

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a small, young green plant with three leaves and a mound of dark brown soil. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green field. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

# **PREPARING THE SOIL:** GROWING FAITH, A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

ANN CASSON, NICK TAUNT & BOB BOWIE

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR  
CHRISTIAN EDUCATION RESEARCH

The logo for Canterbury Christ Church University, featuring a stylized white knot or interlocking loops design.

Canterbury  
Christ Church  
University

## FOREWORD

Growing up in today's world is a challenging experience for children and young people. School can feel like an uphill struggle in the midst of the pressures to perform in tests and to succeed academically. Paying attention to the spiritual dimension of life is one of the most important ways in which schools can contribute to the well-being of their pupils. This enables them to gain a healthy perspective in their lives by balancing learning to perform and learning to be.

This practical guide will be a welcome support to those working in Christian ethos schools. It offers guidance based on research that will enable those responsible for leading spiritual development in their school to develop strategies appropriate to their context.

My prayer is that this guide will facilitate Christian-ethos schools in being able to offer their pupils a Spirit-filled educational experience.

### **Trevor Cooling**


Professor of Christian Education  
Canterbury Christ Church University

---

This booklet is produced by the National Institute for Christian Education Research, (NICER) based in Canterbury Christ Church University. NICER's aim is to develop world-leading research in areas of interaction between Christianity, other worldviews and education.

Based on active, practice-based research, the booklet is designed to be used to inform and help improve practice in school.

### **It aims to**

- stimulate discussion
  - offer ideas for CPD activities
  - lead you to develop fruitful collaborative projects with schools with whom you might share a common vision.
- 

***"The fully-functioning church school is... itself a religious community, one in which different sorts of behaviour are followed and nurtured... where, above all, it is assumed that what is of consuming and urgent interest is not just a set of individual goals for teacher or student, nor the meeting of targets imposed by management... but a range of concerns about common humanity, expressed in actions and relations and worship; where the culture takes it for granted that there should be argument and involvement – in the most 'inclusive' way – about the needs of neighbours and of strangers, and space for stillness and thought and growth. . . I want equally to emphasise for the sake of the Church that the church school's 'culture'... can provide a crucial experience of what the Body of Christ means, for those, adults and young people, who would not otherwise see it."***  
(Archbishop Rowan Williams Address to AAASH, 2003)

**Growing Faith is about fruitful relationships between schools and churches**, which can develop to resource and support households to grow in faith together. The vision of the Church is for a significant culture change so that every aspect of mission and ministry is seen through the **lens of children, young people** and households.  
(General Synod February 2019, paper 2121)



# THE WHY: WORKING TOGETHER TO GROW FAITH

This booklet draws on **Lessons in Spiritual Development: Learning from Leading Christian-ethos Secondary Schools**, by Casson, Cooling & Francis (2017) which contains the stories of ten schools who participated in a research study investigating how secondary schools contribute to pupils' spiritual development.

**The Church of England's vision for education** promotes the spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, moral and social development of children and young people. The vision has the promise by Jesus of 'life in all its fullness' at its heart as we offer a vision of human flourishing for all, one that embraces excellence and academic rigour, but sets them in a wider framework

*(Right Revd Stephen Conway, Foreword. Lessons in Spiritual Development, p. vii)*

It's making sure that children encounter Christ in people. ... You're constantly revising that engagement and ensuring those encounters happen, those Emmaus moments  
*(Senior teacher, Lessons in Spiritual Development p.68)*

**NICER research has shown** that the church school contributes to pupils' spiritual development; it offers a space for all within to look at life from a different perspective; it is an in-between space to encounter, explore and reflect on spiritual dimension.

**Working together:** "Leaders who are connected operate deliberately **within communities of practice**, positioning themselves within **positive relationships** that **sustain and encourage all parties**. They **embrace interdependence**, demonstrate **compassion** and **embody service to others humbly**. They create shared identity within their teams and **draw colleagues around a common purpose.**"

*(Church of England education office - National Conference 2018)*

**Question:** In what ways could working with your local church or another Church school help your students to grow in faith?"

