

Faith and Society Files: Church and School - Planning RE Days for 16-19s in Sixth Forms in Schools and Colleges

Every sixth former in school has an entitlement to RE as part of their studies, but few schools feel able to offer a suitable course of study. This File offers guidance on how churches can partner their local school or sixth form college in putting on an RE day.



An Opportunity?

It might surprise you that every sixth former in school has an entitlement to RE as part of their studies. It's small, as little as 14 hours a year and not well defined, but it's intended to be compulsory. Few schools (less than 15%) make any contribution towards this entitlement for their students. It's generally not funded, can't command space in a busy timetable and is often perceived as too difficult and not interesting to students. Church-into-schools groups similarly find the challenge of working with 16-19s substantial. Most often they have preferred to work with younger pupils and in recent years have steadily withdrawn from sixth forms, although this is beginning to change in some organisations.

This situation contrasts strongly with the increasing number of school students undertaking formal studies in RE at AS and A level, which makes RE amongst the fastest growing courses today. Moreover research shows that there is genuine interest among students to explore their spiritual side.¹ They are generally less keen on church and formal organised religion but are positively open to belief in God and have many questions that they are keen to ask. There is a marked difference between this picture and that often presented of young people who don't want to spiritually engage.

A Challenge:

How then should Christians seek to support schools and their students to realise this entitlement to RE in truly positive learning which gets to the heart of faith and belief? Many of the standard approaches to both assemblies and General Studies are tired and can easily switch students off.

RE Days:

One way forward is to enquire whether your local school or sixth form college would be interested in partnering local churches in putting on an RE day. Taking a year group 'off timetable' is often an easier way for a school to make a beginning in meeting its obligations to provide 'RE for all'. It also offers a free space in which curriculum subjects can be opened up in dynamic ways.

¹ 'Seventeen year olds: more spiritual than religious, less atheistic than you may have thought' Published in *Resource* written by Lat Blaylock. Data analysis by Peter Williams Autumn 2005. Also available free of charge from the Dare To Engage website at www.dare2engage.org posted 30 May 2007

- » Identify a strong issue ... 'image and appearance' or 'good and evil'...
- » Work out a snappy title ... 'In the body, out the body' or 'An evil day'... and
- » Employ some creative ways to explore it....

and students will respond positively.

Experience suggests days need to be challenging and demanding, requiring deep thought from students. They need to speak into a subject but also connect insightfully with the life experience of students.

Getting resourced:

Often churches are able to gain access to speakers and resources which schools can crave. The Montgomery Trust² can often facilitate top flight speakers and pay their costs as well! But to engage students you will want to engage them in active learning not just listening. Talking for less than 10 minutes maximum at one time is a good rule to follow.

Finding a number of different ways to explore a subject is a good place to begin. There are a number of tried and tested innovative resources from Dare To Engage designed for 16-19 settings that will engage.³ They aim to be fun and to draw students quickly into working with important spiritual questions.

² www.montgomerytrust.org.uk

³ 'Spiritual Engagement' is a selection of RE Days for 16-19s available from RE Today – this publication provides many of the resources you will need to put on a successful day as well as talking you through how to plan it. 'Rage & Despair' is an RE Day published in partnership with the Bible Society 'Breathe' is an art installation which works well in a number of settings with 16-19s. 'Festive' is an initiative working in FE and 6th form Colleges.



Early Issues:

From the start it will be important to consider a range of important practical questions.

- » When can the school identify a space to run an RE day in? Schools will often plan up to 12 months ahead and this is helpful because it allows planning time.
- » How many students will be involved?
- » What sort of classroom or hall spaces are available to us?
- » Do we want to run a conference for a large single group or to offer the group a range of activities which approach the theme differently?
- » How can we start to build a team to deliver the day? What people and skills are available from within the wider church community which could be valuable?

Going deeper:

Working with 16-19s is likely to be demanding because their interest will not be satisfied with superficial ideas. Having a number of people who are skilled in relating to older teenagers on your team will be most helpful. However, you are also likely to need others who have a strong knowledge of the subject and an ability to think theologically and systematically. Getting on the inside of the subject is vital and having people who speak from experience can be very powerful. Often a group of churches can identify these resources together.

These days can result in strong student evaluations and often three quarters of students rate a Dare to Engage day 'very good' or 'good'. Most students state they anticipate an RE day will be boring but came away finding 'it was stimulating, interesting, amusing and different' or it 'opened my mind to questions which perhaps I did not have an answer'.

If you would like to find an easy way in, then you could ...

- » Negotiate with a school to 'buy in' the services of a group like Damaris for a 6th form day.⁴
- » Or, you could support the school sending a group to Damaris 'Global student forum' event.⁵
- » You could seek out an experienced practitioner who could work with you on the first one.
- » Or you could consider asking the school to host a Christian art exhibition.⁶ Dare to Engage is currently working on a set of pictures on spiritual themes produced by young people which are available to loan to schools and colleges.
- » Finally, you could consider inviting in 'Breathe', which is an interactive art installation focussing on Christian themes from the curriculum which has been designed with 16-19s particularly in mind. (See pictures below) A full RE day in conjunction with Breathe will be available shortly.⁷

RE Days are not for anyone to take on. They do require a strong range of skills across a team of people. They should be demanding for those who come and those who lead but they can also be deeply spiritual and rewarding. So we'd encourage you to speak to your school or college and explore just what might be possible.

⁴ www.damaris.org

⁵ www.globalstudentforum.org

⁶ <http://dare2engage.org/2007/10/07/easter-journey-posters>

⁷ www.breatheresource.org.uk

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