What does it mean to be a Church of England school?

Historical Perspective

To answer the question about what it means to be a Church of England school today we have to go back a few centuries, see how universal children's education came about in England and Wales, and understand how the established church came to have such a prominent role in it.

1870 and 1944 are pivotal years in this synopsis.

Before 1870

In mediaeval times education was largely confined to the clergy ('clerks in holy orders'). The establishment of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the 13th century was for the clergy – they were originally religious institutions. Public schools and grammar schools were also founded and endowed to provide education for the privileged (with some scholarships for the poor), and by the end of the 18th century there were Sunday schools and many village 'dame schools' to teach the four Rs (the usual three plus religion) for a few pence a week. Teaching standards were extremely variable. Remember that, out of economic necessity, for many poor people Sunday was all that could be spared for children's education, as they would be needed to work alongside the family during the rest of the week. Schooling was still voluntary.

In England there was much debate about extending education to all and the role the state should have in providing it. Even forward-thinking people commonly considered that government would be 'interfering' if it were allowed control of education. By contrast, in Scotland, France and many other countries, it had long been clear that only with state funding could universal education be provided.

Some modern-day commentators, especially those opposed to today's 'faith schools', have portrayed the churches as displaying power-hungry self-interest in trying to maintain their control of education. The Church of England at the time almost certainly saw it as a legitimate and laudable Christian ambition (through their National Society) to establish a school for the poor in every parish. In the 19th century the non-conformist churches (with their British and Foreign School Society) were also very active in founding schools. Despite this, when finally the Education Act of 1870 required universal school education in England, the new local school boards could not make adequate provision, and the churches continued to expand their own networks of schools. So, for example, by 1900 there were 5,700 state-funded schools and 14,000 funded by the Church of England.

Post-1870

From the start of state education, therefore, England and Wales had the so-called 'dual system', with church schools and 'state' schools alongside each other. The Church of England and non-conformists (mainly Methodists) both had large numbers of schools, and the Roman Catholic Church founded a comparable number.

There was some rivalry between the C of E and the non-conformists, and this resulted in legislation requiring that religious education in state schools be non-denominational.

The 1944 Settlement and After

During World War II, R.A. (Rab) Butler was Minister of Education and set about a total reform of the school system. This required what no previous Minister had dared to undertake: a renegotiation of the place of religion and the churches in schools. With great difficulty he agreed a settlement, the key features of which were increased funding for church schools (which had to opt for voluntary aided or voluntary controlled status) coupled with increased state control, and new legislation on the place of religion in state schools (then called 'county' schools but now usually called 'community' schools).

Most but not all Church of England and non-conformist schools opted for the total state funding coupled with smaller religious influence of controlled school status, and over a period most Methodist schools were merged with or handed over to the Church of England. Roman Catholic schools all or almost all opted for voluntary aided status, with stronger powers for the church but a need to find (initially) half the funds for building works (though running costs were totally provided by public funds). In the years since 1944, state funding of building costs for voluntary aided schools has risen by steps from 50 to 90 per cent.

As to state schools, the 1944 Act required them to start every school day with an act of non-denominational worship and to provide all pupils with religious education according to a locally agreed syllabus (subject to a right for parents to have their children excused RE and/or the act of worship). These requirements of the Act were being increasingly disregarded in practice until, as a result of an ambush of the Government by conservative members of the House of Lords, the 1988 Education Reform Act strongly reinforced them, contrary to much educational opinion. It was this act which introduced Grant Maintained status, allowing schools to be directly funded by central government and remove themselves from local authority control.

A result of the way the 'dual system' has evolved is that the great majority of schools with a religious character are either Church of England or Roman Catholic. Only a handful of Methodist schools still exist. There have from the start been a few Jewish voluntary schools, but for a long time there was political resistance to local proposals for their own schools from the minority religions of the post-war immigrant communities. Recent years have seen the acceptance of a small number of schools for these religions and for minority Christian denominations.

Today

The reduction in the funding of local authorities by central government since 2008, coupled with the advance of the academies movement, has led to a shrinkage in local authority involvement in education. In many dioceses the church has begun to fill the void left by local authorities' withdrawal by expanding its role in training and offering education-related services. Today a quarter of all primary schools have a Church of England foundation. Recent years have seen a reinvigoration of emphasis on what should be distinctive about a Church of England school.