# EXPLORING SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT & CHRISTIAN-ETHOS

## What does NICER research tell us about spiritual development in church schools?

For students in ten Christian ethos secondary schools spiritual development was about

- Deepening an understanding of **self**: “*what you should be, what else you could be and how you need to respond to the world*”
- Belonging to a **community**: “*a sense of who you are in connection to each other*”
- **Deepening of knowledge and understanding**: “*you start to get a lot more involved in questioning what your beliefs actually are*”
- Developing a **relationship with God**: “*you feel like you want to connect to God*”

## What is Christian Ethos? A variety of views:

*“It’s about treating people with decency, respect blah, blah, and that kind of thing”*

*(Digitalspy post)*

*“Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good”*

*(Church of England Vision for Education Report, 2016)*

*“A Christian Ethos in our school means that you support the aim to respect everyone within the school community, treat others as you expect to be treated, be kind, well behaved - really adopting a 'moral' way of behaving.” (Mumsnet.com)*

*“The glory of God is a human being fully alive*

*(Irenaeus) Each member of our school community is created by God and our aim is to achieve our full potential.*

*All we do is rooted in this hope of who we are as people and who we can become.”*

*(St Mary Redcliffe and Temple School)*

## EXERCISE 1: FOUR DEFINITIONS OF CHRISTIAN ETHOS

Consider these definitions singly, then in pairs/threes.

- What resonates with you?

- What aspects have not been captured?
- What image or definition would you offer?

It’s like you’re on a journey and you have a map and the map is the people with you. You are going along on your journey and you are asking questions. (Student, Lessons in Spiritual Development p. 39)

We had to build a school community from scratch. The first thing was laying those firm foundations. From the outset, we were outstanding in terms of [the Christian ethos], knowing that if you get that right everything else is going to follow, but you’ve got to get that right, [and] protect it fiercely. (Principal, Lessons in Spiritual Development, p. 28)

### KEY FINDING 1

#### An awareness of the active agency of students.

Young people are not a blank slate, they are active in their own spiritual development. It is important to remember that the students are leaders and role models among their peers today (Lessons in Spiritual Development, p.90)

# WHERE ARE WE NOW?

## EXERCISE 2: YOUR SCHOOL CONTEXT

There is no one size fits all solution; the context of the school inevitably shapes the response.

1. Write down three words that are distinctive about your school's context (e.g. size, location etc.)
2. If a visitor were to spend three days in your school, what three things do they see students doing that mark it out as a [deeply] Christian school?

### KEY FINDING 2

#### Students and staff value the making of time and space for reflection in the everyday life of the school.

(Lessons in Spiritual Development, p.89)

The presence of prayer in The John Wallis Academy gave an indication of the Christian roots of this pastoral care... Everyday every meeting would start with a prayer, a moment of reflection of the task ahead, a focusing in on the particular needs of the students. The students are exposed to the idea of prayer being an integral aspect of being Christian, as an expression of the Christian faith. (Lessons in Spiritual Development, p.4)

**Reflection:** The Quiet Place was designed by a sculptor in residence working with the students to create a space for private, personal or class meditation time and it is designed in such a way so that a whole class can sit around a central cross. The design was inspired by the idea of a journey, the twist and turns becoming a metaphor for a spiritual journey. ... At times of crisis or tragedy students find their way to this place for quiet moments of reflection (Lessons in Spiritual development, p.79)

### KEY FINDING 3

#### Confidently Christian

We can be confidently Christian. We seek the right to serve society from the resources of the Christian faith. (Professor Trevor Cooling in Lessons in Spiritual Development, p.91)

It is often the less visible, the less quantifiable, ...the hello in the corridor; 'just the people'; the principal 'knowing your name'; the kindness of the catering staff when you were suffering and when you were celebrating; the tea and cakes in the staff room once a week, ... It was in quiet moments of reflection, the prayers shared with others daily and at times of crisis. It was not just in the school chapel or classrooms but in the music practice rooms, or the changing rooms before a big game. (Lessons in Spiritual Development, p. 27)

We are explicit about being a Christian organisation and we say very clearly the reason why we have a motto, 'always our best because everyone matters' – everyone matters to us because everyone matters to God. That's why we aim for always our best and that's why it matters. (Headteacher, Lessons in Spiritual Development p.84)

### EXERCISE 3: MODELLING GROWING FAITH AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT IN YOUR SCHOOL

Discuss the questions below with a delegate you've not worked with before. For each question, identify the day-to-day evidence of the impact of faith

1. What does faith look like in practice in your school?
2. Why? (What is the underlying rationale/overarching aim)
3. What are your processes for sustaining spiritual development for the whole community? (for those of other faiths or worldviews, for the Christians)
4. How do you make faith real?

#### THE PEOPLE

5. How do your students and your staff define faith/spirituality? (You choose which word they define). How is the spiritual life of staff and students nurtured? How are student leaders encouraged, developed and sustained?

#### FAITH CONVERSATIONS

6. Who are the 'apostolic core'; the key people who sustain this in your school community? With whom do you have faith conversations in your school, in your local community, local faith/church community, with other Church schools?
7. How comfortable are you talking about your spiritual development? How comfortable are your staff? Where in school do these conversations take place?

