

## Faith and Society Files: Church and School - School Assemblies

Help for churches in serving their local schools and communities by leading creative assemblies.



## “Good morning Mr Williams, good morning ev-er-ybody”

I can still remember the almost sung response to the Head Teacher’s greeting at the beginning of my Primary School morning assemblies as I sat cross-legged on the school floor trying (and failing) to find a comfortable way of sitting without kicking the person in front and avoiding the elbows of my neighbours. I can still picture the hall, with the school dinner serving hatch in one corner and the PE apparatus stacked in another. I can still remember the smell of the floor after it had been polished – first by the caretaker and then by several hundred small bottoms as we shuffled around to find our place. I can even remember singing ‘When a Knight Won His Spurs’ and wondering what it was about. What I can’t remember is one single word that was said, never mind the themes of the assemblies. Maybe that doesn’t matter – in the same way that I can’t remember many meals but they have all done me some good – but surely it would be better if school assemblies were more memorable, and that many years later people would be able to recall the message?

### What does the law require?

The legal requirement at present is for schools to hold a daily act of collective worship and this must be ‘wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character’.<sup>1</sup> Usually this is seen as being fulfilled by assemblies, although sometimes it is carried out in smaller groups. Because of a lack of physical space and space in timetables it is rare that every child in a school will experience such an event every day. ‘Broadly Christian character’ is defined as reflecting ‘the broad traditions of Christian belief without being distinctive of any particular Christian denomination’.<sup>2</sup> This means that State schools can positively promote Christianity, although they cannot promote any one Christian denomination. Pupils from non-Christian faiths can have collective worship according to their own faith, and parents have the right to withdraw their children from collective worship.

### Why should churches get involved?

There are many good reasons for getting involved as a church with leading school assemblies – none of which are about preaching the gospel and calling for a response. Yes, there are mission reasons to get involved, which include the opportunity to explain aspects of the Christian faith and how they relate to the lives of the children or young people in the assembly – where else would you have the opportunity to do that with most of the children and young people in your area?

Other mission-related reasons include ‘sowing seeds’ that the Holy Spirit may germinate later, and improving the reputation of God’s church among a group that may be generally cynical. In addition, taking school assemblies is a way of serving local schools and helping them meet the requirements of the law. Many schools welcome appropriate offers from local churches as they struggle to find members of staff who are willing to lead creative assemblies or have the time to prepare them amidst the many other demands placed on them. Both churches and schools want the same for the children and young people who attend: they want the best for them. It’s another way of getting involved in your local community and it may open up further possibilities.



1 Section 386(2), Education Act 1996

2 Section 386(3), Education Act 1996

## **How should we make an approach?**

If you do not already have links with the local schools nearby, a sensitive approach to them will usually be warmly received. Check with the other churches in your area which schools they serve so that you can ensure that all schools are supported and perhaps see opportunities for working together. Write a letter on church headed paper to the Head Teacher explaining who you are and why you would like to help by leading assemblies. If you lead assemblies in another school, mention this and make the offer of obtaining a 'reference' from the Head Teacher of that other school. Offer to meet with the Head Teacher to discuss how you can serve the school (that may bring back bad memories of being sent to the Head's office when you were at school, but try to overcome them!). In that meeting remember that the school is in the business of educating and forming children and young people, so try to explain how you can help with that. Be prayerful and courteous.

## **Some principles for assemblies**

Everyone will lead and deliver assemblies in different ways, however following these principles may help create memorable and appropriate assemblies.

### **Aim to be invited back**

If this is one of the fundamental principles that you consider when preparing and leading an assembly it will provide many positive constraints on you. Remember that no matter how often you have been invited to lead assemblies in a school, you are always their guest. This aim underpins all of the rest.

### **Enhance the reputation of Christians**

It is likely that there will be other Christians present in the assembly – staff members as well as pupils. Don't embarrass them (asking all the Christians to stand up is a definite 'no-no!'), but rather provide them with positive talking points that they can take up in discussions with friends and colleagues after the assembly. Let those in the assembly have a positive experience of a Christian.

