

EVALUATION STUDY OF UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

FINAL REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>F1 Overall, the response to <i>Understanding Christianity</i> has been extremely positive, from both pupils and teachers, particularly in relation to the 'Big Story', pupil engagement and increased teacher confidence.</p> <p>Both pupils and teachers noted, in particular, the impact the frieze had on engagement and understanding. Teachers found pupils had an increased awareness of the big story in Christianity and pupils demonstrated their ability to connect this to core theological concepts.</p>	<p>R1 This report recommends the use of <i>Understanding Christianity</i> in schools and that schools using <i>Understanding Christianity</i>, engage thoroughly, and continuously with the frieze, firmly embedding it in their syllabus in RE in order to support pupil learning and engagement.</p>
<p>F2 <i>Understanding Christianity</i> was valued for its promotion of pupil agency and individual reflection.</p> <p>Both teachers and pupils found the lessons to be inclusive with pupils from a range of religious and non-religious backgrounds finding the lessons enjoyable and accessible. Pupils felt their lessons encouraged discussion, individual reflection and debate with a range of different viewpoints considered.</p>	<p>R2 For schools to continue using <i>Understanding Christianity</i> to support group discussion and individual reflection and ensure a range a different beliefs and perspectives are considered during lessons.</p>
<p>F3 There was considerable/noted improvement of textual understanding and knowledge of core concepts after using <i>Understanding Christianity</i>. The ability of pupils to articulate, discuss and reflect on core theological concepts was significantly improved when the <i>Understanding Christianity</i> resources, such as the Big Frieze and the Core Concept icons were used.</p>	<p>R3 To continue using <i>Understanding Christianity</i> to support pupil's core learning of the main theological concepts and how they relate to the text. In particular, for schools to draw on the Big Frieze when teaching these concepts.</p>

FINDINGS		RECOMMENDATIONS	
F4	Teachers would value this resource being made for other religions.	R4	Consider whether resources like this can be made for other religious and non-religious traditions.
F5	<i>Understanding Christianity</i> supports and enhances the continued professional development of teachers. Teachers found the training extremely important and useful. Teachers noted this supported their continued professional development and overall enthusiasm for the subject.	R5	To continue training teachers using <i>Understanding Christianity</i> and to establish ongoing training opportunities after the initial training period, including potentially establishing peer support networks for teachers in the same region. For those who have received training from RE Today to continue to cascade their training and learning to other members of staff who are responsible for teaching Christianity.
F6	A number of cross-curricular opportunities have been identified where participants have linked lessons and learning outcomes in Christianity to other school subjects such as English, PE and History.	R6	Further research might be carried out to explore this further and in what ways a cross-curricular approach can be used in RE, using <i>Understanding Christianity</i> as an example of how this might be achieved.
F7	<i>Understanding Christianity</i> is a highly effective teaching resource for schools with teachers finding increased pupil attainment and progression.	R7	For SACREs to consider using <i>Understanding Christianity</i> in their agreed syllabus.
F8	There are some challenges faced when pupils transition between key stages if they have not used <i>Understanding Christianity</i> previously.	R8	Schools to ensure that <i>Understanding Christianity</i> is used throughout the key stages to help support pupil learning and progression.
F9	Teachers found the range of resources and activities extremely helpful. This supported their lesson planning as there are many ideas to choose from with the structure of the <i>Understanding Christianity</i> allowing for a great deal of freedom and creativity in terms of how lessons are planned. One KS3 teacher did note that the range of activities available for KS1 and 2 would be very useful for KS3.	R9	To consider developing a 'bolt on' resource pack for KS3 with further activities that cover a broader range of abilities.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings and analysis from a study that examines the impact of *Understanding Christianity* in schools across England. The study, conducted by Dr Rachael Shillitoe at the University of Birmingham, seeks to evaluate the impact of RE Today's *Understanding Christianity* teaching resources amongst pupils and teachers across primary and secondary schools, with a particular focus on schools without a religious character. This study aims to find out the extent to which the resource has 'made a difference' to teaching and learning about Christianity in RE. The evaluation includes the following elements:

- Setting out the intentions and goals of the resource.
- Assessing the effectiveness of the training model (over 100 people were trained and accredited to train schools in implementing the resource; school training uses a model of at least three encounters totalling 15 hours of training for primary schools).
- Evaluating the impact of the resource and its teaching and learning approach on a range of outputs, including, for example, teacher confidence, teacher subject knowledge, pupil engagement, pupil knowledge and understanding about Christianity.

