

National Association of SACREs Annual General Meeting 2011

Keynote Address:

Dr Robert Beckford was introduced by Julie Grove.

Dr Robert Beckford is an educator, author and award-winning broadcaster. An educator for most of his life, he first taught adult literacy at Bournville College in Birmingham in the early 1990s and progressed to become the first ever tutor in Black Theology at Queens College, Birmingham (1992-8) where he taught trainee priests and ministers for the Anglican and Methodist churches.

He began teaching at the University of Birmingham in 1999, working first as a Research Fellow with black offenders at Birmingham Prison and then moving to the faculty as the first Lecturer in Black Theology in 2001. He spent two years as the Reader in Black Theology and Popular Culture at Oxford Brookes University. He is currently a Visiting Fellow at Warwick University.

The title of his address was: Engaging young people in the big society. He spoke about various interpretations of 'Big Society' and how young people haven't really heard about it. When asked, a national survey said that young people want to get involved in society decisions and 54% thought they could influence local decisions. 3/10 thought they could not influence national decisions. Robert emphasised that social justice should be the main goal of the 'Big Society'. Co-production should be the standard way of getting things done.

The presentation will be on the NASACRE website soon

<http://www.nasacre.org.uk/>

NASACRE Finance:

There are potentially serious questions about the future activity of NASACRE. It may not be possible to continue to have such high profile AGMs for example. There is some apprehension about the future linked with challenges for SACREs in the future. The report for past year is a positive one but the future is uncertain.

RE Celebration:

Sharon Artley, stepping in at the last moment, gave a report in the absence of Denise Chaplin. Sharon spoke about Denise's leadership. So much had been achieved on a shoestring budget and things were successful due to people's commitments. Partnerships were a significant feature which allowed RE to have a real focus within local communities – a great positive. There were a great many events and a huge variety from small local events to big national events. It raised the profile of RE with councillors, parents and many others. What is the legacy of the month? Many people have sent in information and photos about their events. SA is compiling a graphic novel of events which includes evaluation of them. The website will be revamped so eg the competitions will remain available to provide ideas. The statements made by key people about RE is a downloadable resource. There will be a 4 page article in RE Today in September. The one negative is that some people's description of the legacy of what they did does not indicate a

good understanding of good quality RE. It lacks evaluation of impact. This challenges SACREs to future work and training.

Westhill Grant

Tristram Jenkins introduced young people and Youth SACRE members from Newham and said how impressed he had been with the way they worked with challenging issues and the relations between the generations illustrated in their work

The adviser who supports the Youth SACRE said it had been important to devise a logo.

The young people talked about their SACRE and their interest and commitment to it using a PPT to support them but they were not dependent upon it.

Their project involved working with an artist and local faith leaders to develop ways of expressing their identities. Their presentation showed pictures of the sculptures they made. They talked about identity boxes they had made and explained the symbolism of them.

A teacher for one of the schools (St Angela's Ursuline Convent School) talked about the value of pupils belonging to the Youth SACRE. It made them part of a different group, outside the school. They mixed with a greater diversity of people. Approximately 12 people attend from the school and meetings start with lunch which enables students from different schools to mingle and learn from one another.

The boxes will go into their respective schools with plaques. They will also feature at the Youth on Religion show case where a report from Middlesex University will be launched nationally. The students thanked NASACRE for the funding which had supported this project

John Keast spoke about the state of the RE nation

JK started by thanking Brian Gates as the outgoing chair of the REC acknowledging the debt of gratitude owed to him for his work.

He went on to say that about 17 years ago he used to do Ofsted inspections. He talked about being part of a team inspecting a school where there were two RE teachers in the dept. One was brilliant but the other was diabolical and knew it. The difficulty was in the decision on how to grade the department. Should it be a compromise satisfactory which was not true of either of the teachers. This, he said, is the problem of trying to give a general picture of a complex issue. The state of the RE nation varies from place to place. To characterise it as satisfactory because it is good in some places and not in others is not helpful. It is however better than it was 15 years ago. We have made enormous progress as a subject and we know the evidence of this. Whether things are better than two years ago is more difficult to say. Most of you will have read the Ofsted report of two years ago and the one before that so you know the Ofsted characterisations of the RE nation ie a mixed state. Where we are going is not easy to determine. He thought it was about 1992 that St Gabriels held a conference when the then Archbishop of York (John Hapgood) gave the keynote address saying if we could solve the problems of RE we should have solved the problems of religion. JK admitted to still

thinking about that after all this time because he suggested there is some truth in it. The health of RE is, he thinks, tied up with perceptions of religion in society. If you look at ups and downs in RE you are probably looking at ups and down in the way religion is looked at by individuals, society and the media. The profile of religion has risen in recent years. He can remember when the Sunday Times colour supplement was first introduced – one of them in that decade gave its whole issue to what life would be like in the distant year of 2000. Some of the predictions included for example: people would not play cricket anymore; second was that the apartheid regime would end in a blood bath in S Africa; third was that religion would disappear. All wrong. The profile of religion has increased not decreased and our understanding of religions and world views has not gone away and nor has RE which has also got a raised profile.

He chose to pick out one element of this idea – by its very nature matters of religion and belief are contestable. Most of the interesting things of life are contestable. Therefore when we look at the state of the RE nation we need to conclude that it will never be utterly clear or non-contestable. Opinions come and go, different ideas predominating at different times. This is probably true of other subjects also. There is always room for improvement.