## **Maintain the reputation of the school**

Don't do anything that will undermine the authority of the staff or reputation of the school. You may be there for a short time and gain laughs from making fun of the teachers or the school, but the staff have to work there all the time and need all the support you can give them. Even if you think it has gained you (dubious) credibility with the pupils it will do you no good because you won't be coming back!

## **Keep to the themes you have been given**

Often schools will offer a theme or subject for the assembly, and unless you are given permission to do something else, it is sensible to try to keep to the theme. That way your assembly will fit within the plans that the school has prepared, and you will be seen as someone who works with the school. Of course, you can be very creative in the way that you approach the theme and can always share a Christian perspective on it!

## **Keep to time**


If you have been given five minutes, stick to that. Staff won't thank you for making their pupils late for the next lesson. If the bell (or whatever signal they have) rings stop and ask whoever is in charge whether they would like you to stop. This leads to the next principle.



## **Be flexible and adaptable**

You may find that the time you have been given is shortened or (occasionally) increased. Be prepared to abandon some of what you had prepared in order to fit in with what the school needs. Be ready to find out that the normal space you use has been filled with scenery for the next school production so you can't do what you had planned to do.

## **Leave a question or two**

 If you only give answers in your assemblies you may find that they are answers to questions that the pupils are not even considering. Leave the pupils with an open question or two, which may provoke discussion beyond the assembly. For example, rather than saying, "God loves all of you unconditionally," you could say, "If God loves people without conditions,

how do you think he feels about you?" That is more likely to remain in the consciousness longer.

### **Be imaginative**

Because you have the opportunity to spend more time considering the assembly, try to be imaginative in the way that you illustrate the theme. For example, with younger children puppets are fantastic, especially if you can create a mischievous personality for them. You don't need to be good at ventriloquism (puppets can always whisper in your ear), but do practise in front of a mirror. For young people, how about creating a 'chat show' where the pupils get to express their opinions? There are many resources available that contain outlines and ideas for school assemblies or collective worship (see the end of the Mission File) but be ready to adapt them so that they suit your style and the theme of the assembly you have been asked to take.

### **Try to be original**

While resources from books are helpful, especially when you have no idea about where to start, there is always the risk that someone else has used the same material previously, especially where a theme runs for consecutive weeks or months. Creating an original assembly removes the risk of that happening. Originality (by definition) will happen in different ways, but you may find it helpful to start by writing down the message you want to communicate in one simple sentence. If you can't do that, how can you expect your audience to remember it? Then write down as many words, ideas, themes, TV shows, films etc that you can think of which relate to the theme of the assembly. Allow those thoughts to float around in your imagination for a while as you consider them, and ask yourself: "how can I best illustrate the theme in a memorable way?" You may surprise yourself what you come up with.



### **Assemblies are not the only way**

Churches can serve local schools in many different ways. It doesn't have to be the minister who leads assemblies if you have others in your church that have the availability and gifts, although schools may appreciate an initial approach through the minister.

As a relationship develops, schools may invite you to participate in lessons, lunch clubs, after-school activities, chaplaincy, governorship and other possibilities. Pupils may start to consider your church in a more positive light – moving from "I don't go to church" to "that's the church I don't go to", which is a step in the right direction. One youth minister who took regular assemblies was asked to take a funeral for a pupil's mum because his family did not know any other 'vicars'.

There is a current government initiative for schools to make provision available for all pupils from 0800 to 1800 each day, called 'Extended Schools'. All schools need to be able to offer this by 2010, placing them at the heart of communities. Churches may be ideally placed to provide support and resources to help with this. If you would like to know more, visit [www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/ete/extendedschools](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/ete/extendedschools), and if you would like to see one way in which churches can respond, consider YFC's *The Crux* resource (a sample is available from [www.yfc.co.uk](http://www.yfc.co.uk)).