This report will focus on the findings gathered from teachers and pupils using the resource and examine some secondary data gathered by RE Today, which evaluates the teacher training experience.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

To conduct this evaluation, a qualitative approach was adopted in order to gain in-depth and detailed insights into the thoughts, perspectives and experiences of both teachers and pupils. Although surveys could have been used to evaluate the resource, a qualitative approach with a smaller sample allows for a greater and more specific focus on the impact of the resource and encourages discussion and reflection amongst the participants. In total, ten schools were invited to participate in the study. However, data collection could only take place at nine schools due to the COVID-19 lockdown occurring during the period when the last school was due to be visited. Schools have been chosen from different regions in England in order to provide a geographical spread of northern, southern, rural, suburban and urban field sites. The schools have also been selected to ensure a mix of primary and secondary schools and both schools with and without a religious character. RE Today initially contacted schools to inform them of the study and the opportunity to participate as RE Today had an existing relationship with all schools that use the resource and have the contact details of all those who have attended the training. The school's participation at the training session for *Understanding Christianity* is part of sampling criteria, as part of the evaluation is focused on training and support. Once a school expressed an interest to take part, RE Today put these schools in contact with the researcher who would then liaise with the contact teacher to discuss the study in greater depth and arrange a visit. The University of Birmingham granted ethical approval for this study. All participation is voluntary, including school, teachers and pupils. All participants' names and field sites have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Pupils were initially asked to express their interest in participating in the study before the researcher visited. If interested, they were given a parental consent letter to take home which contained an opt-in slip for parents or carers to sign. This needed to be signed and handed back to the school if the pupils wished to participate. Before participating in the study, the pupil's signed informed consent was asked for.

The methods employed in this qualitative study included:

- Focus group discussions with pupils
- Semi-structured interviews with staff
- Photographs of pupils' workbooks
- Observation of an RE lesson using *Understanding Christianity* (when possible).

Classroom observations varied depending on whether the school in question was teaching *Understanding Christianity* during the period of data collection. In total, six RE lessons have been observed. The focus groups followed a semi-structured interview schedule with questions adapted at each school to reflect the different topics they have been learning about in RE. Supplementary questions were added based on the lessons pupils had taken part in (e.g. creation, salvation and the Trinity) with child/youth-led approach adopted throughout. This allowed the participants to shape and inform the nature of the discussion and topics covered. As a way of an ice breaker and to introduce the theme of the focus group, a free-listing exercise using key terms from the *Understanding*

Christianity resources was used. This proved a useful tool in the beginning of the focus group and allowed the pupil participants time to reflect and think about some of the topics they had learned about before the discussion formally began. This proved most useful in those field sites where there had been a significant gap between their lessons using *Understanding Christianity* and the period of data collection.

In total, ten schools were recruited for study with data collection complete at nine of these schools. This report provides an account of the findings and themes generated from the data collection. Interviews and focus groups have been transcribed and coded with a thematic approach adopted to identify key and reoccurring patterns within the data. Of the nine participating schools where data collection is complete, eight are primary, one secondary. The last and tenth school due to be visited was also a secondary. Two primaries are from rural locales (one south west and one west midlands), three primaries are located in suburban areas (one each in south west of England, south and east midlands) and three primary schools are located in urban areas (east midlands and north east) The one secondary school is from a rural area in the north of England. Of the nine participating schools, four are community primary schools, four are Church of England primary schools and one is a secondary community academy school.



Breakdown of participating schools and anonymised names:

