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# Leadership and faith: working with and learning from school leaders



Over recent years, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) has supported a number of key projects focusing on leading schools of a religious character. Three themes emerge from this work – the leadership of faith schools, leadership and spirituality and the development of leadership in faith schools.

This report identifies and summarises key themes arising from these projects and highlights issues for the future.

Leaders of faith-based schools have identified the need for:

- **recognition** – of the specific selection and training needs of leaders of schools of a religious character
- **research** – on the specific characteristics of leadership in schools of religious character, including sustainability and succession issues
- **reflection** – on their own practice and the development of their schools as communities of faith

“The core of leadership is to understand the people working with you, but before that you have to understand yourself.”

“Self-exploration cannot be done in a vacuum on its own – it has to be done by, with, and for others.”

“Being explicit and open about my own faith has enabled the articulation of the faith of others.”

“Being the head of a faith school puts you in the firing line with respect to your own beliefs. Every decision has to stand the test of being publicly compared against your faith principles.”

“The way you deal with an individual, the way you treat people, reveals, inter alia, your faith.”

“We search for God within ourselves – As we discover ourselves, we discover more about God.”

A series of think pieces plus further information about the Leading Practice Seminars can be found at: [www.ncsl.org.uk/faithschoolsandspirituality](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/faithschoolsandspirituality)

# The leadership of faith schools

NCSL's programme of Leading Practice seminars seeks to capture and reflect school leaders' voices and to enrich them by bringing together research and best practice.

In this way, it aims to produce new, shared understandings of significant aspects of leadership that will in turn inform debate and generate materials for on-going professional development.

Recent seminars looking at leading schools of a religious character have focused on the distinctive contribution that faith schools make and how their leadership could be better supported and developed.

The following pages summarise some of the key issues emerging.

## What school leaders tell us

A need for greater recognition of the issues facing faith schools and for identifying the specific training needs of faith school leaders was identified at the first NCSL Leading Practice seminar on leading schools of a religious character.

Attended by delegates representing all phases of education and including school leaders from the Church of England, Roman Catholic, Jewish and Muslim faiths, the seminar celebrated the strengths and explored the tensions around leading faith schools.

It set the tone for future reflection, debate and collaboration, being seen by many as an important step forward in supporting those who lead schools of a religious character.

School leaders told the seminar they would benefit from a greater integration of faith schools into the leadership development package "so that the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), Headteacher Induction Programme (HIP) and other NCSL programmes contain some elements about leading a faith school and give status to faith schools."

**In a series of workshop sessions, delegates looked at what makes faith schools 'distinctive' and at the 'characteristics' of faith school leaders.**

**Among the conclusions they came to were that faith schools:**

- are a way of integrating an authentic expression of faith in a context within which children are growing
- have a distinctive understanding of individuals – distinctiveness but not exclusion
- need to have the confidence to develop a distinctive curriculum for individuals
- need to develop spirituality – to find it and develop it and to take that 'special bit' and run it throughout the curriculum
- get their hands dirty with the difficult and marginalised – mission redefines the purpose of education

## On leaders of faith schools, they said:

- leadership resides not just with one person but must be shared throughout the school including with students and members of the local faith community. The head does not have to lead on everything
- sustainability comes through articulating a relationship with the transcendent, and hope comes from a deep personal faith that informs leadership
- school leaders are the interpreters of faith for the school community
- school leaders are the spiritual leaders for both pupils and staff, but this is true also for non-faith schools
- the role is one of servant leadership – learning through faith, leading through faith and walking the faith

# Leadership and spirituality

Defining spirituality and understanding the need to develop the capacity of school leaders for further spiritual growth was the key theme of an NCSL Leading Practice seminar.

Delegates considered how they could help create a better personal understanding of the links between spirituality and leadership and how they could communicate this to each other.

They also explored how this might be used to inform their understanding of leadership practice generally, and how it might be translated into the way they work with colleagues.

What emerged was an acknowledgement that all facets of school life are underpinned by the importance of spirituality as the unifying thread that runs through all subjects and all experiences at school – something that requires “being it and not just doing it.”

And, as leadership behaviour is one of the most powerful determinants of how organisations develop, it is important to develop the leader’s capacity for personal spiritual growth.

In order to develop, school leaders require the opportunity for ‘inner work’ – time for reflection and ‘internal sustenance’ so that they, and hence their organisations, can grow.

They can do this through:

- creation of time and space for reflection and transcendence beyond the self
- access to other perceptions of the concept through a common vocabulary, shared resources and opportunities for engagement with others who are exploring it
- development through opportunities for individual creativity (for example, painting, yoga)
- development through opportunities for service and the promotion of social justice
- creation of strategies for sustainability, to allow the capacity for self-renewal

- awareness of spirituality in relationships through a concern for the dignity of colleagues and pupils in the school

Reflections on leadership from individual school leaders included a presentation from secondary school headteacher Gerard Moran, who said leaders had the power to project ‘shadow or light’ into their organisations because of their ability to create conditions for good or ill in which colleagues have to work.

He described five facets of the journey from shadow to light:

- the shadow of the identity crisis – the need to eschew the external trappings of authority and role and to replace them with a sense of personal value and empowerment
- the shadow of competition – the need to move from the self-fulfilling prophecy of competition to a more consensual, co-operative and communal approach
- the shadow of functional atheism – the belief that ultimate responsibility rests only with the leader and is characterised by workaholic behaviour, stressed and strained relationships and absence of effective delegation, rather than the need to share the load and to trust others to play their part in bearing it
- the shadow of chaos – fear of which results in a rigidity of rules and their slavish application and a school culture that is imprisoning rather than empowering and a failure to recognise that chaos is often a necessary precursor to creativity
- the shadow of death – the artificial maintenance of initiatives well beyond the end of their natural lifespan, rather than allowing something to die so that something new might begin

Primary school head Vanessa Huws-Jones described the importance of opportunities for reflection, posing a series of thought-provoking questions on:

- school priorities: what one gift would you give to your pupils or your school community (for example, patience, compassion, love of learning, love of life) and how would you encourage this to flourish in your school?
- school values: how do people feel treasured in your school and how do you create the environment for this to happen?
- school worship: how do you utilise it in your school?
- school subjects: how do you recognise and reinforce good practice in your school?

## The development of leadership in faith schools

A national survey of provision for leadership and management development was carried out by NCSL, the Catholic Education Service and the Church of England Education Division across Anglican and Roman Catholic dioceses.

While the survey uncovers many examples of good practice that need to be shared more widely, it also revealed a number of key areas for action and identified gaps in current provision.

Among the key priorities for future development it presents are:

- a more strategic approach to leadership and management development throughout a teacher's career, including early leadership development and succession planning for headship
- understanding and making effective through training and development programmes the distinctiveness of faith-based schools, including middle level leadership and specific knowledge and skills for headteachers
- faith-based activities to nourish teachers and leaders personally as well as professionally
- creating effective models to strengthen community leadership
- supporting school and network-based training and development through coaching and mentoring, consultancy and better e-learning
- strengthening links with higher education, particularly the network of Church Colleges and Universities
- more effective marketing of NCSL programmes and activities within the context of Anglican and Roman Catholic schools and the communities that they serve
- more inter-diocesan and regional opportunities

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