this inclusiveness and credibility comes from a variety of sources, but if anything, the inclusiveness is strengthened by the local aspect of RE – particularly by the SACRE – and the credibility has been strengthened by the national aspect – particularly the examinations and the support offered to schools through QCA and the Ofsted inspection. So we already have a slight difficulty, it seems to me, in knowing quite where to put our emphasis.

The third area I want to talk about in RE, the one which is perhaps the most apparent to us today, is the enlarged opportunity for RE. I said, 'Let's not call it a "Cinderella subject" any more.' To put that more sharply, can we stop whingeing about being marginalized and stake our claim to the high ground of the curriculum? I think that's what we have to do in RE, and we do it with good reason and not just in a partisan way. We do it because there is high ground in the centre of the curriculum, which we have a right to occupy, and from which we can help the whole school curriculum. Like the new teacher in the school you sometimes have to earn your credibility by taking things on, and something we are being called upon to take to ourselves in the present climate is certain aspects of citizenship.

Is citizenship a threat or an opportunity for RE? I believe it is an opportunity, as long as we approach it taking our share of the citizenship curriculum, offering our contribution to citizenship education in those areas where our strengths are, while also pointing out that every subject needs to make a contribution if it is to work. It is a bit like those old stories we used to tell when 'spiritual and moral' was enjoyed across the curriculum, and the maths department used to say 'It's not us, it's the RE people.' Citizenship is going to be the same. It might be that the RE people broaden out into several of the Humanities subjects, but I think we have got to make sure that within schools RE does not take on more than its due and more than some of the other subjects. For instance, when you look at what is supposed to be there in citizenship, I don't really see how the sciences can opt out of it.

The other kinds of opportunities which are coming to us and we have begun to take up are things like the National Grid for Learning into which we have been trying to put RE components. Please help us as we try to do this together. We need to co-operate with the slender resources we have in the RE community to make sure that RE offers good quality support to individuals and schools through the National Grid for Learning, and there is an opportunity waiting to be taken up.

In two conferences this summer I have been privileged to see some of the other things that RE can do by way of enlarged opportunity and broader thinking. The Keswick Hall Trust project at the University of East Anglia held a conference reporting on some of the local work. The British and Foreign Schools Society Trust project at the National RE Centre also held a conference. Some of you were there, and you may have been, like me, enthused by the teachers and the researchers who clearly had been taking opportunities for RE at the classroom level and driving the subject forward. The thing that impressed me most was the way in which RE plays a part in whole school issues. Religious educators are taking their share of literacy teaching and seeing it as an opportunity rather than a threat. Similarly, religious educators are taking their share of ICT work. Religious educators are asking themselves what would they contribute to the school if it were in special measures; and what would religious educators do about the oncoming drive for creativity in our schools, and so on. The Brunel project was called 'RE and School Effectiveness'. I would like to think that we in the RE world would want to say a school is not effective unless its RE is well done,

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and unless the insights of the RE team are taken on board by the whole management and used for the good of the whole school.

Now all these kinds of developments, these kinds of opportunities, need national encouragement, and sometimes we even hold out the bowl and say they need national money too. RE has not been a great beneficiary of national funding because of its local place within the scheme of things, and we know that local authorities have taken very different views on how much funding they are going to put behind RE. But if these kinds of developments need national encouragement and resourcing they also need local support and dissemination. Some of the things which were reported at those conferences would not have happened without local RE advisers and the support of the local SACRE and the local RE community. So I think which way we go is a very real question before us today. Perhaps we may want to go one way for some things and the other way for others on this local and national divide.

In conclusion, don't let us make today a day when we think either national government and its agencies have got to put RE right, or local government and SACRE and syllabus conferences have got to put RE right, with the help of their officers. We have to remember that many of these wonderful changes have come about in RE over the last ten years because those who believe in the subject, those who are represented in this room today, have taken it upon themselves to push their enthusiasm forward, to grab lapels and shout in ears, whether or not people wanted to listen, and to move things on. I think it would be a terrible thing if as an RE community we tried to shuffle off our own responsibilities and if we did not keep up the momentum – by our lobbying, by our efforts and by our imagination – to make sure the subject continues to add to the prestige it now enjoys in schools.

3. A Government Perspective

Mr Ian Berry, Head of National Curriculum Division DfEE, on behalf of Jacqui Smith MP, Education Minister

Thank you very much for inviting me to contribute to this event, and thank you very much for the very positive start that has been made. I wasn't quite sure what sort of atmosphere I would walk into today. Would people have their begging bowls out? Would people be saying 'Central Government is terrible, you are ruining our subject'? The view that I take about education and improving the state of subjects in the curriculum is 'Let's assess where we are now; what can we do to improve things?' That's very much the approach that I want to take in what I want to say about the Government's view of RE today. You will see on the slides that I have actually failed the first test because I am afraid I referred to RE rather than Religious Education. Apologies for that but it saved ink.

I am going to cover four areas. First of all, just a short assessment of where we are now. Secondly, how did I guess you would want to talk about citizenship? So I will take head-on the question of RE and citizenship. Thirdly, what the Government is doing to support RE, and finally just a quick look into the future.

So, where are we now? I want to start by emphasising that the position of RE is secure under current policy. During the recent review of the National Curriculum, on which I advised Ministers, it was made quite clear to me from day one that the position of RE was not to be changed by the review, it was not to be affected by citizenship, and the statutory status was not to change; that was what I sought to deliver. I think that we recognise that RE has a distinctive place in the curriculum. It contributes something that no other subject can, it teaches children about beliefs and values, it helps to promote an understanding of ourselves and what is right and wrong. It concentrates on our sense of belonging and respect for each other. I don't think that any other subject can deliver that combination of things, and that's why it has an important place. It also helps children to learn about Christianity and the other faiths that exist in Britain and to learn about how to respond to those religions and to look at issues within and between the religions. Clearly you cannot get any or all of that together anywhere else in the curriculum and that's why RE has a distinctive place. RE also helps to develop thinking skills and it actually requires a high level of literacy to be able to learn effectively. It is very important that RE teachers understand the contribution they can make to some of the current themes of our policies about literacy and thinking skills.

I also think there is lots of good practice and we should celebrate that. When I was preparing for this conference I looked at one example: Lawrence Sheriff School in Rugby ran a day of study for all students in the lower sixth form, entitled 'Faith in the Future'. The day provided sociological, philosophical and religious insights to help students think about what will happen to religion in the next century and about what their own sources of faith and confidence in the future might be. They had a full day of interactive learning which made a valuable contribution to the key skills of communication. One student commented, 'I thought it would be boring' (haven't you heard that before?) 'but the day exceeded my expectations by far and opened my eyes to other cultures.' Another said, 'It was insightful, but not too forceful,' picking up the idea that RE today is a proactive and challenging, without indoctrination.

Now I think there are lots of other examples of that sort of thing happening within RE and one thing that you ought to be thinking about is how do we identify such good examples, celebrate them and spread them around. There are also some examples of RE being particularly relevant in schools where there are children from many different ethnic backgrounds and with many different faiths. RE lessons can be a particular key there to helping children build understanding between each other, and we would like to see that sort of example being picked out and developed.

Standards in RE are rising, and that of course is very important. The keystone of a lot of our policies is: how do we raise standards in education? RE is not exempt from that requirement, as has already been said in terms of national action to help to raise standards, and through the inspection and activity of Ofsted. Ofsted inspection evidence confirms a number of things – some of them you might think are straws in the wind – but one of them is that more primary schools are complying with the statutory requirements than in previous years. You may think that that is not necessarily something to shout about, but it is a sign of improvement. It also emphasises that quality in RE is highly dependent on the work of the LEA specialist advisers and trainers and the SACREs in supporting teachers.

I didn't know that Barbara Wintersgill was not going to be here today. She is here in spirit and in indeed I have a quote, which I think is from her, from a recent Ofsted inspection report, which says, 'There has been a significant increase in the proportion of schools introducing GCSE full and short courses for RE. These accredited courses have improved the quality of planning and teaching and have resulted in improved achievement by pupils.' The rise in entries for GCSE short courses has been dramatic and it has continued this year. The figures have increased from 12,390 in 1997 to 80,000 in 1998 to 106,000 last year. The latest information from the examining boards shows a further increase of almost a third, to 137,000, so that's an eleven-fold increase since 1997. Community and foundation schools have taken up the short course in whole cohorts, rather than relying on small option groups.

This is good news: it shows the commitment to the subject that exists and we need to ensure that it continues. I actually even have a chart here to cheer you up a bit – it won't cheer you up very much, because it shows a gradual improvement in standards at GCSE level, but actually that is consistent with the rate of improvement at GCSE across the board. That shows in recent years a rise in the number of A to C passes in full- and short-course GCSE, and that is the sort of improvement we want to encourage.

We are clear that behind this progress is a combination of the development of the syllabuses and the work of the SACREs, together with the hard work of many national and local organisations and the positive effect of Ofsted inspections in schools. This very much echoes what Stephen Orchard said about the combination of factors which is helping to raise standards, the dynamic of which is important to understand and maintain when thinking about the future. I think that no other subject in the curriculum is so dependent on the work of voluntary groups. This shows the increasing effectiveness of the local responsibility and the local ownership of RE. It is very difficult to get right and sometimes standards vary, but it is stake-holding at its best. I know there is concern about how to make it work, but it is a strength.

Groups such as SACREs, national, diocesan and local groups have a very beneficial and important part to play in the delivery of this subject. Church Trusts support the curriculum and pedagogical developments in RE with a generous level of financial support. The St Gabriel's Programme and the Farmington Trust are two examples of

pioneering support and practical opportunities for RE teachers. So all in all I would say that the picture of RE in terms of standards is positive – not, as I say, a dramatic improvement in standards, but a gradual improvement in standards, which we ought to be pleased about and to celebrate and to seek to understand how to increase.

But the question is, have we just introduced a threat to all of this through citizenship? Now I know some people have expressed concerns during the review of the National Curriculum about the introduction of citizenship and about a strengthened framework for personal, social and health education. There were concerns that we were going to replace RE or take away the curriculum time that Lord Dearing referred to, and undermine the progress of recent years. My belief is that those concerns are not well founded. The introduction of citizenship and a stronger PSHE framework will not undermine RE, but will actually serve to strengthen it. The Government is committed, as I said, to delivering RE alongside citizenship, recognising that each has a distinctive, but complementary role.

There are no changes to the statutory requirements for teaching RE following the revised National Curriculum; it is business as usual. I believe that RE teachers, in fact, can make a very valuable contribution to citizenship and to personal, social and health education. I think the new curriculum, particularly PSHE, gives a stronger role to family life, and makes explicit the importance of learning about marriage. Citizenship also makes explicit the importance of learning about tolerance and understanding of others. I hope you will agree that actually strengthening these aspects in the curriculum, thinking in terms of its broad purposes, does actually strengthen the curriculum and strengthen what will be taught in schools: RE with its unique contribution will actually support and strengthen the delivery of those subjects. It is hard to see how schools can develop respect for diversity, for example, without a reference to religious beliefs, Christianity and other religions and faiths. I think that probably RE teachers will have much to contribute in teaching citizenship. There is a clear role for RE in dealing with some of the moral and social dilemmas facing children, and which children will be contemplating facing society. RE teaching will contribute towards that.