School A: Community Primary School, South East of England

School B: Community Primary School, South West of England

School C: Community Primary School, South West of England

School D: Church of England Primary School, East Midlands

School E: Church of England Primary School, West Midlands

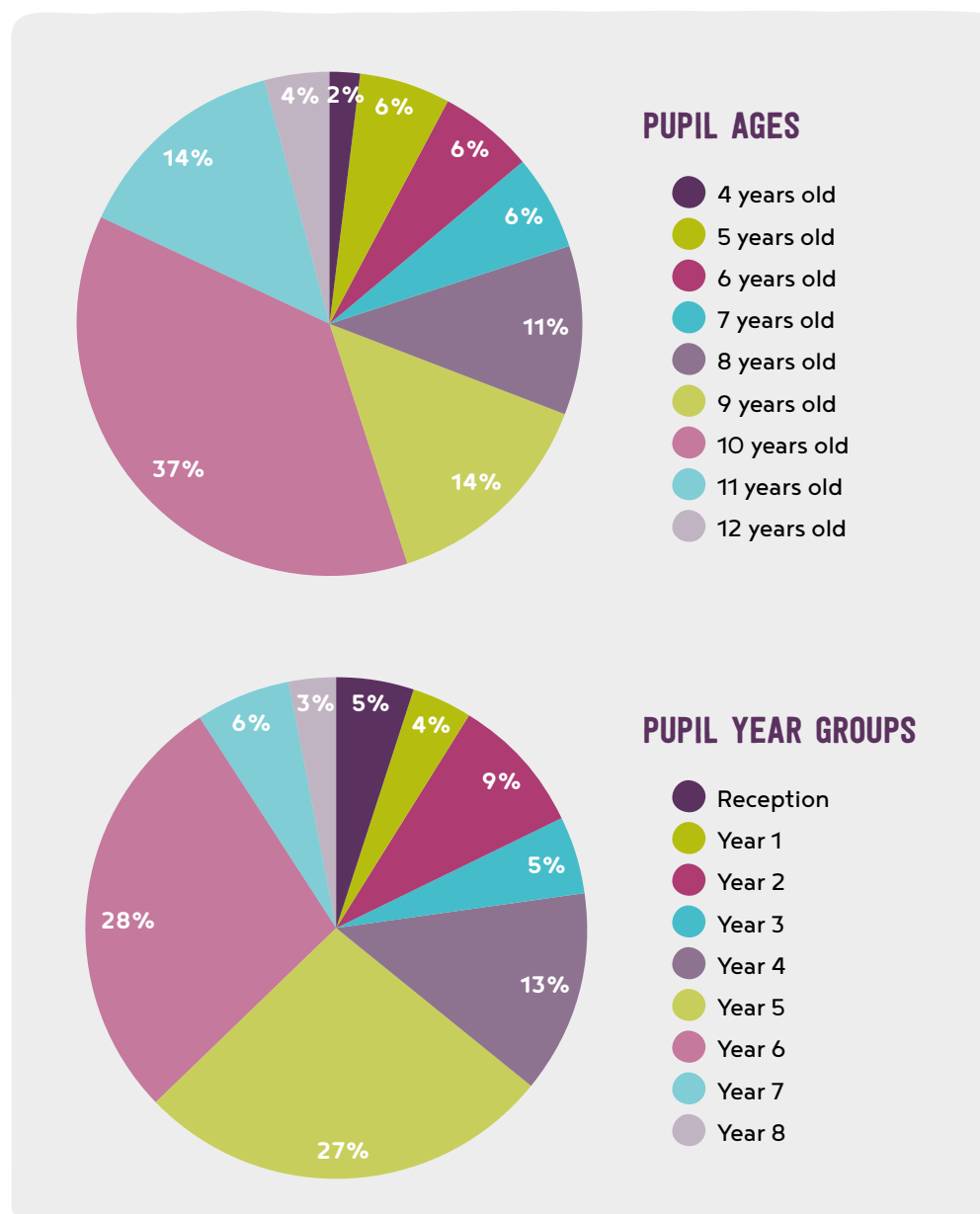
School F: Secondary Academy School, North of England

School G: Church of England Primary School, North East of England

School H: Community Primary School, North East of England

School I: Church of England Primary School, East Midlands

127 pupils have participated in focus group discussions, 17 teachers have been interviewed and 6 RE lessons have been observed.



BACKGROUND TO UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Understanding Christianity emerged as a response to Ofsted reports (2010, 2013), reporting on the teaching of Christianity in schools, as well as the Church of England's Making a Difference Report (2014). Both the Making a Difference Report and the Ofsted reports, commented on the challenges facing, and limitations of, the teaching of Christianity in schools, including both church and community schools, and the opportunities for schools to improve and enhance this. The Ofsted 2010 report found that, for example, pupil understanding of Christianity can be unsystematic and confused; that schools pay insufficient attention to the progressive and systematic investigation of the core beliefs of Christianity; and that the study of Jesus focuses on an unsystematic collection of information about his life, with limited reference to his theological significance within the faith. The Church of England Report, argues that the subject requires more intellectually coherent and challenging curriculum and a programme to raise the level of pupils' religious literacy while developing pupils' 'ability to think theologically and engage in theological enquiry' (2014). In response to this, a project between the Cambridge Interfaith Programme and the Church of England Education Office was funded to support Hazel Henson, a primary head teacher from Derbyshire, to explore an alternative approach to teaching Christianity. In May 2014, RE Today was invited to be involved in developing these ideas, to develop a resource that would stretch from foundation years to KS3 (ages 4–14). Crucially, the resource was to be intended for all schools, both community and church schools. In May 2016, the completed *Understanding Christianity* resource was launched.

Understanding Christianity aims to respond to the challenges laid out by the Ofsted and Making a Difference reports as well as those difficulties discussed by Copley and Walshe (2002) and Fancourt (2012), by raising standards of achievement in teaching and learning about Christianity. The key purpose of Christianity is to support pupils in developing their *understanding of Christianity*, as a contribution to their understanding of the world and their own experience within it.

To achieve this, the resource aims to:

- Reduce the content covered and focus on a small number of core concepts in order to enable a deeper understanding by pupils.
- Ensure coherence by selecting core concepts which reflect a view of biblical Christianity as following a salvation narrative.
- Use a 'spiral' curriculum, where pupils revisit these core concepts in different contexts as they move through the school. These varied encounters deepen pupils' understanding of the meaning of these concepts within the overall 'big story' of the Bible.
- Explore ways in which belief in the core concepts has an impact on the diverse Christian community and on the individual lives of Christians.
- Integrate opportunities for pupils to reflect upon these ideas in relation to their understanding of religion and belief, including their own responses. (*Understanding Christianity*, 2016)

