

Religious Education

Anne introduced Rachel, who is a secondary school chaplain. She has been ordained in the Church of England for 31 years and spent some time working with juvenile offenders. She is now in a non-teaching role as chaplain at a large secondary school with 1800 students, which means that she is also chaplain to the staff. In addition she is part of the Student Welfare Team.

She is available all day, responding to whatever happens. This is particularly important at the beginning of the school year, looking out for the new Year 7 students. Many find such a large school a great challenge, especially finding out where they should be for their next lesson. They can be anxious and nervous, and she is a friendly face about the place. If any student is in distress, the teacher can email her, or she can be contacted via walkie-talkie.

Very often Rachel's role is just to sit and be with people when they are finding life hard. She also looks after parents, if necessary, for instance finding second-hand school clothing for a child from a family in need. She has a special relationship with the children, as she is not a member of the teaching staff. She finds humour can be very helpful. Her office is just by where students wait if they have been summoned to the Head. If there is time she can give them support, help them think what they should say and act in a 'good cop' role.

Anne asked Rachael some questions. The first was: 'What is Christian about what you do?' Rachael explained that the students see her as offering the Christian viewpoint. She could ask, "Would you like me to pray for you?" They may be confused about the Bible, so she could arrange a meeting with the student, offering a book which could help to explain.

She is sowing the seeds of Christian faith. She was then asked about the key aspects about collective worship. Rachel explained that it should be invitational, inclusive, and inspirational. This would be a model of good worship. Students of other faiths are invited to stay if they wish. They may be inspired by what they have heard.

Rachael believed all schools need collective worship because it adds something to their experience. Other people are sometimes invited from local churches, and so on. The experience of collective worship in secular schools can be unfortunate. At her school everyone enjoys the experience.

Following the death of the Queen the school held a separate assembly for each year group, using appropriate material which the Church of England had already provided. This gave everyone another way to process and understand a time of national mourning. Everyone tried to make sense of the grief and loss they were feeling.

What is good RE teaching? The teacher must be expert, passionate and take it seriously. It is not just another subject, but a way to involve all faiths. There are seven in the RE team at her school, and Christian values are emphasised.

Anne asked for questions: Kathy wanted to know if people need commitment to teach RE? Yes, but not necessarily a faith, they must be passionate and know what it means to teach in a Christian school. Sandra asked if Rachael's job was the same as a counselling role? Rachel said using counselling skills is very important in her role, especially with the increased emphasis on mental health in students. Anne asked if Covid has made things worse. Rachel thinks that anxiety has increased in both students and parents. Mental health services are understaffed and underfunded. GPs seem to think schools can fulfil that support role, but this is not good enough.

Anne then played a recording of a talk by RE teacher Peter Hammerton. He first gave his own background, which had led him to believe that RE deals with fundamental issues of human existence and with truth. RE is on the curriculum to provide skills in critical thinking. It is difficult to find specialist RE teachers, and staff often must teach it although they would rather not. He also was critical of the Worldviews approach, which he felt makes assumptions about religion, widening the curriculum to secular beliefs and watering down RE.

Margarita then spoke of her lifetime respect for Queen Elizabeth II. In 1990 Estonia regained its independence, and teachers were invited to a conference in London. They visited schools and lived with families. Her hostess was very kind. In Portsmouth Queen Elizabeth joined her yacht. Margarita took some photos, but felt they were not very good.

Margarita's children always bring back souvenirs when they visit London, including a marvellous waving figure of the Queen. Margarita's granddaughter came to Imperial College in July for a young scientists' conference and sent her a card including a beautiful picture of the Queen, and a stamp which, of course, had her head on it.

Barbara spoke about Coronation year, when the Queen and Prince Philip passed in their car. She stood on a metal kitchen table so that she could wave. There was also a children's street party, with every child given a small teddy bear and a Coronation mug. Diana remembered being a guest at a reception in Lambeth Palace, and when the Queen walked into the room Diana had been fascinated by the beautiful buttons on the back of her bright blue dress! Penny remembers watching the Coronation in Belfast on a tiny black and white television. When the Queen visited Belfast they waited in the street for the royal car to pass. So many memories – such an integral part of our lives.

Diane Billam (Gamma Chapter)