4. A Conservative Perspective

The Rt Hon the Baroness Blatch, Conservative Spokesman on Education in the House of Lords

My Lord Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, first of all thank you very much for inviting me to the conference. My own credentials include a period of time, some years in fact, serving in local government. I have been in the past involved in the work of an Agreed Syllabus Conference and indeed for a number of years I have served as a member of a SACRE. I served also in the DfEE 1992–94, and at present I am a member of the shadow education team; it is good to see Tim Boswell, who is another member of the education team, here in the audience this morning. I have to say in confessional mode that my experience is not altogether a happy one in this respect. There was a constant battle against the supermarket approach, as I describe it, to the teaching of RE, certainly when working with the Agreed Syllabus Conference, and again through the SACRE; a constant battle for Christianity to be predominant in the RE curriculum; and of course during the 1988 Act in the House of Lords where I took a part as a very new member, and again in my role in the Department for Education and Employment. I said to Lord Dearing before the debate started that I was in a confessional mode, and my confession is that I don't believe that I ever won that battle.

But what I want to do is to shed some light on where I am coming from, and to that end I want to read from a debate in the House of Lords in 1988 when the late Lord Jacobovits (who made wonderful speeches in the House), spoke on this particular subject in the House of Lords. He outlines almost more than anyone else where I am coming from. In fact he was describing Jonathan Sachs' experience and he said Jonathan Sachs was raised at a primary school which was devoutly Church of England, where Jewish boys had their separate Jewish assemblies. Jonathan Sachs said, 'The effect of this schooling on our Jewish identity was curious. It made us, of course, acutely aware that we were different, but because those around of us were taking their religion seriously, it made us consider our Judaism seriously too.' He went on to say, 'So it isn't so strange that all this produced a Rabbi. From living with those who valued their traditions, I learned to cherish my own.' What brought this to mind was the report called 'Crisis in Religious Education', in which two Newcastle teachers complained that children in today's schools are losing the chance to grow up as practising Christians. They might, I think, have gone further still, because if Christianity suffers, so in a curious way does every other faith as well. It happens with the best of intentions: how else in a multi-cultural society should we promote tolerance than by teaching children something about every religious group with which they are likely to come into contact? A touch of Christianity, a dash of Judaism, a slice of Islam and so on, through a fruit cocktail of world faiths. But the whole that emerges can be less than the sum of its parts, because it misses out on the most crucial element of all. In fact for each of us there is usually only one faith that resonates with personal meaning, the faith of our community, our culture, our family, our past and that is for each individual child. Of course in trying to teach all faiths it is possible that we succeed in teaching none. 'From schools that had confidence in their Christianity I learned an answering pride in my Jewishness, and I discovered that those who best appreciate other faiths are those who treasure their own.' Might not teaching children their own traditions do more for tolerance and for faith than teaching them everyone else's? He went on to say, 'I want to see included in RE, not

only what distinguishes us, what separates one faith from another, reflecting the prevalent ethos for the majority and the particular beliefs and observances for the minorities, but also what we have in common.'

I believe that particular attention should be given to the moral dimension in preparing the rising generation for responsible marriage and responsible citizenship. For example, these days youngsters receive little if any guidance on dating, courtship, choice of a partner and the expectations within marriage. Instead they simply rely on momentary infatuation and snap decisions, with the result that so many unions, contracted in this casual manner, soon flounder with catastrophic results for the stability of society. Broken homes cost the nation far more socially and economically than AIDS.

He finished by saying, 'To me RE in the widest sense should embrace efforts to excite the intellect with the wonders of nature, to inspire the orb of the human genius as expressing art and literature. It should cultivate an insatiable appetite for learning and a thrill in the pursuit of knowledge, through reading and study for its own sake, until killing time becomes as reprehensible as killing life, because time is our most precious commodity next to life itself.' Now, I really could not put it better myself, but the underlying message there was savouring and sustaining the integrity of each religion, which is important.

Mr Chairman, the questions which you posed, to which this conference is addressed, are very important. What is the state of RE in schools? To what extent are SACREs supported by their LEAs? And to what extent is the reorganisation of local government impacting on the work or even on the status of SACREs? We have had some light thrown on that this morning, both by Mr Orchard and by Mr Berry, but I think the jury is still out on some of those questions. These are questions that actually only the Government itself can answer. Local government reform is not yet complete and there are no signs yet that RE and the respective supportive roles of Ofsted, QCA and the Teacher Training Agency have been positively addressed. I did welcome the comments by Mr Berry that there is to be a green paper addressing this very specifically. In particular many share the concern that RE, if neglected, could be replaced or subsumed into the new subject of citizenship. Here I am not sanguine. This would be extremely undesirable and would, in the long term, result in the loss of the spiritual dimension of education. Citizenship and RE are distinctive subjects, even though as Mr Berry has said, it is accepted that there will be some syllabus overlap. It also has to be asked that if citizenship is introduced into the curriculum as a new compulsory subject, as we know it is, and the school day is not lengthened, then what has to be sacrificed? Could it be RE? I hope not. What we do know is that surveys show that support for SACREs by local authorities is very patchy, which has already been said. So, too, is the way in which RE is resourced, and the issue of sufficient numbers of qualified RE teachers continues to be a problem.

In my maiden speech in the House of Lords back in 1987, I said that education without a spiritual and moral dimension is nothing more than a clinical and arid experience, and I continue to hold strongly to that view. Lord Dearing in his opening remarks said that it should underpin education – how much I agree with that. Education is about the liberation and development of talent in all its forms and should be a civilising influence on the individual. Variety, choice, opportunity and the pursuit of high standards for all are means to that end. The opening section of the Education Reform Act 1988 specifies that the curriculum should contribute to the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils, and that this is to be an

entitlement of every child in the classroom. In other words, the mind, body and the spirit should all be nurtured.

In the best of all possible worlds, educational policy should present no problems. However, many of the current social trends present special challenges in this area of policy. The depressing fact is that an increasing number of children come into our schools from very insecure backgrounds and for many of them, school is the only anchor in their lives. School may be the only place where such children will receive any form of guidance, any codes of behaviour and ethics or any framework in which to grow and develop, so the onus is a very real one on all of us. Another depressing fact is that a large proportion of crime is committed by young people and that the peak age of offending of both boys and girls is mid-teens. Add to this the advances in science and their impact on our social fabric – and here I do agree that scientists cannot cop out of this, it is a very real area for them. But there are advances in science and they have an impact on our social fabric – for example, the growth of surrogacy, in-vitro fertilisation, cloning technology; some children are now growing up without any knowledge of their biological roots. Then, of course, there is the social trend of positively choosing to have children outside of marriage. All of this combines to create instability.

The challenge therefore is to educate young people to be morally and spiritually strong as individuals. As part of laying down those foundations shared values are important. They are a necessary condition and hallmark of a civilised society. The possession of a set of values, which give meaning to life and guide action, is a characteristic of people of all faiths. A set of shared values is necessary if we are to live together harmoniously, and equipping us to live in this way is a function of education.

There will, however, be those who say that because differences exist over which values should be adopted, neither government nor schools should try to impose a consensus where none exists. However, just because there will be difficulties does not mean that we should not proceed, and I believe that there is a wider agreement than is often supposed around a core set of values. For those of the Christian faith that core can be found in the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount and Christ's call to love our neighbour as ourselves. They have become enriched by two thousand years of accumulated wisdom and doctrine, and in today's society we must look at how these are relevant to everyday life and how they can be interpreted.

I believe that a core of values for today should focus on a sense of self-reliance and self-discipline, an acceptance of responsibility for one's actions, regard for proper authority, a sense of unselfishness, honesty, dignity, fairness and loyalty and the readiness to stand up for what one believes in. These are a set of values which encapsulate Christian thinking, yet still find more than an echo in the beliefs and experiences of all the other faiths represented in Britain and indeed in the ethics of all those who profess no particular religion. In a real sense these values have universal appeal. Young people should be enabled to appreciate the importance of having a set of values, to recognise that they are held by others, particularly in the Church from whom they can learn, and to make an informed choice of their own values as they grow older.

Ideally, of course, that process should start in the home, but it should not end there; it should continue and be developed through the ethos of the school as a whole. This is especially important where the foundation has not been made in the home (though schools cannot be expected to put right every failing of the family) and every

maintained school is now required to include in its prospectus a statement of its ethos. That ethos should pervade all the school's activities and be reflected in the expectations that staff and pupils have of one another. The school acts as a microcosm of the wider community in which pupils will eventually take their places. It is there that they should begin to live out their values and expectations necessary for society to function properly. Ofsted is now required to report on the ethos of every school it inspects and Ofsted's paper on spiritual, moral, cultural and social development made a valuable contribution here. It offered guidance on how a school might set about creating an ethos, making that explicit and giving practical expression to it through the school's organisation and day-to-day life.

Just as an aside, as one of the activities of Ofsted in inspecting individual schools, I believe it ought to comment on how the school is being served by SACRE, by the conferences and by the model syllabuses. Equally when it inspects LEAs it should comment quite specifically on the way they are fulfilling their duties as set out under the law. I think there is some scope for improvement in the way in which Ofsted report on these matters.

As the paper Ofsted produced said, to help pupils find their way through the moral maze, schools need to provide a thread with two closely interwoven strands. One is the code of personal relationships established throughout the school, and the other is the curriculum and the ways in which it is presented to pupils and received by them. For Church schools, of course, the religious foundation will be a vital source of both of those strands, but for all schools, we need to draw on the reflective wisdom of all those involved in the life of the school. As Ofsted recognised, values just do not become absorbed effortlessly by children, they need to be taught deliberately, fearlessly and explicitly. Good schools recognise this and they tackle it effectively. Such teaching we all know is not easy to do, but we do owe it to the children to try.

Moral teaching does not mean telling pupils throughout their school career exactly what they should do in every conceivable circumstance. It means helping them as individuals to draw from their basic moral and spiritual values a clear set of rules of conduct, which will help them to face their own life challenges. It also means fostering the development of a strong moral conscience to cope with the new situations where the familiar rules do not give an entirely clear answer. Moral issues, questions of good and bad, right and wrong, can arise in handling almost every subject – for example when tracing the causes of war in history, or considering the depiction of characters and their motivations in works of literature, or looking at the impact of technology and the application of scientific innovation, and I can't better what Mr Orchard said about these things.