To help ensure teachers feel ready and able to use *Understanding Christianity* to its full potential, RE Today provides training for those who wish to become an accredited trainer and learn how to deliver training in those schools using *Understanding Christianity*. This approach was taken by RE Today in response to the importance of and need for continued professional development that is sustained, intense, focused on teachers' subject knowledge and how pupils learn, with opportunities for feedback and responses (Coe, 2013). As a result, training and the continued professional development of teachers is inextricably tied to *Understanding Christianity*. RE Today provides two days of training to accredit advisers and teachers to offer *Understanding Christianity* training in their region. To date (Sept 2020), RE Today has trained 106 accredited trainers, of which 65 are Church of England Diocesan advisers or directors, three are Church in Wales Diocesan advisers or directors, thirteen are independent advisers (including five RE Today trainers), two are local authority advisers, seven primary teachers/head teachers (three of these in Wales), one international teacher (Catholic international school in Paris), one Roman Catholic diocesan adviser, and eleven youth workers (Christian organisations already supporting schools in RE).

PREVIOUS EVALUATION FINDINGS

Prior to this study, a number of evaluations of teachers' experiences of using *Understanding Christianity* and the accompanying training have been undertaken.¹ Although this is not part of the data collected in this study, it will be helpful to bear these findings in mind when thinking about the broader impact *Understanding Christianity* has had in schools. Kathryn Wright (2017), a Diocesan RE Adviser, undertook an evaluation of the *Understanding Christianity* resource with teachers who had attended training and used the materials for two terms (2017). Wright's questionnaire was responded to by 90 teachers. Some key findings are as follows:

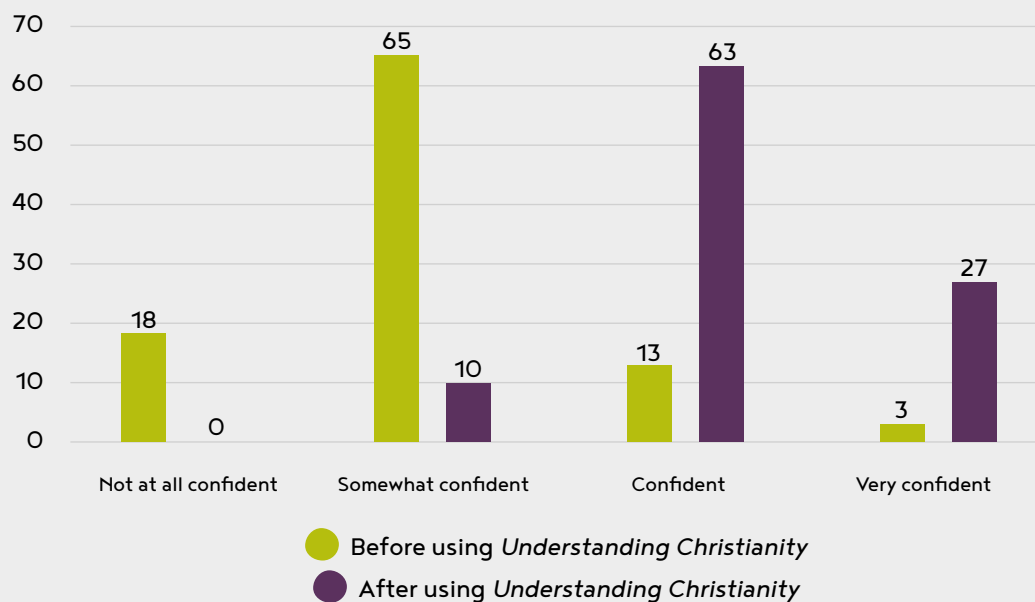
- Over 85% felt that the resource has impacted a fair amount or a lot on their own subject knowledge
- Over 85% felt they had gained confidence in teaching RE. They felt they could plan with more direction and ensure depth of learning. Some said the training had 'made them think' and empowered them.
- Over 80% of teachers felt the eight concepts and the 'big story' of the Bible had helped them understanding Christianity better, with 60% saying they felt they helped pupils to understand it better too (more time needed)
- Over 50% said that the resource had already had a positive impact on pupil outcomes (more time needed).
- Over 75% said pupils were engaging more positively in RE

Additionally, Wright's findings showed that some teachers felt the textual aspects too difficult for KS1 with some KS2 teachers finding the KS2 materials set a high challenge. A survey undertaken by Leeds Diocese (2018), found that 83% of 55 teachers thought that the *Understanding Christianity* resources were easy or very easy to use. Evaluation studies across nine Church schools in the Bishop Anthony Education Trust, Hereford, and eight community schools in Gloucestershire both found an increase in teacher confidence and enthusiasm in teaching Christianity, and increased knowledge and understanding of the 'Big Story' after attending the training and using the resource.