### KEY FINDING 4: The Value of Inclusivity

The schools involved in the study aimed to offer an experience of spiritual development within a Christian ethos education where everyone flourished and felt affirmed (Lessons in Spiritual Development, p.93)

[Students do not] have to have a faith to develop spiritually, they can still think about big questions and consider the meaning of life. (Staff, Lessons in Spiritual Development, p.46)

Everyone is at a different point and spiritual development is like going on a bit further in that journey no matter where you're at. (Student, Lessons in Spiritual Development, p. 38)

It is knowing that in the corridors and the schoolyard, in conversations at break, or lunchtime with friends, you could talk about your faith.  
(Lessons in Spiritual Development p.27)

8. What are your spiritual development strategies/ objectives for 2019/2020
9. What currently do you find most difficult in building and sustaining the Christian culture?

**Highlight three ideas that would be worth exploring together. Plan how you might develop partnership in these areas.**





# THE COLLABORATIVE APPROACH: THE NEXT STEPS

## Connected

What does it mean to be in connected as secondary school leader?

### EXERCISE 4: A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: ACTIVE COLLABORATION

#### Food for thought

- A. Recall a fruitful working relationship that you have had in the past.
- B. What three factors made it effective?
- C. Where do think the fruitful partnerships are in your area?

#### Networking Opportunities (with Other Schools, Local Churches, or with Other Departments in your School)

1. Write down on separate post-it notes, 2/3 ideas that have resonated with you during this session and that you wish to explore further.
2. Place under the appropriate broad headings posted around the room
3. Talk together and make pairs/triads to establish links for working together:
  - i. Agree to visit each other's schools or exchange ideas
  - ii. Book up a time for visits (necessary for the collaboration to have concrete form)
4. Write up these activities as an item for regional group meetings

You can never know the full impact because obviously, we can't see [people's] relationship with God (Student, Lessons in Spiritual Development, p.24)

### KEY FINDING 6: Nurture a Sense of Community

People flourish within community; being with others is essential to developing fully as a human being.

The importance of a sense of belonging to the school community was highlighted by students and staff, how it had supported them in difficult times or spurred them on to achieve goals they had thought impossible. (Lessons in Spiritual Development, p.87)

This place gives you a sense of belonging. This place is a community; I take it for granted until I talk about it. This place is an absolute community that I'm very lucky to be in and a lot of people's professional lives will never feel that. (Member of staff, Lessons in Spiritual Development, p.28)

[Once a week in SLT meetings, we reflect on [the Bible passage] and relate it to what's happening in our school at the moment and the challenges we face... I am a cultural Christian, I'm not a practising Christian, but [reading the Bible] in school every week. It is a time of learning and developing. (Member of staff, Lessons in Spiritual Development, p. 56)

The most important Gospel value is faith because without faith there is nothing (Student, Lessons in Spiritual Development, p.62)

# KEY FINDINGS: THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AN ETHOS WHERE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT FLOURISHES

An awareness of the active agency of students

Opportunities for reflection time

Confidently Christian

Value inclusivity

Think strategically and act deliberately

Nurture a sense of community

## REFERENCES

*Lessons in Spiritual Development: Teaching from Christian-Ethos Secondary schools*, by Casson, A., Cooling, T., Francis, L.J., (2017) Church House Press

*Growing Faith: Churches, schools and households (2019)* – <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/GS%202121.pdf>

*Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good*. The Church of England Education Office (2016) <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/education-and-schools/vision-education>



The National Institute of Christian Education Research is a centre in the Faculty of Education at Canterbury Christ Church University. We aim to develop world-leading research in areas of interaction between Christianity, other worldviews and education.

#### WHAT WE DO:

- **Promote research** to inform the contribution of faith to the public understanding of education; support and conduct research and development in Christian schooling, spiritual development, religious education, faith development and worldview in education; enhance evidence research-based policy decision-making in Church and faith-based national education policy.
- **Provide national conferences, seminars, and consultancy on Church schools and the Christian dimensions of higher education**
- **Support and encourage: faith in education**, Christians & people of other faiths to consider teaching as a vocation, and seek to support the presence of faith in the workplace & the classroom
- **Supervise & collaborate:** we supervise doctoral students and we collaborate with other institutions and bodies that have similar goals, particularly other faith-based higher education institutions and centres

We seek to embody and enact the virtue of hospitality and welcome, through all aspects of our work.

#### CONTACT

Prof Bob Bowie  
Director of NICER  
[bob.bowie@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:bob.bowie@canterbury.ac.uk)



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR  
CHRISTIAN EDUCATION RESEARCH  
Canterbury Christ Church University  
[nicer@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:nicer@canterbury.ac.uk)  
[www.canterbury.ac.uk/nicer](http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/nicer)