RE and collective worship in schools play a very large part in forming children's morals and values. The Education Reform Act of 1988, as I have already said, confirmed the place of RE as a vital part of the basic curriculum in maintained schools, and that has been confirmed again today by Mr Berry. Its position was strengthened in 1993 and has been further strengthened since. RE promotes knowledge, skills and understanding of a different order from those of other subjects. At its best, it provides a standpoint from which students can consider questions affecting their own lives, and that is why we are keen to promote intellectually rigorous and effective RE in our maintained schools. In drawing up a syllabus the local community has an opportunity, through consultation, to influence the spiritual and moral development of children in their area, in the way best suited to that area. However, not every local authority can draw on the necessary expertise and the

resources to produce a really top-quality syllabus. In this respect, the model syllabuses were an important initiative to help overcome the drawbacks and to build upon the benefits.

We also must not forget that daily collective worship in schools is necessary in order to make a valuable contribution to a school's ethos. It affirms the importance of the spiritual side of life and reinforces the values promoted by the school. It also creates a space in the day in which pupils have the opportunity for reflection; an education in morals, values and religion is necessary for children to realise that they have obligations in society to others, but most importantly to develop an inner self-confidence for each child.

As I said earlier, taught well, RE provides an important anchor and a framework within which children can grow and develop. It is the wholesomeness of the individual that matters in education, so allow me to make a controversial proposition, one that I have made before. It is based on the well-known saying that there is no such thing as society. Society, if it is anything, is an amalgam of individuals, you and me. It is the sum of its parts, parts being individuals. Therefore the more spiritual, the more moral, the better educated, the more responsible, the more self-disciplined, the more self-confident, the more caring, the more nurturing an individual is, and the more of them there are, then therein lies a good and healthy society. Conversely, the less spiritual, the less moral, the less well educated, the less responsible, the less self-disciplined, the less confident, the less caring and nurturing an individual is and the more of them there are, then therein lies chaos and disorder. Therefore society is a consequence of the quality of those individuals, and it is determined by the moral and spiritual strength of those individuals, so that is the challenge for all of us.

I want to end by referring to one of those excellent occasional papers written by Penny Thompson, who was an RE teacher, entitled, 'RE and Collective Worship, a Guide to Parents'. She says this: 'The law as presently constituted offers both Christian parents and parents who follow other faiths the opportunity for their children to receive RE within certain limitations in accordance with their faith. RE and collective worship do not have to adopt a distanced or uncommitted approach, nor do RE and collective worship have to be conducted in a way that requires children to be Christians one week and adherents of other faiths the next. However, we must recognise that it may not always be possible for parents to establish the sort of RE and worship that they would like to have. There are not enough teachers with faith, for example, but if a sufficient number of concerned parents were to become informed enough and motivated enough to work for change, they would make a difference and in so doing help us all in the God-given task of passing on faith to our children.' Well, in that conclusion I think lies an area of policy that could be explored. I hope I have said enough to convey the message that I regard RE, and so does my party, as a vital part of the school curriculum. There are those who say that unless it can be done properly, it is better that it should not be done at all. Well, whilst there is a grain of truth in that, I regard that as a policy of despair. RE must not be allowed to be sacrificed to local government reform, nor should it become the poor relation to the new subject of citizenship. As Section I of the 1988 Education Reform Act sets out, the spiritual and moral dimensions are an integral part of education. I'll end with Lord Jacobovits' quote, again from the same speech in 1988, from Proverbs chapter 22, and I think it bears witness to all other quotes too. 'Educate a youth in the way he should go, so that even in his old age he should not depart from it.' Thank you.

5. Inspection Evidence

Barbara Wintersgill, HMI

Ofsted is a single-minded institution – we are dedicated to the raising of standards in schools. We therefore approach any question such as this by asking, ‘Which option is most likely to raise standards in RE?’ That is a pertinent question. For as long as Ofsted has been keeping records of school inspection reports, RE has been one of the subjects in which pupils’ learning is weakest – with one exception which I will come to in a minute.

Local responsibility for RE falls on SACREs and Agreed Syllabus Conferences. SACREs are old friends of Ofsted’s. They write to tell us when they are dissatisfied with an inspection report, or to ask us what will happen to a school which fails to comply with legal requirements in two consecutive inspections – they have even set a precedent by begging us to inspect them as part of our LEA inspections. SACREs share our concern for standards in RE. Many of them work very hard to support local RE teachers and fulfill a unique role in promoting inter-faith understanding in the local community.

The local determination of the RE curriculum however does cause us some concern; and this concern has arisen as a direct result of inspection evidence of both schools and Initial Teacher Training.

We are concerned that uniquely among the statutory subjects of the curriculum there are no national standards in RE (at least, compulsory ones). We have clear evidence from inspections that some Agreed Syllabuses have lower expectations for what pupils should achieve than do others. That cannot be right. We have not identified any problems with the content of RE varying with localities, but can see no religious or other sensitivities in having national standards by which pupils’ learning is judged. We have already disseminated to SACREs data which shows that there are widespread variations in the quality of teaching and standards in RE between LEAs; these variations do not necessarily follow the broad trends in standards between LEAs and have still to be accounted for.

We are particularly concerned that the support given to teachers of National Curriculum subjects on critical matters such as assessment has not been made available to most RE teachers, and we are convinced that the national weaknesses in assessment in RE have contributed significantly to depressed standards in the subject. Assessing RE, like any other subject, is a complex matter and one that we feel would be resolved most successfully at national level using all the expertise available.

HMIs with responsibility for inspecting Initial Teacher Training courses in RE have been concerned that the demands of some Agreed Syllabuses are not sufficiently rigorous either in content or expectations for trainees to meet easily the requirements for Qualified Teacher Status. For example, when an Agreed Syllabus includes little indication of the standards expected, or when those standards are unacceptably low, or there is no indication as to how RE is to be assessed, trainee teachers using that syllabus are at a disadvantage compared to their colleagues training to teach other subjects, and they feel it. They also feel at a disadvantage at having to learn to teach two and sometimes three different Agreed Syllabuses in their training year compared

to the one set of Orders required by their colleagues in other subjects. We find that new RE teachers in the profession are among the greatest critics of the present system.

We find most compelling the evidence of differences in pupils' learning between Key Stages 3 and 4. Ofsted has consistently noted that where pupils are following a GCSE course, teaching, learning, monitoring, assessment and recording all improve. In the past this could be explained by the enthusiasm of pupils who opted for GCSE, but not any more. The most significant improvement over the last two years has been in the quality of RE at Key Stage 4 compared to Key Stage 3 in those schools where all pupils are following a GCSE short course. We have noted on several occasions that when teaching a GCSE course, teachers' planning, expectations and use of assessment improves compared to their work at Key Stage 3.

Although five examination boards are used in England, what we have with the GCSE is close to a national syllabus with a wide enough range of options for schools to choose the content most suited to the backgrounds and interests of their pupils. The important feature of the GCSE syllabuses is that every optional section is structured in the same format, there are common criteria, common standards and common grade criteria. Hence it is easier to ensure common expectations and standards across the country.

We believe that the status of RE in schools, the quality of teaching and subsequently standards could be improved by greater centralisation of the RE curriculum. We recognise the huge contribution of local Agreed Syllabus Conferences to developments in RE over the past decades, but wonder for how long that commitment can be sustained effectively, given the cost of producing and disseminating an Agreed Syllabus.

Any discussion of who should hold responsibility for the RE curriculum must take as its first concern the needs of pupils and teachers in our schools. What is best for them? While recognising the need for the content taught in RE to be acceptable to the local population, we see no reason why Agreed Syllabuses should be so different in their structure, aims, objectives, attainment targets and so many other features. This singles out RE as a subject that appears to be unsure of its identity and nature, creates difficulties for teachers moving from one LEA to another and, as many head teachers have told us, diminishes the status of RE in schools. It is difficult to see how RE could ever become a National Curriculum subject, simply because Voluntary Aided schools would be exempt from it. However, we believe there is a case for creating a common structure or framework for RE. We believe that for the convenience of teachers, particularly primary teachers who have been trained in the statutory Orders, that such a framework should resemble the Orders as closely as possible in layout, structure and, of course, standards. However, such a framework must allow more flexibility than the Orders to allow schools to reflect local needs and concerns in the content of the RE curriculum. Such a framework would ensure that any school teaching from it met the statutory requirements while ensuring that all pupils, no matter where they live, are provided with the same quality RE and are expected to meet the same standards.

6. Support from QCA

John Keast, Principal Manager for RE, Citizenship and PSHE, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

This conference is dealing with important issues that touch on the work of QCA. QCA's policy is to work within the legislative framework and, in accordance with its remit to raise national standards, to try to secure a high-quality experience of RE. I am speaking in a personal capacity.

We all know that while RE is statutorily required nationally, the RE curriculum is determined locally through Agreed Syllabuses, or (in aided schools) taught according to trust deeds. A spectrum of national and local responsibility has existed since 1944.

Over the past decade, the national end of the spectrum has, quite rightly in my view, become prominent mainly through non-statutory means. Forgive me if I remind you of these.

- 1988 – All Agreed Syllabuses to reflect the mainly Christian traditions of Britain whilst taking account of teachings and practices of other principal religions represented in Britain
- 1990 – *Analysis of SACRE Reports* published annually by SCAA/QCA
- 1993 – All Agreed Syllabuses to be reviewed every five years
- 1993 – Ofsted inspection of RE begins
- 1994 – Non-statutory *Model Syllabuses*, and *Glossary of Terms*, produced by SCAA
- 1995 – Non-statutory *Guidance on RE post 16* published by SCAA
- 1996 – GCSE (short course) RE introduced
- 1997 – Non-statutory guidance on *Format of SACRE Reports* published by QCA
- 1998 – *Exemplification of Standards in RE* published by QCA
- 1998 – Non-statutory guidance *An Effective SACRE* published by QCA
- Regular RE Updates
- 2000 – *Non-statutory Guidance on RE* (parallel to publication of revised NC) containing National Expectations (8-level scale) for RE published by QCA
- 2000 – Non-statutory *Schemes of Work for RE* at KS1–2, KS3 published.

The result of these developments over the past decade is much more compliance with legal requirements and higher standards of achievement in RE. This is evidenced from a variety of sources including Ofsted, QCA monitoring and SACRE annual reports themselves. This is measurable to some extent in GCSE examination entries, which have mushroomed since 1995 (approximately 110,000) to about 260,000 this year.

Within the local end of the spectrum there is also much activity and much of value. Local ownership of RE, and the involvement of faith and local communities in agreeing the syllabus, adds credibility, reality and vitality to RE. There is much that should be taught about religions and religion in common wherever pupils live, but

there is also a need for RE to reflect and serve the needs of local populations. Only local decision-making can make the decisions about syllabus content that are necessary to meet this need. Moreover, support, advice, resources, teaching and learning in RE can all be strengthened by local ownership and responsibility for it. The annual analyses of SACRE reports that QCA publish testify to this.