Morley-McKay and Moss (2018) carried out an evaluation of *Understanding Christianity* in 49 Church schools in Leicester. This research also showed an increase in teacher confidence, particularly in relation to using biblical texts in lessons and connecting these texts with core theological concepts. Prior to using *Understanding Christianity* and receiving the training, 18% of teachers did not feel confident teaching Christianity in schools with the majority, 65%, only feeling 'somewhat confident'. Only 13% were confident teaching Christianity, with 3% feeling very confident. After undertaking the training and teaching Christianity in RE using *Understanding Christianity*, there was a marked shift, with none reporting as having no confidence, 10% feeling somewhat confident, 63% confident and 27% feeling very confident. The report found that schools sampled found effective ways to cascade the training received by RE Today to all staff who taught RE, teacher confidence had increased, pupil's subject knowledge had also increased as well as their language and overall enthusiasm. The diagram on the next page shows this increase in confidence.

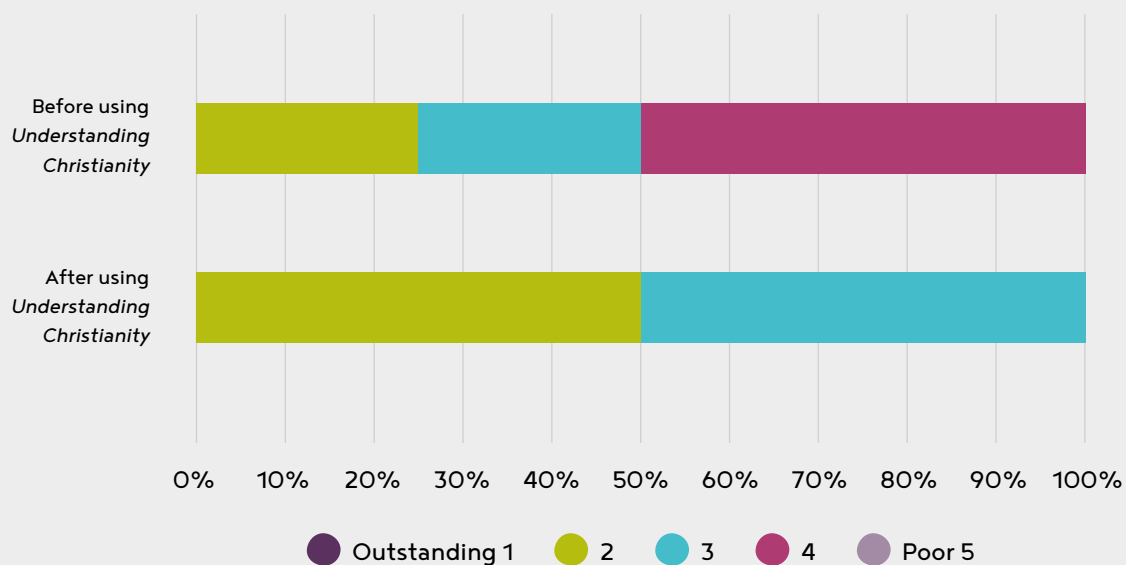
¹ All data provided by RE Today

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A more recent study of seven teachers from seven community primary schools in the west midlands carried out by RE Today found that 100% of teachers noted an improvement in the teaching of Christianity in their school with 100% of respondents also finding pupil progress had increased.

HOW GOOD IS TEACHING ABOUT CHRISTIANITY IN YOUR SCHOOL?



The next page shows data collected from the Worcestershire diocese in 2018. The feedback also evidences improvement in teacher confidence and the quality of teaching after attending *Understanding Christianity* training and implementing the resource in class. All respondents noted improvement in each area.

1. CONFIDENCE IN TEACHING CHRISTIANITY IN RE

	Not at all confident	Somewhat confident	Confident	Very confident
BEFORE Attending UC training and using the UC resource		80%	20%	
AFTER Attending UC training and using the UC resource			60%	40%

2. CONFIDENCE IN USING BIBLICAL TEXTS IN LESSONS

	Not at all confident	Somewhat confident	Confident	Very confident
BEFORE Attending UC training and using the UC resource		100%		
AFTER Attending UC training and using the UC resource			80%	20%

3. CONFIDENCE IN TEACHING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN TEXT / CORE THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS AND CHRISTIAN PRACTICE

	Not at all confident	Somewhat confident	Confident	Very confident
BEFORE Attending UC training and using the UC resource	80%	20%		
AFTER Attending UC training and using the UC resource		20%	60%	20%

4. KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE BIG STORY OF CHRISTIANITY (THE OVERALL NARRATIVE AND SALVATION NARRATIVE OF THE BIBLE)