What is a C of E school – and what is it not?

From the earliest days, the purpose of Church schools was to enable children to flourish by providing a basic education and by developing their moral character. It was always intended that Church

schools should be open to all of the children of the parish. The schools are not 'faith schools' in the modern sense of presuming that children are practising Christians or attempting to make converts of them. However, the ethos of the schools is based on distinctively Christian values and they offer children an experience of faith through collective worship and links with the parish church. Religious Education in Church schools will always include teaching about other faiths and they will usually follow the same syllabus for RE as non-Church schools. Since 2010 some Church schools have been converted into academies. This process entails a new way of managing the school apart from the local authority but makes no difference to the way in which the foundation ethos of the school is lived out on a day-to-day basis.

What is added by being a Church of England school?

Church schools have Christian beliefs and values at their heart. This means that every child and adult associated with the school is not just important because they are members of the school but also because they are seen as unique individuals within God's creation. A church school might have a motto such as "No one left behind!" and the reason would be that everyone is seen as so valuable in God's eyes that everyone must be supported and encouraged to be the very best they can be. Church schools recognise that as well as academic and emotional intelligence human beings also have spiritual intelligence. The spiritual aspects of life are recognised and nurtured alongside the academic and emotional needs of all. Church of England schools are places where questioning of belief and non-belief is encouraged as we all try to make sense of the world, the gift of life and the purpose of our own personal lives. Although we live in an increasingly secular society, the values of our country have their roots in the Christian faith. Church schools continue to celebrate this as an aspect of the heritage which enables them to be successful places of learning for children of all faiths and none.

What differences should you notice?

As a pupil, parent, visitor or member of staff you should find your Church school is as good as any other good school, but you should feel that the way in which the school works is different and distinctive. That distinctive difference will be rooted in Christian values that affect the way everyone behaves and in the way everyone is respected. Around the school, there will be signs and symbols which reflect the Christian heritage on which the school is built. There may also be areas for reflection which contain school prayers and prayers that the children have created themselves. Additionally, there will be a much greater emphasis on links with the local parish church than would usually be the case in a non-Church school. However, none of the above should be taken as indicators that Christian beliefs are being forced upon anyone. They are ways in which Church schools encourage an understanding of the meaning and significance of faith and promote Christian values through the experience that they offer all pupils.

What else?

Church schools are encouraged to:

- ensure that the school is led by a headteacher who is committed, with the help of staff, to establishing and maintaining the Christian character of the school in its day-to-day activities and in the curriculum

- engage meaningfully in a real act of Christian worship every day
- offer a school life that incorporates the values of the Christian faith
- ensure that religious education is given at least five per cent of school time and that the character and quality of religious education are a particular concern of the headteacher and the governing body
- observe the major Christian festivals and, in schools in which other faiths are present, ensure that those faiths are able and encouraged to mark their major festivals with integrity
- maintain and develop an active and affirming relationship with a parish church
- proclaim that it is a Church of England school on its external signboard and on its stationery, and make appropriate use of Christian symbols inside and outside the school.

School Inspections

C of E schools are inspected by Ofsted just like any other school (sometimes called a Section 5 Inspection). In addition, Section 48 of the Education Act 2005 places upon schools with a religious character a statutory obligation to arrange an inspection of religious education and the content of collective worship. In a voluntary controlled C of E school which is rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted it is the responsibility of the foundation governors in consultation with the local diocese to ensure that this is done every five years. All C of E dioceses use the National Society Framework for the **S**tatutory **I**nspection of **A**nglican and **M**ethodist **S**chools (more commonly called **SIAMS).** In essence the inspector will be judging the distinctiveness and effectiveness as a Church of England school. Section 48 (SIAMS) inspections often take place at a similar time to Ofsted inspections.

Summary

The Church of England's prominent role in providing education (especially primary education) today is rooted in an historical ambition to provide a school for the poor in every parish. It continues to be driven by its desire to be of service to the communities in which it exists. To be a Church of England school is not a series of do*s* and don't*s*. It will normally be associated with the way the school was originally founded. Its focus will be on delivering the best in education, with a distinctive Christian character, because every child matters in God's eyes.