In the exercise of local responsibility there has always been diversity – how could it be other? Each LEA has its Standing Advisory Council for RE (SACRE) and they operate in different ways with widely varying degrees of effectiveness. The annual analyses of SACRE reports testify to this also. You may have noticed that we drew particular attention to this in this year's analysis, which several LEAs have said they welcomed.

I have probably visited more meetings of different SACREs than most other people here. Nearly forty at the last count! I am aware of some of the strengths and weaknesses that diversity brings. These are seen in the degree to which a SACRE has access to specialist advice and support; the degree of involvement they have in promoting RE locally; their monitoring of standards; their resources; their development plans!

Some authorities claim to find it hard to resource their RE responsibilities adequately; others, it may seem, choose not to. The inspection of LEAs has not, so far, yielded sufficient data on the ways in which LEAs carry out their responsibilities for RE to be able to make a full assessment nationally. The Culham research points to a need for more information.

Anecdotal evidence also exists. Only last Friday I had a SACRE administrator complain that the effect of their LEA inspection report's not mentioning the good work of SACRE was to cause members to wonder whether SACRE was, after all, important. The administrator went on to describe potential difficulties in justifying SACRE costs to the finance team in her LEA, and highlighted the vulnerability she felt SACRE was risking in her LEA.

I say this about the exercise of local responsibility, not to be critical of any particular LEA, or central government, or its agencies, but because it is part of the real picture that appears as we at QCA carry out our statutory remit of keeping the curriculum under review. Diversity itself is not problematic. What would be problematic is if the current arrangements led to so much diversity that the common pupil entitlement to RE were weakened, and a necessary consistency and quality were lost. No subject can afford that when we should be focussed on higher standards and demonstrating our accountability.

In brief, while there has been some improvement all round, many perceive the local end of the spectrum to have become weaker than the national end. The answer to the first question posed for the day seems to me to be itself a question. 'The present system is effective but is it effective enough for a world-class education system?'

RE is and will continue to be an important part of the national curricular framework. My view is that we need both local and national involvement in decision-making on RE: what is taught, to whom and why, how it is provided, and on teaching, learning and assessing, in order to guarantee the highest quality to which pupils are entitled. For that reason, I should like to see local SACREs not only continue but their ability to perform their functions enhanced and monitored, and their work and level of performance inspected.

At the same time, I think more can be done to strengthen the way in which RE is represented in national curriculum developments. It must not lose out on the further work that is going on in supporting and exemplifying the curriculum, including the very exciting developments with the national curriculum online. I believe that there is a strong case for developing a non-statutory framework for RE, along the lines of the PSHE framework, in consultation with faith communities and RE organisations.

In a few weeks, there will be the launch of far-reaching improvements in how the curriculum is presented, linked and resourced, by its going online. RE could lose out on such a development if there is not, at national level, some equivalent to a national programme of study, which can be meta-tagged, connected and electronically resourced in the same way as is happening to NC subjects and to PSHE. A non-statutory framework of this kind, based on the SCAA model syllabuses, would not only complete the current structure of RE but would help to ensure that RE nationally can take advantage of this and other opportunities available to the subjects of the NC. Links with other central agencies, ITT providers, professional organisations, publishers and many other organisations would be put on a more secure and useful basis. This is particularly important with the imminent arrival of citizenship into the curriculum. A framework could enable clearer links with citizenship to be forged and RE to more easily identify its proper contributions to it, nationally and locally.

Such a framework could actually strengthen the work of local SACREs and Agreed Syllabus conferences. It could offer them decisions to take on local variations of emphasis and content that are really needed to reflect their distinctive local needs. At present many Agreed Syllabuses do not provide for this flexibility. It could offer continuing opportunities for developing support through advice, resources and training, tailored to local circumstances within a national framework. It could free much time and energy spent on duplicating curriculum development to be used in raising standards through curriculum support and methodology. SACREs should be local forums for meeting the needs of local communities and mediating the needs of the nation in RE.

In my view, a balance between local and national responsibility in RE is important and should continue. However, its effectiveness does need to be reviewed from time to time. National developments in RE in line with the NC, with all the support and status that they can give to RE, should be complemented by a clearer description of the role, expectations and resources of local SACREs, accompanied by requirements for greater accountability. A national paradigm (a clear national framework devised in partnership) is replicated by local variations (Agreed Syllabuses supported by local partnerships called SACREs). Although SACREs are not mentioned in the recent green paper, this local role of SACREs could fit with some of the proposals in it. A balance of national and local responsibility, where the policy and structure of RE is shaped nationally, but the application and resourcing are determined locally within a more accountable framework, would, it seems to me, help to secure benefits from both ends of the national–local spectrum. With goodwill and relatively minor expenditure, we can achieve this without legislation, relying instead on a true spirit of partnership, and avoiding the dangers of division.

7. The Local Framework in Action

1. Marion Agombar, Chair, National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on RE (NASACRE)

There appears to be a belief that the current system of local determination for RE does not work. The headline in the TES on 13 October of this year, 'RE Watchdogs let errant schools stray from the path', echoes this, and yet the article itself, based I am assuming on the latest information taken from QCA's analysis of SACRE reports, actually says it is only a very small number that this applies to, and the majority are in fact working very well indeed. We hear about the need to drive up standards, and I am sure that SACREs would wish this to be the case, and that any shortcomings are not due to a lack of will on their part.

Advantages of the current system

As the National Association of SACREs we would wish to dispute the idea that the current system for RE does not work, with the role of SACRE as the monitoring body, as well as the curriculum development initiator.

Most of those involved in SACREs can talk about the particular feature of their SACRE and how it impacts on its local area. Some of this can be very detailed and not really the purpose of today. My remarks try to bring together the benefits of having local responsibility for the subject while also pointing out that this is not a static situation.

SACREs bring together all the interested parties in RE in a local area, many of whom give of their time freely. From these people come many who also give their time to attend various events arranged for SACRE members, and sometimes training within their own faith community so they can more effectively play a useful role, as well as events such as the QCA conferences for SACRE members which have been held in previous years, and the forum and AGM which NASACRE hold as well.

One of the roles which SACRE can undertake is to promote an understanding of the nature of RE in today's curriculum – something which still remains unclear to many people, and seemingly this includes senior management in schools and others in positions of power in the curriculum. This can often apply to those who come to work with a SACRE either from faith communities or from among the elected members of the local council, who find RE as it is now quite a revelation.

Among many, these are some examples of what a local SACRE can offer where the system works very well indeed:

- lectures hosted by SACREs with speakers of national importance, so that members of SACRE and others interested in the subject can further their own knowledge
- working parties to provide support for schools in understanding the faith communities from which pupils are drawn
- support material from their own local Agreed Syllabus which is then made available to other areas to support their teachers – in these cases it is response to local needs as perceived by the teachers themselves which enables real progress in the subject to be made
- awards to schools and teachers to enable them to undertake specific projects.

All of these are in addition to the usual working of SACRE which also monitors and responds to inspection reports, and enables the sharing of good practice within the schools in their own area and beyond.

Community involvement – citizenship in action

Under the right circumstances SACRE provides a real opportunity for the community to work together – an example of democracy in practice, involvement in the local community as the education for citizenship initiative actually suggests should be taking place. Groups are able to work together for the benefit of the pupils in their area. There is a sense of real involvement for faith communities and teachers so that the teachers can feel ownership of the subject in a way that is not possible for a subject whose orders are determined at the centre. The syllabus devised can thus meet the needs of a local community and local circumstances – something which would be impossible with centralised syllabus production.

Resourcing issues

There are also examples of where the SACRE could work if there were enough resources made available to support it. All the examples cited above require funding to be available to SACREs. There needs to be a supportive LEA which takes its responsibility for the subject seriously, so that there is a specialist adviser to the SACRE and the Agreed Syllabus conference, and the funds available to enable that person to provide the support to the schools. I could say more about the role of the local adviser, but will leave that for the chair of the advisers association. I will say, though, that I see this as a mutually beneficial situation, for both adviser and SACRE.

However, it is important that their work is not ignored or marginalized, as tends to happen in such things as budget considerations and local authority inspections. When SACRE and its needs are ignored in proposed legislation regarding changes to local government organization, or when inspectors make no mention of this area in the LEA's legal responsibility, members of SACREs will inevitably feel that they are being undervalued in the work they are doing. It is good to know that the contribution that SACREs make to education is recognised by the Minister; it would be even better if this were supported with practical consideration in some of the basic areas.

The partnership

The current arrangements and responsibilities can work. What is important is how to make them work and put energy into this rather than divert it to devising a whole new system. This does not mean to say that there could not be improvements, and changes in local government structures and other developments may mean that it will change in a variety of ways. Certainly SACREs have always been pleased to receive support and advice from the centre – the dismay of many who attended the last NASACRE AGM when informed there was to be no conference held by QCA this year is testimony to how SACREs feel the need to have links with central bodies. We know that the majority have taken account of the work done by QCA in their own syllabuses and advice to schools, and will continue to do so.

Many of us are convinced that it is the partnership which is important, so that local circumstances are fully recognised and RE continues to benefit from the local support that its SACRE can offer.

2. Dave Francis, Chair of the Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants (AREIAC)

No developments in Religious Education over the past ten years could have succeeded without the professional leadership of RE inspectors, advisers and consultants. Let me re-state some of the recent achievements in RE: record numbers of pupils taking GCSE examinations; 'A' level entries on the rise again; a renewed focus on the relevance of RE in young people's lives; a renewed confidence in RE as a vital (even 'basic') subject of the school curriculum; last year 133 of the 150 local education authorities even sent their annual SACRE report in on time! And most people have now recognised that there is a difference between RE and collective worship!

Dare we think that the RE being delivered in our classrooms has contributed more than anyone can imagine to harmonious relationships between the many different cultures and belief systems which operate so freely in our country? That RE has played more than its full part in alerting young people to the dangers of racism and unthinking intolerance? In short, RE has supported their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

You know with whom the vast majority of advisers in RE are working: with RE teachers, co-ordinators and heads of department; with Headteachers, with curriculum and pastoral Deputy Headteachers; with representatives of the local faith communities; with teacher trainers; with local politicians and policy makers; with members of the Standing Advisory Councils on RE. This is the local framework in action. Its strength comes from the involvement of people with the issues that matter to them in their communities. Because there is no national curriculum for RE, these people can work in a spirit of creativity, innovation and enterprise.

For teachers, the process of putting together a syllabus can be a marvellous opportunity for solid professional development and the impetus for a new enthusiasm for the subject. I have seen this happen. SACRE members can see the positive outcomes of their efforts in many ways: syllabuses delivered by those who wrote them; improved Ofsted reports and reporting (don't forget the impact of specialists within inspection teams); increasing numbers of pupils taking public examinations; the take up of in-service training by teachers. For teacher trainees in RE, the task of comparing syllabuses make them think about what really matters in the subject.