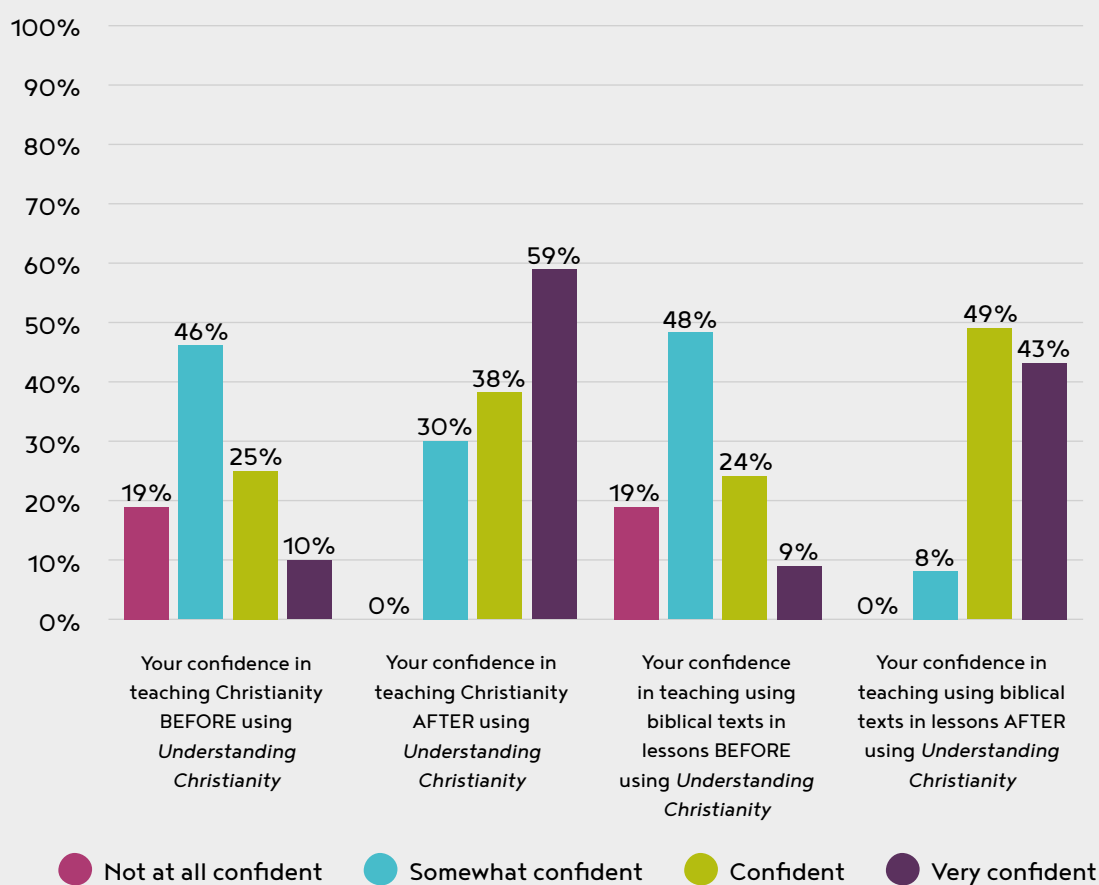
	Not at all confident	Somewhat confident	Confident	Very confident
BEFORE Attending UC training and using the UC resource	20%	60%	20%	
AFTER Attending UC training and using the UC resource			60%	40%

5. WHAT IMPACT HAS THERE BEEN ON PUPILS (SO FAR)? HOW WOULD YOU ASSESS THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE MAIN CHRISTIAN CONCEPTS AND THEIR IMPACT?

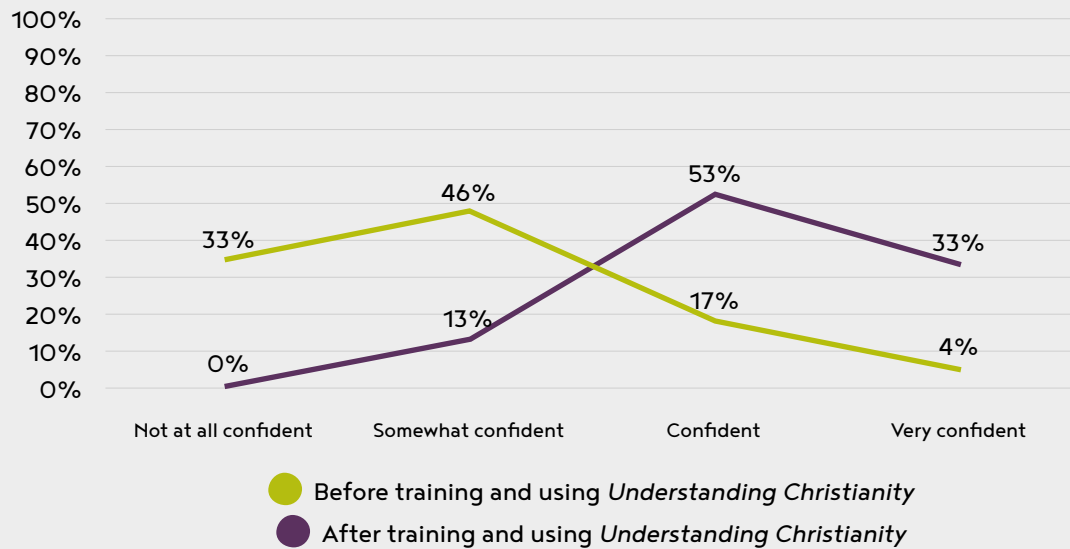
	Not at all confident	Somewhat confident	Confident	Very confident
BEFORE using the UC resource	40%	60%		
AFTER using the UC resource		20%	80%	

A larger scale questionnaire using the same questions was conducted in 2018 with 162 schools, across both community schools and schools with a religious character. This evaluated both the teachers' experience of the training and of using *Understanding Christianity* in their RE lessons. Again, this shows uniform increase in teacher confidence in teaching Christianity after attending the training and shows improvement in the use of biblical texts and core concepts in their RE lessons, as set out in these three graphs.