Despite all this, he said he thinks the state of the RE nation is critical at the moment. He summarised this by saying the context is particularly difficult at present and most delegates are aware of this with LA funding cuts, restructuring and colleagues losing their jobs. The legal position of the subject is also critical at the moment. There is no plan to change the statutory nature of the subject but by default this did happen last year in relation to its place in academies and the situation was only rescued through the funding agreement.

We are in uncharted territory with the dismantling of the National Curriculum as we know it – we don't know what this will mean. There is also the issue of qualifications particularly in relation to one measure of success being the enormous growth in qualifications. The threat to RE though its omission from EBacc is particularly important.

We haven't just been sitting around though. In the last few months we have shown how effective we can be when we work together to make a case. We have not fully realised the effectiveness of our case but we have worked well together. He thanked all those who have contributed to bringing pressure to bear on authorities on these issues eg signatures on EDM, petition etc. For him personally there are 3 priorities:

- Resolution of the EBacc situation
- Get involved in one way or another with the review of the curriculum because without it doubt is cast on the place of RE
- Clarify place/role of SACREs in relation to the new climate eg academies, free schools etc.

JK went on to say if this is a true picture it presents us with a series of opportunities. There are things we can draw from this:

He asked the question – where does authority lie in relation to RE? Who are the guarantors of standards in RE? At one time he might have said in the coalition of people involved in it. Now he would say it lies within the RE community. This might imply a greater coherence than is the case BUT he uses 'community' to apply to a loose combination of groups that have interest in RE at their heart. This is a

community that has both national and local importance/elements – not exclusively one or the other. What does local mean in the current context? The understanding is changing. Not only does it mean LAs but could mean individual schools as they become detached from LAs. We see another coming together in the community ie community representatives on SACREs with elected members, ‘professionals’ (the practitioners of RE); the representatives of faith communities who represent a coalition within SACREs. (One of the ways this could be improved might be closer links between school and higher education professionals). JK presents this as an opportunity ie the authority lies within the community. We need therefore to define the community – how do the different constituents relate to one another? Another Q is how do different parts of the community work together and separately – which things are done best together and which separately? Then there is the embodiment of the community. SACREs have done it locally and the REC has done it nationally as it spans all the interest groups. How can we get people from different backgrounds and constituencies to work effectively together? It depends on the will of all the groups to do so. The ways in which SACREs and REC work depends on the goodwill of the members of those bodies. To take advantage of the current opportunities we must make sure we work effectively together. He went on to speak from the REC perspective – it must become as effective an embodiment and representative of the RE community as possible. To this end the ‘think tank’ was established. It made a report to the REC in March suggesting how the REC could be better at what it does. Crucial is the need for a strategic plan for the next five year period. This is an opportunity for all members of the REC to contribute to setting the direction and making real the opportunity the current changes in education are providing. Without a national place, the community has to take responsibility for the subject, to advance the interest of the subject, for its teachers and young people. Final point: that to take advantage of the opportunity and remedy the threats we have to work together. Failing to do so will mean the threats will weaken us in ways that will undermine the profession and the subject for more than a decade to come.

Clare Dempsey (GCSE student)

Sharon Artley introduced Clare Dempsey who spoke on a title of her choice – Why RE is important to society in Britain and beyond.

She started by showing us a video she had produced to illustrate what RE is like in her classroom and many others.

The nature of RE is one of questioning. There are lots of misconceptions about RE. We have to ensure that everyone understands the nature of RE and why it is important. She spoke with great enthusiasm about what she has learned in RE. She talked about starting in Y9 a philosophy and ethics GCSE. Teachers had said benefits are that pupils can develop personally and become fully rounded human beings. She gave an example – euthanasia. RE is the only place where I learned about this and all the complexities around it and was encouraged to develop a personal view about it. Without RE we might not ever have considered this important issue. Genetic engineering is covered in biology but only in RE is there time and encouragement to develop personal views on it. We have also learned about Islam which is so important for young people to understand. Without RE we

would have to rely on the media and develop misconceptions. Community cohesion - important that RE encourages people to understand what people's beliefs really mean to them and support the development of cohesion in Britain. Religion is here to stay so it is important to learn about it. Everyone has beliefs which arise from experiences etc. RE is a subject which enables students to develop faith and beliefs but also question their own faith positions, provides an opportunity to change the world in which we live. She sees herself as a future RE teacher.

Young peoples Interfaith project:

Marion (Blackpool) spoke about a project run via Blackpool SACRE. Yr 6 pupils had been involved in Holocaust Memorial Day. Firstly training was provided for teachers in order to ensure pupils were properly prepared. Westhill award funded training for 10 teachers.

Aims

Introduce subject content of the Holocaust

Challenge stereotypes perceptions and presumptions

Develop skills of critical evaluation of human behaviour, ability to review and justify.

Context:

Build stories of 6 people who experienced the Holocaust in some way

Ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances

Significant impact on lives of others

Made a choice to help others

She introduced the six characters who had been studied – some Jewish and some not. All had helped Jews during WW2.

Children were given photo and information to help them decide whether each of the people was a hero or not. Development of thinking skills – impact line – ie sequence information and evaluate. NO graphic images or reference to numbers.

8 out of the ten schools committed to HMD.

The project resulted in a DVD of the HMD presentation by the children from the collection of schools.

Impact – 10 schools committed to teach this material next year and take part in HMD. A school from another LA observed and learned and will develop with other schools in their own authority.

Westhill awards for the coming year will not be announced until after the selection meeting on 2nd June.