RE inspectors, advisers and consultants are leading and prompting, but above all, involving the community in the production of an agreed syllabus and in the provision of resources to support effective RE in the classroom. RE inspectors, advisers and consultants are taking part in the process that has seen the development and implementation of guidance on all the major national initiatives in RE: the GCSE short course; the new expectations in RE; the exemplification of standards; the Schemes of Work for Key Stages 1 and 2 and Key Stage 3; guidance on Learning From Religions; standards for RE subject leaders; guidance on the use of Information and Communications Technology in RE; the promotion of links between RE and global citizenship.

The effective impact of the Model Syllabuses too, would have been greatly diminished without the debate and application fostered by RE inspectors, advisers and consultants. But they are often only in post because of their expert contribution to the LEA SACRE. They are often the individuals involved in the sharp end of challenging schools where they are not complying with the legal requirements for RE. They bring

a knowledge of national initiatives to the local situation. They are often the individuals who mediate, pacify and clarify when the controversial issues of religion are raised within communities. They are the individuals, alongside teachers, who make it work.

Now, there are choices to be made. Without the strength of a well-funded LEA SACRE, there would be a severe reduction in community involvement and accountability in the development of RE. Without a locally agreed syllabus for RE, there would be a severely reduced incentive to provide professional support for the subject. Without RE inspectors, advisers and consultants, there would be a severe reduction in the number of schools being challenged to improve that part of the curriculum that is fundamental to the spiritual development of young people.

The future. As the new expectations begin to figure in revised Agreed Syllabuses, the effectiveness of those standards will depend on the clarity with which teachers understand the principles underlying pupils' progress in RE. I don't deny that the same framework operating nationally would greatly simplify the inspectors' job as they move from one authority to the next. But this is the choice: a way of planning for progress in RE that is owned by the teachers and the community, or a centrally imposed system which becomes another bureaucratic burden?

Was it Woody Allen who said, 'I'm not afraid of a National Curriculum; I just don't want to be there when it happens'? Too heavy an emphasis on the national, at the expense of so much that has been, and is being, achieved in local communities, would set back the cause of RE where it really matters – on the ground. Rather, let us strengthen what is working well now – national guidance, with the full involvement of inspectors, advisers and consultants. But this must be embodied locally through a local SACRE; sufficiently funded for effective action; and a locally agreed syllabus in which teachers, faith communities and elected councillors are fully involved.

3. Linda Rudge, Director, Keswick Hall Centre for Research and Development in RE, University of East Anglia

What I would like to do is to address the question posed by the St Gabriel's Programme: 'How effective is the present system in relation to overall policy, syllabuses and related materials and resourcing the subject? And in the future, who should be responsible for each of these three areas?'

'Whose responsibility?' is clearly a question which provokes a variety of responses from teachers, government agencies and LEAs. 'How effective?' implies a system of measurement and evaluation and, of course, it depends on whose system you use. Who should be responsible is no doubt a matter of concern and interest to this conference. My focus here is on university-based research in which we have been engaged at UEA, funded partly by St Gabriel's Trust and partly by Keswick Hall Trust.

As we have heard, as RE stands now its local position offers problems, positive opportunities and notable achievements in relation to questions of responsibility. 'RE is seen as a subject in transformation.' That quote comes directly from a report by Barbara Zamorski, one of our researchers. It is just about to be published, and will be available to members of this conference today. There is a complex relationship between Agreed Syllabus construction, the syllabus in its final form and RE in the classroom. Internal and external factors all play their part in the translation of policy to school practice. The combination of these factors forms the basis of the challenges we've been seeing today in making RE work, and the basis of questions about designated or unwritten areas of responsibility. While teachers are still the key to successful RE, the combination of these factors helps, hinders, or stalls their progress and the progress of their pupils. Progress is developmental and the management of developmental change is an area of responsibility for teachers, school managers, LEAs and central government alike. When considering the effectiveness of the present system against what we can only call an imagined future, these key concerns of educators and others need to be taken into account. These concerns are substantiated by the research in the 'Making RE Work' project at the UEA, but they are not new, and they include the existence of tensions about the ownership of RE.

There is the current legislative framework and its history; the need for appropriate strategies to manage change, both in schools and LEAs; the perceived essential role of LEA RE advisory staff, which we have just heard about; the diverse and complex roles of subject leaders, both in the primary and secondary sectors and in special schools; the variety of levels of support in LEAs and in schools; the nature and aims of the subject and the pupils' responses to it, and this links with the varied levels of teacher confidence in the subject and with its content, and also the relationship of RE to religion in society. (Of course, I should also mention at this point the majority of teachers upon whom secularity has been a formative influence on their own beliefs and values.) These points are explored fully in the research reports available from the University.

Evidence from the research can be clustered around those issues I have just mentioned, and we have heard about one of them today, the role of the LEA adviser. For teachers there is a strong relationship between the manner of design of the Agreed Syllabus and the success of the implementation, but the essential key to success for many teachers in this research is the existence of RE advisers. They are seen as both representing and co-ordinating LEA support and the interface between schools and the

LEA and religious communities. Good practice is perceived as a direct result of good syllabus design and vice versa. A cyclical developmental process and the role of the subject adviser for this locally agreed area of the curriculum are seen as essential to the support of good practice and the dissemination of that practice. The research indicated that two of the LEAs involved did not have RE professionals in this LEA role.

My conclusion is as follows: aspects of responsibility lie with all educators and professionals in schools and LEAs, and with those engaged in the design and implementation of legislative policy. This shared responsibility will remain the same even if the balance gradually, or suddenly, shifts towards the central and away from the local. National policy and a national curriculum after all have to be implemented locally. Schools and teachers play a pivotal role in the development of the subject. Shifting to a national RE, whatever the format and legislative states, will not resolve all these issues related to the subject, its needs, aims and outcomes. However, making RE work locally is a positive challenge, not an insurmountable problem.

8. Focus Groups

Focus groups gathered in the afternoon for discussion, and each one summarised its findings.

Group 1

Two main issues were raised for us, covering a lot of the ground that has already been discussed in the presentations this morning. The first is the support for SACREs and LEA RE advisers and inspectors. We felt that was an absolutely crucial issue, particularly financial support and local council support as well. These are two areas in which SACREs have really struggled. Many of us have been involved in working with SACREs where an LEA adviser has given us a great deal of support as practitioners in the classroom, and we feel that is an area that we wouldn't want to lose. There are issues such as money going directly to schools, which undermines LEA SACREs in terms of resourcing. In my own experience, finance has always been an issue in terms of supporting the work of SACREs and therefore the work of the local faith communities. What we don't want to find is that the local faith community voice is excluded from our RE provision; we feel that in order to have an integrated society which prevents social fragmentation, we do need the representation of faith communities within that. We feel that is absolutely crucial.

External pressures on LEA inspectors are not helping their work, and one of the current Green Papers actually hinders a lot of their work. In a sense, their responsibilities are now much more diverse and the work load is much heavier, whereas before a lot of the work was concentrated on RE itself explicitly, without these other imposed obligations, and the fact that OFSTED inspection reports don't actually comment on SACREs. We wondered if one of the ways forward would be to have a statutory power for SACREs and a directive to Local Education Authorities to have SACREs and to facilitate their work and to make sure that the voices of faith communities are included, therefore, in our local work.

The second issue which we raised was to do with having a national agreed framework. There was a lot of support for SACRE involvement and less for a national agreed framework, although that is obviously very important. We feel it is very important in terms of maintaining standards, perhaps, but the fact is that we have a distinctive subject which deals with thinking skills at a higher order level, and is philosophical and ethical in its quest. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development aspects are intrinsic to the subject and very important. It is distinctive in terms of the nature of what we do, and perhaps that makes it difficult for us to measure. The same issues about measuring arise particularly with regard to current performance management, in positions from outside where we are expected to measure pupils' performance. The same issues are coming up, and yes, a national framework might help that. The interpretation of that, of course, is always different in different contexts, but if we had some consistency that would certainly help in terms of raising standards of attainment. But there are other parts of RE which should not be forgotten, and they may come as a distinctive subject area and an important subject area with a major contribution to make to the future of society.

Group 2

We have a question to ask. What is the status of the recommendations and comments of each of these groups here today? What will be done with them and how seriously will they be taken?

Lord Dearing: We are going to collect these comments after today's conference, and invite any groups who want to supplement them to send in any further comments. These will be gathered together and Culham College Institute is going to invite a dozen to fifteen people to meet, reflect on what has been said and come forward with some proposals.

Group 2: That may link in with my second point, which is about the makeup of today's gathering. We are very concerned that this group that is not sufficiently representative of faith traditions other than Christianity, nor of Christian denominations other than the Church of England. Some people who are here – for example, Sikhs and Muslims – are here because they happen to be Chairs of SACRE or LEA advisers, but they were not invited specifically in their role as representatives of faith communities.

Lord Dearing: We will try and put that right in the composition of the group in December.

Group 2: Of course we have more than two points to make, but I will try and make it appear that they are two. One thing is to do with the way in which SACRE operates. We felt as a group that it has a unique role in involving adults from a wide spectrum in a debate which doesn't happen anywhere else. It is a debate about values and beliefs and a debate about education, which doesn't happen in other subject areas. What comes of that debate is a consensus and a harmony which has to be worked at. It isn't something we've arrived at now, and think, 'Right, we've done that and it doesn't need any more working at.' It needs working at constantly, and what happens at SACREs is that that debate also involves teachers. We feel that one of the biggest transformations in RE in the last ten years is the way in which teachers and members of SACRE have come to an understanding of what RE is about, such as RE not taking a confessional approach, not proselytising, not being Religious Instruction to one faith tradition. That has come about because of the nature of the work that SACRE does and the way it does it. This would be damaged both at a local level and at an education level if there were to be a national determination, because teachers would be suspicious of something handed down to them, and faith communities would feel that their voice was no longer being listened to. This refers to our point at the beginning about under-representation of other faith traditions: the Church of England and St Gabriel's Trust have not only resources but a clout and a structure which other faith traditions do not have. SACRE is one place where the voice of other faith traditions is currently heard, and in future it might not be.

Linked to that, then, is the fear that if there were national determination, that determination could shift depending on the political opinions of successive governments. We have heard today from somebody who hopes to be in a future government, whose understanding of RE is not the same as that of many of the people here in this room today, and that understanding could become a new and national approach to RE, if it were to be determined nationally.

Linked to that also is the role that SACRE has and how that can be checked up on – that is the role of Ofsteding of LEAs and the part that SACREs play in fulfilling the LEA responsibility for the development of RE. It has been commented on by the

panel that that is not happening, but that is not an argument for it not happening in the future. Many of us spoke about the lack of interest that Ofsted's teams have in how RE is being delivered locally. Another of our questions was on resources, so we would recommend that money is ring-fenced for RE, so that specialist advice and support in developing syllabuses and schemes of work continues, whatever is happening nationally.

Lord Dearing: On the subject of representation, John Gay tells me that all members of the RE Council were invited to this conference, representing all the faith communities and professional associations. A lot of people who were invited did not come, but I think we can reflect your comment in the composition of the next meeting.