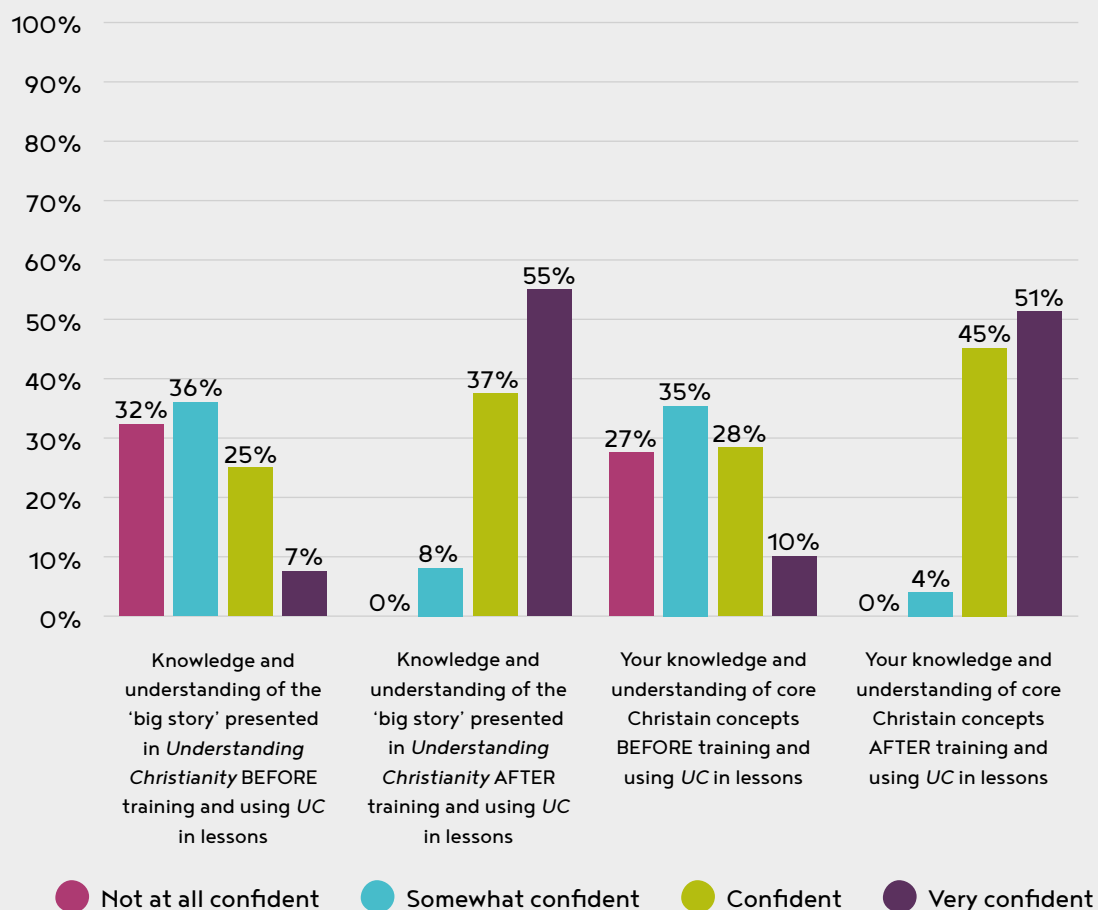
TEACHER CONFIDENCE IN TEACHING CHRISTIANITY AND USING BIBLICAL TEXTS IN LESSONS



TEACHER CONFIDENCE IN TEACHING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN TEXT/CORE THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS AND CHRISTIAN PRACTICE



KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE 'BIG STORY' AND CORE CONCEPTS



THE 'BIG FRIEZE'



The 'Big Frieze', the large pull-out art resource, designed by Emma Yarlett, which explores the core concepts in the *Understanding Christianity* pack, was always discussed as being one of the best resources for teaching. Teachers often commented on how well pupils engaged with the lessons when this was used, how pupils look forward to RE when the frieze is used and how their knowledge and understanding has improved as a result. One teacher reflected on her use of the frieze and said:

"Brilliant. I have only had it this year. The frieze absolutely captivates them and they love it and it's amazing. It's been an amazing resource for sitting and discussing and thinking and ... thinking about other people's ideas as well, and they have absolutely love the frieze it's drawn lots of ideas out."
RE Lead, School C (Community Primary)

Another teacher, commenting on pupil engagement said:

"The other thing I absolutely love is the art work the FRIEZE... From what I gather from pupils myself, they also love it. It's a really nice way into a topic because you've got links from a previous unit that you can make. It just gets them looking and exploring... "they're poring over it, they're making links...A really nice way into a unit."
Teaching assistant, School B (Community Primary)