## Here are some we prepared earlier

Below are some assembly outlines that have been tried and tested. They are offered as examples of taking a theme and getting creative with it, but feel free to take and adapt them as appropriate. You may prefer to offer answers to the questions at the end in a discussion. If you would like to share an assembly idea that you have tried and tested, then please contact the Mission Department and we will start to establish a list on the BUGB website.

### Theme: What is the meaning of Easter? (Secondary School)

Ask for a volunteer to take part in a short quiz. When they are at the front explain that you will ask them three questions and if they get them all right they will win a prize (perhaps half a dozen Crème Eggs – make it an attractive prize). If, however, they get one wrong they will have to pay a forfeit. Make the first two questions relatively easy to ensure that they get them (you could even help them out if they are struggling). Congratulate them on each success. Make the third question impossibly difficult to answer correctly so that they will fail.

Explain that they now have to pay the forfeit, which is to drink a raw egg. Break an egg into a glass and give it to them. BE CAREFUL – don't let them drink the egg! Most of the time the volunteer will be very reluctant, so give them some encouragement. Remind them that these are the rules of the game. If they look like they are about to drink the egg, or when it becomes obvious that they won't, you take it from them and drink it down (quickly in one go is best!). Now give them the prize, explaining that because the forfeit has been paid they can receive the prize.



#### Some questions to leave with the pupils:

Would you prefer the egg instead of the Crème Eggs?  
How is this like Easter?

### Theme: Forgiveness (Primary School)

This version was told using a rabbit puppet called Stew the Rabbit. In essence it is the story of the Prodigal Son (or Bunny) where you have the older brother with you. Stew explained that his brother Clyde had asked for a whole year's carrot allowance (rabbit version of pocket money) and had run away from home with a wheelbarrow full of carrots. Stew had been left at home and wasn't even given one extra carrot (aaah).



When Clyde didn't come home that night Stew's parents were very worried and called the police, but no-one could find him. After several days Clyde still hadn't come home. Eventually, after about a week, Stew came home to find a big party going on. He was told that Clyde had come home and was very sorry, so their parents were throwing a big party to celebrate. Stew was upset because Clyde had been so naughty by running away and now they were throwing a party for him – and Clyde had eaten all the carrots when Stew hadn't even been given one!

#### Some questions to leave with the pupils:

Was Stew right to be upset?  
What should Stew do next?  
How do you think Clyde felt?  
Jesus told a similar story – do you know what it is called?

### Theme: The Media (Secondary)

This takes some preparation! Buy all the daily newspapers for one day (best not to make it a weekend if you don't want to break your back carrying them). An alternative would be to visit all the newspaper websites (perhaps include BBC news as well). This includes the red tops, (and even the *Daily Sport* if you can bear it). Look at the main headline on the front of each newspaper and see if you can find it anywhere in any of the other papers. See how the different papers cover the story (if they do at all) and note any differences. Finally, get the circulation figures for the newspapers from the

internet (a search for 'newspaper circulation figures' should bear fruit. This link is currently live: [www.nrs.co.uk/open\\_access/open\\_topline/newspapers/index.cfm](http://www.nrs.co.uk/open_access/open_topline/newspapers/index.cfm))

Begin by saying that you want to try an experiment. Read out the front page headline and see if anyone can guess which paper it came from. You may be surprised. Then see if anyone knows what the story is about. Explain how many of the other newspapers carried the same story, and note either where there are differences, or if any of them claimed an exclusive where it was covered elsewhere. You can do this for all of the papers, or a selection depending on how much time you have available.

Ask how many read a newspaper regularly. Now show the circulation figures of the papers. Point out that people rarely read more than



one newspaper a day, and often buy the same one. If you had bought just one newspaper on the day in question, what (important) stories might you never have heard? If you had bought just one newspaper in question, would you have been given a different view

of the event to others? The news media is not independent – it is compiled by people with a particular point of view. An editor decides what you will read. You may like to compare this with the Bible which has many different human authors but one consistent message.