Group 3

I'll keep my comments brief in order to minimise repetition. We did have two main points we would like to make: the first is that we think it is important to keep the balance between national and local influence. National, because we think there is a need for a national lead and it is appropriate to have a national lead; but local because we think local support is needed – in fact, we felt that any shift towards reducing the local role would not help the quality of RE, but would actually worsen it. To make this balance healthier we believe that there should be a requirement to have an RE adviser in every Local Authority and that there should be earmarked funding, for example, for the work of SACRE, including the training of SACRE members and the implementation of Agreed Syllabuses and Inset for teachers. That's the first main point – the second is that we also thought that Ofsted inspections of LEAs should be required to report on the work of the LEA in relation to RE.

Group 4

The first thing we wanted to say was that there is actually great success, and we shouldn't be too negative about the things that are happening; that hasn't been fully recognised. It seems the weakness is not at Key Stages 1, 2 and 4, it is at Key Stage 3, and that hasn't been made clear today. There is a lack of confidence in the consultation processes both at QCA and Ofsted, and therefore one of the concerns about a national syllabus or national framework is how effective would that process of consultation be? We feel that local consultations, in whatever form you describe them – whether SACREs, a new body or otherwise – would disappear if there was a national framework. It would simply be a way of allowing Local Authorities to opt out of responsibility. We are concerned about the way the model syllabuses – which were, as I think you said, Chairman, produced in 1994 – escape any review, unlike the syllabuses for LEAs, which have to be reviewed every five years. They have also become mandatory in HE by default, and one of our concerns was that the material put out by QCA in the end will simply become statutory or mandatory through the inspection process, so the consultation is minimised again. So there is a great suspicion of the work that is taking place – that isn't meant to be a personal attack but one on QCA's structure. There is no RS committee there, as there was some years ago.

I think this also relates to the inspection of LEAs. I take much of what Barbara Wintersgill said, in her absence, but she should also turn inwards and fight the battle

for the proper inspection of LEAs. I read five inspection reports of LEAs this weekend and none of them mentioned RE at all; there was no mention of it. Now unless Ofsted is to take its responsibilities with LEAs as seriously as it seems to take schools, then we are not going to get anywhere. I think that's part of the lack of confidence. Now running through all this is money, and I won't say that again, because people have talked about ring-fenced monies for RE, but there has to be some way in which local initiatives are supported financially.

Group 5

Our group gave one priority which we haven't heard from anybody so far. They felt that the emphasis on pupils' development and attainment at each key stage was very important, and this must be at the heart of whatever we are doing in relation to RE. On the main issues, we are in favour of national guidelines, but there must be local determination and local flexibility. While recognising that the Government is very loathe to get into this minefield, it is important that if we want such guidelines and want them to be effective, there has got to be work from and support within all the religious groups if that's going to work. We think that it is also essential for there to be availability of RE advisers for schools. We recognise that however good the SACREs are, the schools have very little contact with what actually goes on in SACRE unless they have good RE advisers who can take this forward. Finally, earmark resources for SACREs – again, top priority.

Group 6

Much of our discussion included points which have been heard already, but we wanted to point out that to be quite honest we did think that across the country there was very good quality of SACREs and Agreed Syllabuses, but we also thought national material was variable, so we weren't alone in that. Two things we wanted: one was local ownership – we wanted to retain local ownership – and secondly, we wanted national support and resourcing for local support and syllabuses. So two things, one local ownership, and secondly national support and resourcing for local syllabuses.

Group 7

Just two or three quick comments, because most of the things have been said. One thing which came out of our group was a sense of the way in which there could be a risk to the faith community contributions by changes in either direction. This is particularly possible if it is national, because of the difficulties of actually hearing the local faith voice, but also if it becomes too local, so that the Local Authority is so small that it can't actually work effectively.

The second thing was that our group came out fairly strongly on the line of capitalising on the current arrangements, with the national framework offering that structure, support and profile. We did have one suggestion that was quite interesting: having not a national syllabus, but a national framework of skills, attitudes and key elements, supported by content being fed in locally, together with the production of illustrative syllabuses that the LEAs could draw upon, which is not a new idea. What

is a new idea is the concept of self-destruct schemes of work, which would be the sort of scheme of work which would last for about a year into your job and then would somehow disappear so you were left on your own – a bit like the trainer wheels you get on your bike, which have to come off – so we wouldn't have dependence on a national syllabus. Another idea was of producing national RE SATs, to follow the success of the GCSE short courses – I thought that one would be interesting.

And, lastly, to do with the concept of raising standards: the raising of standards is not really linked to new policy, but it is linked to improvements in teaching, and that depends on advisory support and it depends on teachers being resourced. We therefore felt that the Government ought to take some responsibility for support of that type of activity, so that it does become clear that advisory support is something which the Government is committed to, and that it's not just a Local Authority issue. There is also the issue of career development for RE teachers, because again if that were supported at national level, it could make an enormous difference to the quality of local work.

9. A Local Government Perspective

Graham Lane, Chair of the Education Committee, Local Government Association

I am the Education leader in Newham. I am not actually religious, but I'm not an atheist either, I know that much.

First of all the Ofsted report. Within the framework, of course, voluntary aided schools do have a special section on RE, but it doesn't seem to apply to the other two-thirds of the schools. When the Bishop is due to come and see the Local Government Association in December it might be worth discussing that. It struck me that because we are under a legal obligation in RE why doesn't it apply to all the other schools as well in the Ofsted RE framework?

There is an issue about advisers: we haven't got very many and there are not very many people coming forward. In fact my own advisers are having to get rid of half of their number, because we have too many – I think we have twelve, and we need to get down to six. Now you can imagine what sort of subject adviser you are going to get, in that they are virtually becoming data monitoring officers really. This raises the issue of how on earth do you get advice? If you delegate the money to schools, you can't guarantee that it will buy religious advice at all, unless they are compelled to by law, for the simple reason that they will tend to concentrate the money elsewhere, so I think there is an issue about how we provide it. It may well be that the churches should supply it in some sort of way rather than relying on the Local Authority officers. In fact there are not many advisers in other subjects, history, geography, economics etc. Most members of local advisory staff now are actually part of the inspectorate team, worried about the raising of standards, rather than giving subject advice, and that applies to all the subjects, so there is a real issue there about what is going to happen to all subject advice.

The SACRE issue is different, the SACRE being one of the most imaginative things I have seen because of the way it has begun to work, particularly in areas like Birmingham and Bradford and in my own East End of London. As a result we managed to produce a much more multi-racial curriculum in a multi-racial area, which I think is extremely useful. It does cause some problems, as the Islamic fundamentalists withdraw their children sometimes, so do the BNP supporters, for the same reason. For one there is not enough about Christianity, and for the others there is too much. In fact by having an Agreed Syllabus with the other faiths represented as well and seen as an offer to all the schools, it is actually followed and it is useful. The danger is that we could finish up with an RE system which is only based on facts. I always think there are values behind religion as well, you don't actually teach values in quite the same way as you might teach mathematics, at least I hope not. But SACRE has been something where I think we in Local Government ought to take more seriously, to see that syllabuses are reviewed and properly brought up-to-date and also that they actually do reflect the needs of the area.

The other area you as voluntary churches manage to get involved in, of course, is the School Organisation Committees, and you now have a vote on that, at least the Anglican and Catholics do. It is interesting that the other faiths don't have this by law, but you actually now have a vote and, of course, your section now has a veto – not

just a vote, a veto – when it comes to opening new schools and closing new schools. The advantage of getting a unanimous decision at local level is that it can't go to the adjudicator and it cuts out the Government, and I'm always in favour of local government cutting out their Ministers in that particular area, because the decisions are then made locally, these are just not made by elected members.

I am worried about the role of the Diocesan representatives on what used to be the Education Committees, because they are being abolished in practice, but I'm not quite sure where you are going. In my own authority we made absolutely clear that it had to be on the scrutiny committee and on any policy review of sub-commissions that we set up as well, because, I think, if you are separating them from policy-making you are also to have a key role in the future of LEAs, but I think there's a danger that you will be shoved off to the scrutiny committee and scrutiny committees, on the whole, are the last group that people are taking notice of in modernisation. I think there is still a lot of thought to go into the future of scrutiny committees. They tend to be, of course, where people who don't get on the cabinet turn off, so most people would prefer to be elsewhere in local government. I don't think that will last: I think scrutiny committees will become policy review and policy development, but you do need to be where the decisions are being made, particularly when it comes to things like budgets, that strike me as central to policy making.

There are other issues too. In my own borough (and one or two others have followed us) we decided we had better celebrate different religions for holidays, or as many as we could. I'm all in favour of more holidays, you know. When we set this up it was Divali that caused the biggest row. One or two white parents turned up in the Town Hall saying that they wanted Churchill's birthday celebrated as well. So I went along with this idea as it was my own birthday and I thought it might be useful. I didn't say it was St Andrew's, which, of course, it is as well. We now celebrate Eid, Divali and Guru Nanak, and it might be interesting to know that if we standardised an Easter break, we might celebrate Good Friday properly as well, because I think that might be an advantage that the students had a day off when it was Good Friday and knew that, having a day off rather than the start of another holiday. But there are issues around there, which I think are useful. We have the holidays, the Christian holidays, but how many people understand what they are for? It is not your fault, it is the way in which societies operate. I mean, Christmas is now one of the biggest commercial outfits that there is, and actually since I have been alive, Good Friday is now almost a work day, with people hardly realising that it is one of the most important religious festivals in the year. So I think there is a lot the education system will need to do and I think it is quite useful that you have had this conference. I'll be interested in carrying on the discussion with Lord Dearing and with other members of you, because I think there are many initiatives we can take in local government. The idea that local government has lost all its powers is sort of nice newspaper talk. I find that if the Government moves the power, we find more influence by other means, and I think together we could actually pursue this particular agenda. It isn't just the third of the schools that are voluntary aided, it is the other two-thirds that we have to work with, to have all our people having some understanding of what the values are behind the different religions, the different faiths etc., living in a multi-racial society, and also some understanding of why those values are there, and I don't think we pay enough attention to this in local government. We haven't supplied the advisers, we haven't necessarily supplied the sort of status that ought to belong to the SACRE committee. I think it is an important measure to try to take this thing forward, and I would be glad to do what I could to see that local government does play a part. I think if you grow

up without any understanding of the different faiths and different religions and their values, I think you have a poorer view of what humanity is all about, and I say that from someone who is not part of any established Church.

There followed a comment from the floor about the fact that the Newham report had not been submitted to QCA – this came from a Muslim Chair of SACRE whose own children attend a state school.

