

Understanding Christianity for Church of England representatives on a SACRE

The purpose of this briefing is to provide diocesan representatives on a SACRE, or on any other RE group, with additional information to be able to respond to any concerns about Understanding Christianity.

Understanding Christianity: Background

There has been a need identified in RE (by successive Ofsted reports) for support to enable the progressive and systematic investigation of Christian beliefs and practices. A number of funders, together with the Church of England, agreed that there was a need to create a more intellectually coherent and challenging approach for teaching about Christianity as part of a wider RE curriculum, and for a resource that could contribute to raising the level of pupils' religious literacy. RE Today, an organisation without denominational affiliation, and with a widely acknowledged track record of producing high quality RE resources, was commissioned to prepare the material. Understanding Christianity offers that clear, coherent approach to teaching and learning about Christianity in RE for 4-14 year olds. It is based around a selection of core Christian concepts and structured across the age range to support pupils in deepening their understanding.

The launch of Understanding Christianity has been a great success. The resource has been positively received by Diocesan Directors of Education, diocesan advisers and, most importantly, by teachers. To date 62 Diocesan RE advisers and several independent RE advisers have been trained as accredited trainers by RE Today. Each of our dioceses has engaged in the project by sending at least one adviser to be trained and they are now rolling the training out across 38 dioceses to our 4700 schools. This training will be focused on church schools but is open to community schools. The project was extensively trialled in both community and church schools, and significant changes were made as a result.

The initial reaction from diocesan officers/trainers has been very positive. The first training sessions for teachers are being held this term (Autumn 2016) so it is too soon to provide quantitative data. However, the 'digital noise' around the project is enthusiastic and anecdotal feedback is very positive. Over 1,000 packs of the resource have now been shipped from the warehouse in the first fortnight of the roll out to schools.

www.churchofengland.org/education

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Understanding Christianity has stimulated a heated debate about curriculum development in RE. This positive development forces all sides to sharpen and think through what a balanced RE curriculum should look like. We now have an informed debate taking place about religious literacy, and in particular in relation to this project, theological literacy. While we would not claim that this is entirely as a result of Understanding Christianity, the resource has certainly acted as a catalyst to the debate.

Frequently asked questions

Is Understanding Christianity a complete RE curriculum?

Understanding Christianity is a **resource not a curriculum**. Any school (church or community) just teaching Understanding Christianity would be failing to provide a balanced curriculum. As a resource it is expected that teachers will use their professional judgement in selecting and adapting activities to suit their context.

Is Understanding Christianity funded solely by the Church of England?

Understanding Christianity is a resource funded by Culham St Gabriel's, the Jerusalem Trust and the Sir Halley Stewart Trust.

Was Understanding Christianity written solely by Christians?

It was commissioned and managed by the Church of England Education Office but written by RE Today and its team of multi faith and non-faith RE advisers.

Should Understanding Christianity be recommended for use in a locally agreed syllabus?

It is entirely a matter for any SACRE if it decides to recommend or discourage a particular resource for use with its syllabus, but the same criteria and approach should be used fairly to assess which resources should be recommended to support RE.

Is Understanding Christianity inconsistent with the REC Code of Practice for RE teachers?

The Code of Practice is about teacher practice and behaviour not about resources and curriculum. It should be noted, however, that the Church of England is a signatory to the Code of Practice and would not support a resource that was inconsistent with it.

The Code of Practice can be found here

<http://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/educators/projects/a-practice-code-for-teachers-of-re>

The teaching approach of Understanding Christianity is wholly consistent with the Code. The Code of Practice encourages teachers to 'respect people's beliefs'; it 'encourages and values reason-giving'. It 'treats others as they would wish to be treated'; it 'accepts contestability and is self-aware'; it is open; it 'promotes a fair and accurate representation of the belief under study'; 'is balanced'; and is 'open to debate and hard questions and deals with controversial issues' about Christianity e.g.: 'Creation and science; conflicting or complementary?' at Upper KS2

Can students of RE participate in thinking theologically or is this exclusive to members of a religious community?

This question assumes a narrow definition of theology and one that would not be recognised as reflecting the scope of theology as understood in many British universities today. The nature of the RE curriculum is being widely debated at the moment and this view is only one of many views in this debate.

see <http://www.reonline.org.uk/news/revision-rethinking-re-a-conversation-about-religious-and-theological-literacy/>

Does Understanding Christianity allow for the diversity of views in Christianity?

What is being explored in Understanding Christianity are the key concepts that build up the prevailing Christian narrative as understood in most Anglican/non-conformist churches. There is, however, considerable scope to bring in other Christian viewpoints. For example, the KS3 unit on Incarnation available on the website <http://www.understandingchristianity.org.uk/teachers-and-schools/resources/> also explores a range of denominational approaches to worship from Quaker to Pentecostal and in the 'Digging Deeper' section explores Jesus as represented in art. 'Body Theology' including the views of the Lesbian and Gay Christian movement is covered, and the unit includes the recommendation that ' [students] 'should explore non-religious views and weigh up how far they might also support the idea of human dignity and value'.

Does Understanding Christianity undermine a core ideal of religious literacy i.e. the impartial study of religion and belief?

Understanding Christianity was written by a team of multi faith and non-faith RE experts from RE Today. It was not written from the perspective of faith, but rather the resource offers an impartial look at Christianity through the exploration of the core theological concepts of the Christian faith.

'This the best resource we have ever seen for teaching RE' (Board of governors at a London primary school)

'Fired up and enthused teachers ready to get stuck into Understanding Christianity' (Senior Lecturer in Teacher Development)

'121 schools signed up for Understanding Christianity' (Adviser St Albans Diocese)

'Over 70 Schools now signed up' (Adviser, Norwich Diocese)

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