### **Some questions to leave with the pupils:**

Given what you have discovered, what is true? How could you ensure that you discover the truth about the world you inhabit?

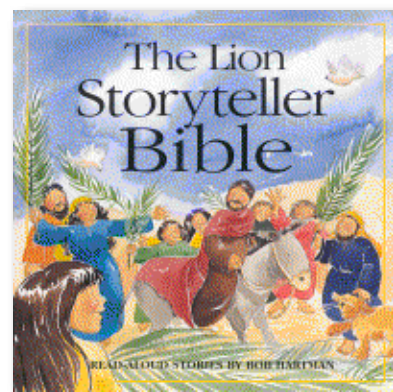
Whom do you trust to give you the truth?



### **Theme: Open the Book (Primary)**

This resource has been developed to tell the stories of the Bible to primary school children over a period of three years. Linked to the *Lion Storyteller Bible* each session provides for innovative and engaging ways of telling God's story to children. The first year tells the Biblical story from Creation to the Ascension in thirty sessions, and the second and third years look at Jesus and the Early Church, and Heroes, Heroines and Children in the Bible respectively. Each session should last just ten minutes. Stories can be read on their own, or illustrated with puppets, props and the children according to your preferred style. The resource is designed to be used by teams of people and the Open the Book team can provide training so that even the most nervous of people will feel empowered and able to take part. It fulfils the OFSTED inspection requirements for Collective Worship.

The Year 1 Handbook costs £4.50. The Year 2 Handbook plus additional Year 2 Storybook cost £8-50. The Year 3 Handbook and Storybook are due to be published by July 2010. You will have to buy your own copy of the *Lion Storyteller Bible* and create or buy your own props and puppets. To find out more, visit the website at <http://www.openthebook.net>



# Resources

## Books and resources

There are many books of ideas and resources for Collective Worship. This is a very small selection that will provide a good basis for starting out, but for many more look at the websites of the publishers listed below.

*Effective Schools Work* by Lee Jackson (Kingsway 2003 ISBN 1 84291 082 5) practical advice about all aspects of schools' ministry, including preparing and taking assemblies

*The Crux* by YFC (available from YFC office – [www.yfc.co.uk](http://www.yfc.co.uk), 0121 550 8055) resources for churches wishing to be involved in Extended Schools.

*Collective Worship Unwrapped* by John Guest (Barnabas 2005 ISBN 1 84101 371 4) Thirty-three story-based assemblies for primary schools

## Sources of resources

### Useful websites

Spinnaker Trust – [www.spinnaker.org.uk](http://www.spinnaker.org.uk)

[www.helpfullinksforschoolsworkers.blogspot.com](http://www.helpfullinksforschoolsworkers.blogspot.com)

[www.schoolswork.co.uk](http://www.schoolswork.co.uk) – what used to be called the Schools' Ministry Network

[www.talkingdonkey.co.uk](http://www.talkingdonkey.co.uk) – site hosted by YFC

[www.request.org.uk](http://www.request.org.uk) – mainly aimed at teaching Christianity in RE, but some great resources.

[www.damaris.org/cm/home/aol](http://www.damaris.org/cm/home/aol) – Damaris has excellent school assemblies online. It is a subscription site, but if you are doing lots of assemblies it may well be worth your church subscribing.

RE online – [www.reonline.org.uk](http://www.reonline.org.uk) – aimed at teachers, but with an excellent links page to resources for collective worship.

### Publishers of resources

BRF / Barnabas - [www.barnabasinschools.org.uk](http://www.barnabasinschools.org.uk)

CPAS – [www.cpas.org.uk](http://www.cpas.org.uk) (01926 458458)

Kevin Mayhew – [www.kevinmayhew.com](http://www.kevinmayhew.com) (01449 737978)

Kingsway – [www.equippingthechurch.co.uk](http://www.equippingthechurch.co.uk) (01323 437755)

Scripture Union – [www.scriptureunion.org.uk](http://www.scriptureunion.org.uk) (08450 706 006 for mail order)

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