Graham Lane: I am sorry, I didn't mean to give any sort of indication about Islamic fundamentalists. I have remade the point that two groups of people actually withdrew their children, which they are allowed to do. I didn't realise we hadn't sent our report to the QCA, we have actually published the report. The Government described our SACRE syllabus as one of the most imaginative reports in the country. But I will find out why it hasn't gone to the QCA. But what I was trying to say is that we do have to find a way – and SACRE is one way which I think is a very useful way of doing it – to see that the different faiths, all the faiths, come to an agreement of what the syllabus should be in the schools, both the voluntary aided schools and the non voluntary aided schools, and in many areas that has been a very successful process. It has been a very successful process, because it has caused the local authority with the church authorities and with the other faith communities to bring out a syllabus that everyone actually signs up to and agrees with, and I think that is an advantage and something that we ought to pursue, because an understanding of all the faiths is essential if you are living in a European society today.

Panel members

Further comments from the panel included:

- how heartening it was to hear such support for SACREs from the floor
- how useful it would be if schools were compelled to spend some of the funds delegated to them on RE
- QCA accepts the importance of consultation and tries to ensure that consultative procedures are as full and complete as possible – and would try to improve the consultation process in the future.

10. Summary

Lord Dearing

If I have been listening right, there is a very clear consensus about the importance of SACREs to the development of vital and relevant RE. There doesn't seem to be any dissent from that view. Yet at the same time SACREs may vary in their quality and effectiveness, and some have a need to improve. That is the nature of having 150 local independent organisations, and the question, therefore, is how to lift the level when it is low.

So one of the key agenda items is that we wish to keep SACREs, and how can we strengthen and stimulate the weaker ones? Resourcing was mentioned, and this is very relevant. RE advisers were also mentioned. Someone told me this morning that in a certain LEA their adviser's role is only one-tenth of a person – that is not much support. Many people have commented today that there must be adequate resource, possibly from ring-fenced funding. That is obviously an agenda subject to be picked up.

Someone else mentioned inspections – everyone else is inspected. We heard concerns that Ofsted was not doing its business well in relation to the inspection of LEA RE work, and I quoted figures from the Culham report. Ofsted needs to do a better job in that area, because there's nothing like knowing Ofsted is coming to stimulate some action.

I was also reflecting on a point made by Baroness Blatch. Citizenship will soon be coming onto the agenda, and if anything in the school day is going to feel the pinch, it may well be RE. In that situation a great deal depends on the attitude of the headteacher – if the headteacher is enthusiastic you are safe, and if not it's hard luck. That simply isn't good enough, so that is another issue.

Then there was Barbara Wintersgill writing with passion from her sick bed. She said that RE is one of the weakest subjects, so there is still a long way to go. Someone else said that if you want to improve standards you do it through teachers, but Barbara was pointing out that teachers emerge from training into a world with 150 SACREs and a whole range of syllabuses, and are expected to be fully effective.

There is no doubt that you all want to retain a strong local operation, and are concerned that more emphasis on the centre will weaken that, and also reduce the professionalism of the teacher in the classroom. On the other hand, there are these concerns about the scale of the task for effective teachers with so much local variation. John Keast pointed out that the National Curriculum is available on the Web, a great facility, and that RE suffers because there is no comparable framework – even a non-statutory one with many options – to assist SACREs in their work. You may be cautious about that, but given the weakness of RE at Key Stage 3, this may need to be looked at further. Another item, perhaps, for discussion in December.

Comments from the floor

There followed some comments from the floor, including:

- a perceived difference between the attitudes of those representing central agencies and those of the RE practitioners in the audience

St. Gabriel's Conference 2000

- concern about how the findings of this conference would be carried forward
- support for Lord Dearing's summary of the day's proceedings
- the need for proper guidelines for support of the local operation in SACRE, policy-making, syllabus and advisers
- the importance of representation of other faith groups
- concern about changes in local government and their implications for funding of local RE advice and guidance
- the difficulty of challenging statements made by HMI, especially about national frameworks and standards
- alarm at the idea of local government wishing to hand over RE advice to the churches.

Lord Dearing thanked all those present for a very lively conference, and indicated that all the discussions would be assimilated and prepared for a broadly balanced and representative symposium in December.

Priscilla Chadwick thanked everyone for giving up a day at half term, including the Culham staff for their organisation, and Lord Dearing for chairing the conference and summarizing the proceedings.

Part 2: Written Submissions

11. Roger Butler, Professional Adviser to Ealing and Westminster SACREs

I am very worried by the prospect of RE becoming more centralised. My reasons for this can be summarised under three headings.

Intrinsic dangers in seeking changes to legislation

Those of us who were on the RE scene in 1988 remember only too well how a relatively small, well-organised and determined cross-party group of parliamentarians managed to force changes in legislation that many of us found unhelpful to say the least. The nature of RE is such that any discussion of it in Parliament will attract the interest of sections of the press with agendas inimical to those of the mainstream of the RE community. There is no way of guaranteeing that the outcome of any proposed change in legislation would remain close to the original proposals. Specifically, for example, I think there would be those looking for a more rigid definition of 'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian.'

The threat from PSHE and citizenship

Again, many of us remember the movement in the 1970s and 1980s to integrate RE and other subjects – usually either history and geography (integrated humanities) or PSE. At the moment RE is in a comparatively strong position compared to PSHE and citizenship, being statutory throughout the school curriculum. However, the parcelling up of RE with PSHE and citizenship at QCA and the DfEE clearly has its dangers. I am reminded of the Punch cartoon that showed an early socialist activist hitching a ride from a Whig aristocrat. The speech bubble read 'Can I travel along, Sir? I am going your way,' whilst the thought bubble had the socialist adding 'Aye, and a good deal further.' Obviously there are elements in common between the three subjects,

and I am a strong supporter of both citizenship and PSHE within the school curriculum – but not at the price of a dilution of the distinctive nature of RE, or the time allotted it. It is entirely possible that in time the RE, PSHE and citizenship empire at QCA could be headed by someone from a PSHE or citizenship background who lacks commitment to RE.

Intrinsic virtues of the current system

The current system of local agreed syllabi allows RE in each LEA to be responsive to the particular needs and wishes of its schools and local communities. Ealing's Agreed Syllabus includes reference to the Zoroastrian religion because in 1993 a local resident wrote to the Agreed Syllabus Conference with the polite complaint that his four children had gone through Ealing schools without once hearing about, or having the opportunity to speak about, their own religion. Representatives of the Ravidasi and Valmiki community raised with the Agreed Syllabus Conference the difficulty of their children in our schools often being classified as Hindu or Sikh in spite of the insistence of parents that they belonged to quite distinctive religious traditions. Our syllabus recognises those traditions. I do not doubt that there must be other, similar, examples elsewhere in the country.

Also, the example of the recently published QCA Schemes of Work must give rise to serious concern for those of us working in areas with comparatively large numbers of pupils from religious minorities. How can it be right to ask Sikh children to do a unit of work on 'Friends of Jesus' before their school has affirmed its respect for Guru Nanak and the tradition he founded? And whilst I would not personally recommend teaching reception pupils about Noah and his genocidal God, if teachers insist on doing this I would want it done in the context of the place of Noah in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

I am told that John Keast speaks of RE needing to decide whether it is a ship in the same fleet as the other subjects of the school curriculum or some sort of tramp steamer plying an erratic route of its own. I would like to offer a different metaphor. How about RE as the Indian scout who invariably accompanied the cavalry platoon? He started and finished the journey with the platoon but was allowed idiosyncracies of dress and was expected to make sorties to seek out better routes, supplies of fresh water, and bring early warnings of obstacles and dangers.

The English educational system has lurched in a very few years from being almost anarchic to being under central control to a degree Stalin would have been proud of. It may be the vocation of the RE community to serve a prophetic function in relation to education generally; reminding pupils and others about age-old traditions that question many current values, including some that may be espoused by this and future governments. The religious education community should fight to preserve the small degree of independence and autonomy it retains.

12. REsourcing the curriculum

Paul Hopkins

At the heart of good Religious Education is the concept of community, and especially the local community in which we and our pupils live. Local determination of RE syllabi means that we can produce focused and relevant teaching material. Examples of material of this sort can be found in schools and classrooms all over the country. Much of this has been produced by the local adviser for RE in conjunction with local teachers and the local faith communities.

However, a small market makes the production of quality professional-standard materials difficult. A commercial supplier looking to publish any new material is faced with a set start-up and development cost which needs to be spread over as large a sales base as possible. If RE is seen as a multiplicity of local markets, then encouraging publishers and software developers to invest in new products is more difficult. The market within a single SACRE is likely to be too small for the commercial firms to be interested. With the demise and change of role of the RE adviser, this source for the production of quality locally based material is drying up.

Nationally, RE is a growing subject. RE is one of the core subjects in the primary curriculum and is compulsory for all pupils in the five years from 11 to 16 and in all state sixth forms. This year over a quarter of a million pupils sat a GCSE in Religious Studies. Whilst there is still a dilemma here for publishers, as there is no consistent and common examination course, this is still a large market. It is no coincidence that the greatest area of publication in the RE field has been for Key Stage 4 (ages 14–16). Also, there is a move to develop a 'national curriculum' in RE. The production of the QCA Schemes of Work for Key Stages 1–3 (ages 5–14) could well encourage publishers to develop materials to satisfy this 'common core'.

However, this 'common core' material – of which a fair amount already exists – inevitably leads teachers to 'pick and mix'. It is unusual for a resource produced for the national market to satisfy local needs, with the multiplicity of subtle variations on a theme. It often falls to the local teacher to adapt and develop the commercial materials with a local bias and flavour.

Whilst a remarkable number of teachers do find time to compile and publish material, the majority of resources come from practitioners distant from the 'chalk face'. This does not mean that much of the material being produced is not of good quality, but there is always the inherent danger that it will be out of touch. The most under-used source of excellent resource material is the classroom practitioner. In most classrooms around the country you will find quality resources that have been developed by classroom practitioners and tested for effectiveness in those same classrooms.

The internet allows us to take the good factors from both the local and the national models. It allows those teachers who have 'just a few' good resources to share these with both their local and national colleagues. These new and exciting resources can be easily distributed and they effectively disseminate excellent classroom practice across the country. Local materials can be developed by teachers working in collaboration across the internet in order to satisfy the needs of the local curriculum, and these resources can also be used by other remote LEAs that have similar needs. These resources can be presented on school or personal web sites and easily downloaded and adapted by busy professionals.

It is not only the growth in the source of quality teaching material that is exciting about these new technologies, but also the range of materials that can be easily shared and developed. Text and graphics, sound, video and animation are all easily developed using multimedia technology, but all these are available in existing forms. The exciting new developments will come in the use of interactive teaching and learning environments on the web. The local teacher and pupils will no longer be confined within the walls of their own classroom. The local, national and even international boundaries fall away as teachers and pupils use the internet to interact and communicate.

The commercial world is just starting to develop these micro-markets. One of the largest growth areas in the last five years has been the development of 'photocopiable' resources. Buying such resources is always a compromise, as we find only a proportion of them useful and relevant to our local needs. It is likely that in the near future we will buy our teaching resources in a 'pick and mix' fashion from a large selection at an on-line store. We will choose the 'pages', video clips, pictures, audio clips or texts that are useful to resource our own curriculum, and download these from the internet. As there is little in the way of production and distribution costs (printing and replication will take place at the place of purchase) and no waste, this is a much more cost-effective way of developing materials.

Lastly, the internet also allows pupils and teachers to publish themselves. In the last two years there has been an explosion of school web sites on which teachers are putting up quality teaching resources for others to share. There have also been exciting developments in interactive teaching and learning. The internet allows us combine the quality and focus of local determination with the scale and economy of national provision.

Some web sites to investigate:

Resources

The RE-XS site: <http://re-xs.ucsm.ac.uk>

RE Net: <http://www.cant.ac.uk/renet>

Culham College Institute: <http://www.culham.ac.uk>

The Farmington Institute: <http://www.farmington.ac.uk>

Staffordshire Net: <http://www.sln.gov.uk>

The Independent Schools Network: <http://istc-rs.freesevers.com>

The REsource site: <http://www.paulhopkins.org.uk/REsource>

Interactive

The RE GCSE site: <http://www.paulhopkins.org.uk/re>

BBC Bitesize: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize>

School and LEA web sites

The RE site: <http://www.theresite.org.uk>

13. National Standards – Locally Agreed?

Graham Langtree

The increasing activity from QCA in RE (model syllabuses, non-statutory guidance, schemes of work) raises the fundamental question of how close we are now to a National Curriculum for Religious Education, which would of course require a legal change from current practice.

The benefits of such a change are obvious in terms of national standards in Religious Education. Currently it is only GCSE and A level RE/RS which have nationally agreed criteria and standards, enabling schools and LEAs to make informed comparisons about pupils' attainment, progress and attitudes to learning in an RE context. It surely cannot be right that pupils in different parts of the country have different expectations of attainment and standards because of the variety in expectations of Agreed Syllabuses. The eight-level model for RE contained in the QCA non-statutory guidance is a critical framework for establishing standards nationally.

The downside of national prescription is, I think, the clear diminution in the role of SACREs and LEAs in RE. There would, in my view, be a serious loss in the ways in which SACREs function. Dorset SACRE, with which I have the privilege of working, is a SACRE committed to curriculum development in RE and supporting schools with valuable guidance on a whole range of RE issues. Recent publications include work on SMSC and RE; Assessment in RE; RE and Literacy; RE in the Early Years; plus our support for curriculum projects in middle and secondary schools. Furthermore, the very existence of SACREs provides valuable opportunities for inter-faith dialogue, meetings between elected members and teachers, and Inset opportunities which allow members to become more informed about the nature and role of RE in the curriculum. At their best, SACREs play a critical role in developing RE at a local level – particularly in their monitoring role.

I would therefore like to see a commitment to nationally agreed standards which are locally developed in terms of content, process and evaluation. This model would enable standards to be consistent in terms of expectations across the country, but would still allow SACREs and LEAs to pursue issues of local concern and interest and provide some needed flexibility in terms of content and resourcing. The goals remain the same – nationally agreed standards for all LEAs and SACREs; the way we play the game needs to remain flexible.

14. Flexible Frameworks: RE in a 'supercomplex' world

Ruth-Anne Lenga and Vanessa Ogden

We live in a complex era of change. Modern consciousness is alive with conflicting, proliferating and multi-faceted frameworks of understanding. It is a condition of our time that Ronald Barnett has summed up in the idea of 'supercomplexity' – a term for the twenty-first century that encapsulates the problems of multiple discourse in our contemporary world. What place is there for Religious Education within such a web of plurality? Challenged by the information explosion, the continually growing technical mastery of communications technology which brings global boundaries ever closer, the increasing pace of change and the dominance of consumerism, we are drawn to re-examine the role and character of our subject area for the new century.

Over the past decades since the enactment of the religious clauses of the 1944 Education Act, Religious Education has matured into a flexible curriculum subject which remains distinctive, because of its locally determined nature, but it bears many of the hallmarks of a National Curriculum subject. This includes two model Agreed Syllabuses, a framework of national expectations, and a recommended scheme of work. It naturally begs the question of its future inclusion in the National Curriculum. There is a powerful lobby of Religious Education professionals in favour of this, and the reasons are several.

Arguments from those with responsibility for leadership of the subject in schools about the parity of esteem with foundation subjects are potently combined with concerns about national standards of teaching and learning in the subject, to form a strong case for the adoption of determination by a National Curriculum for RE. It is clear that Heads of Religious Education are still caught up in battles for resourcing and curriculum time, feeling defensive and besieged by the need constantly to justify the value of the time set aside through RE in the curriculum to reflect upon the diversity of beliefs, values and traditions underpinning human interactions in private and public life. It is also clear that standards of teaching and learning in Religious Education can lack the rigour and depth required of comparable subjects, unsurprisingly especially in areas where the advisory/inspection LEA support network for teachers is absent.

What could Religious Education lose by inclusion in the National Curriculum as a foundation subject? Taking on a nationally defined framework would sacrifice the parental right of withdrawal from the subject (or aspects of the subject) on grounds of conscience, unless an exception were to be made for RE; it might also lead to the withdrawal of the support of the faith communities, which currently have a voice in the determination of the Religious Education of their children through the negotiation of the local Agreed Syllabus. These would be serious concerns. It is fundamental to the avoidance of social fragmentation and the promotion of social harmony within a supercomplex world that the beliefs, values and traditions for those that have a stake in the diversity of our society are not only recognised but celebrated.

Education is in this sense teleological: it is concerned with what we envision as the future and destiny of the nation. Questions need to be raised about the possibility of forging a new style of provision which incorporates a nationally determined framework, characterised by rigour, continuity and progression, with the flexibility of locally determined elements of study, thus ensuring the inclusion of the voices of faith communities and the parental right of withdrawal. The importance of Religious

St. Gabriel's Conference 2000

Education in the curriculum surely demands the serious, objective consideration of creative possibilities away from the subjective and sometimes sectional concerns of professional interests in the debate. It is the future of our society within this world of supercomplexity that has to be the main consideration in question and the spiritual, moral, social, cultural and academic well-being of the children that we teach.

Drawn from 'Religious Education: Soul-Searching in an Era of Supercomplexity' by R. Lenga, M. Totterdell and V. Ogden, in *School Subject Teaching* ed. A. Kent (Kogan Page, 2000).

Marilyn Mason, Education Officer, British Humanist Association

A small survey was carried out this year by the British Humanist Association, when we sent out a questionnaire to humanists associated with SACREs (73% of the 30 who responded are co-opted members). The picture that emerged was a mixed one, and did not fully answer the questions posed by this seminar. What did emerge strongly from our survey was that, whatever their strengths and weaknesses, SACREs cannot be said to be representative. They are not representative of their local communities (as the absence of humanists and some minority faith groups on most of them testifies), and local communities were felt to be largely unaware of them and their work. Neither were they representative of the six faiths usually studied in RE – only 24% included all six, Buddhism being the most frequently absent (from about half the SACREs surveyed). One SACRE apparently consisted only of Christians, plus a sole co-opted humanist! Whatever the balance between local and national, it would seem essential that local or national bodies responsible for RE are fully representative, and this aspect of control is well overdue for reform.

Part 3: Follow-up Seminar

16. Summary

Colin Alves

The seminar was held on 14 December 2000 at London House. It had been called together to 'reflect on what had been said at the St Gabriel's Conference on October 23rd and to come forward with some proposals'.

One concern at the Conference had been the 'status' of RE within the curriculum. The seminar noted that two ways in which the DfEE could enhance the quality of RE provision further were

- by reinstating its status as a 'core' subject (even though one which is technically outside the National Curriculum) and
- by giving it parity of treatment in its publications (both printed and electronic).

A second concern had been the possible impact of local government reorganisation on the work of SACREs. Members of the seminar reported a very mixed situation, both in terms of support available from the Local Authority and in terms of the tasks the SACRE was expected to undertake. Concern was expressed that some Ofsted inspectors of LEAs were interested only in whether the minimum legal requirements regarding SACREs were being fulfilled rather than assessing the *effectiveness* of the arrangements in place. Research was needed to establish the range of support available to SACREs with a view to the production of national guidelines regarding the level of provision which should be expected. It was also noted that no SACRE could be deemed to be successful unless its work actually had an impact on what was being done in the classroom.

The seminar then turned to what had been the central area of discussion at the Conference – the desirability or otherwise of a 'national framework' for RE. Its 'reflections and proposals' included the following points.

There had been a lot of misunderstanding around that a 'national framework' was simply another name for a national syllabus. This was emphatically *not* what had been proposed. There was also widespread concern that further 'national' initiatives of any sort would put at risk the many benefits of the present locally rooted system. Among these benefits was the fact that the delivery of RE could be 'owned by' the local community through the involvement of all the member groups on the Agreed Syllabus Conferences. This involvement also developed and deepened the interaction between the members which often spread into other areas of co-operation where it had not previously existed. The direct involvement of classroom teachers also ensured that the content of Agreed Syllabuses (and the activities of SACREs) could be informed by classroom experience and innovation. On the other hand the diversity of the local bases made it virtually impossible for there to be any satisfactory integration with other curriculum subjects at the level of national planning and support; this was particularly significant in relation to Citizenship. It was also a handicap in the training of RE teachers. What was also missing from the present arrangements was the possibility of any co-ordinated attempt to set standards of pupil performance in the

way other subjects were able to. (The related issue of the wide variation in local support systems was dealt with above.)

A way forward which might meet all these concerns would be to explore the possibility of building on the existing Model Syllabuses and Schemes of Work from QCA to

- identify ways in which the content of existing Agreed Syllabuses could be more easily cross-related to curriculum developments in other subjects; and
- develop guidance to LEAs as to how Agreed Syllabuses and the work of SACREs might contribute to the enhancement of pupil performance (especially at Key Stage 3) by the setting of standards of expectation both in the classroom and in the structures supporting the subject.

It would be important for this exploration not only to have support from the DfEE (through QCA) but also to involve representatives from all the 'member groups' which make up Agreed Syllabus Conferences. The result of such an exploration could well be the eventual production of a 'national framework', though this of course would be non-statutory (as with PSHE). It could fit entirely within the present legal framework. While establishing a national level of expected standards there would of course be full flexibility and need for local involvement in the local application of these standards – perhaps taking the model provided by the GCSE awarding bodies as a starting point.

Organisations Attending the Seminar

AREIAC

British Humanist Association

Board of Deputies of British Jews

Buddhist Society

Catholic Education Service

Church of England Board of Education

Culham College Institute

CULRE

DfEE

Free Churches Council

Islamic Cultural Centre

NASACRE

National Society

Ofsted

PCfRE

QCA

The RE Council of England and Wales

St Gabriel's Trust

Apologies

NATFHE

TTA