Pupils across all schools unanimously showed their enthusiasm for the frieze. Pupils often gasped with excitement when the resource was brought out during the focus group and showed great enthusiasm describing each panel and the different symbols and meanings within it. Their knowledge of the 'Big Story' varied depending on which panel they had been studying. The pupils' knowledge of key concepts often improved when this resource was brought out, with those who had previously confused reincarnation and incarnation, often remembering the difference upon seeing the frieze. When asked to describe the first panel, Creation, in the 'Big Story', some children in lower Key Stage 2 (ages 7–9) saw the 'Big Story' as a literal interpretation and for example, after learning about creation with the frieze, thought that Christians believe God painted the world. However, older children were able to see the symbolism and what this meant about Christian beliefs.

"The paint pots are kind of representing that earth was God's masterpiece."
Year 7 Pupil, School F (Secondary School)

Overall, the frieze proved to be one of the main highlights and positive contributions of *Understanding Christianity* for both teachers and pupils. Although knowledge of the meaning and story behind each panel varies, this was related to what the pupils had been studying. However, all pupils could talk confidently and in detail about

the panels they had studied, often pointing out hidden details of the pictures which related to particular stories or messages. For example, pupils often enjoyed pointing out the 'warning tape' in the Creation panel and the hidden words in later panels and the symbolism behind the contrasting bright and grey colours in the middle to end panels.

Some schools used the frieze to great effect, with the resource being used in all lessons, stuck in pupils' books or as a wall display. These opportunities to integrate the resource within the school's RE lessons was noted as an important strategy in supporting pupil learning and understanding of the 'Big Story'.



TRAINING, TEACHER CONFIDENCE AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

All staff who undertook the training commented on how useful they found it and how important it is before using the resource in classrooms. Those staff that undertook the training, usually the RE subject lead, would then repeat the training to school staff during INSET days or other opportunities for staff training. Some teachers commented on how large the resource was and how, without the training, it may be overwhelming and difficult to use, pointing to the necessity of teachers engaging in training and support from RE Today (or another accredited trainer) before attempting to teach with *Understanding Christianity*.

One teacher from a community primary school spoke about how she invited her Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) to attend the training as well and how beneficial this was.

“And that was really helpful. Erm just going through it. The training was very good. Broke it all down, showed how it all worked, kind of all the background behind it was really interesting as to why... because the course ran over a year we had projects to kind of do and try out in between. Meeting with the other teachers who are also doing it and sharing ideas I think was one of the most helpful things from the course.”

RE Lead, School B (Community Primary School)

Teachers often commented about how the resource had improved their own confidence and overall knowledge about Christianity.

“Well before it would’ve just been one sheet of ‘this is what you need to teach them’ erm I just think it’s much more inspiring for someone trying to plan something they might not necessarily know loads about themselves because although I am a Christian, that’s in a very blurry way. So, I feel I’ve learnt a lot whilst I’ve been doing it and I’ve actually, that’s nice to feel that I am learning too’.”

Teacher, School C (Community Primary)

Teachers all commented on how this is the best resource they have used to teach Christianity in comparison to other resources they have used previously. One teacher said:

“As someone new to teaching RE, obviously the *Understanding Christianity* resource is so much fuller. I know it’s not a final teaching aid, it’s still something you have to develop and you have to work with the year groups and the pupils and the abilities erm but it’s such a much more fuller resource and I like erm that gives you the sort of basic understanding that pupils should have before you the deliver that unit.”

Teaching Assistant, School B (Community Primary)

"Pretty confident actually. Yeah, I look forward to RE lessons. It doesn't bother me planning them or anything like that. I'm so much more competent than I was probably 2 years ago teaching Christianity erm just couldn't recommend it [*Understanding Christianity*] enough actually."

RE Lead, School C (Community Primary)

"I am Christian so I have some background knowledge but actually having that systematic approach to being able to teach it is very different... I would say my confidence has definitely developed during the year. Erm I think I actually would not be confident teaching RE now without it [*Understanding Christianity*]. That's how much I actually rely on it...It does support me and it does give me confidence in preparing and teaching good RE lessons and I actually feel like I've got a benchmark to work with now to deliver something that's really good."

Teaching Assistant, School B (Community Primary)



UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT AND CORE CONCEPTS

Teachers discussed the impact the resource had on pupils' knowledge and understanding of core concepts as well as their engagement with textual sources. Speaking on the use of text within the resource and how the Bible is positioned as a key resource to draw on, one teacher reflected on how important this is for learning about religions.

"Oh, the other thing which I think is great is the sort of reinforcement of using the real text and using the text for that faith. Rather than, if you like, I mean it's always good to have stories and films and I like that as well and I always do use extracts and I do use film clips quite often and it's things like that that are encouraged in the resource but actually going back to the roots of the text and unpicking it rather than having things that are perhaps available on the internet as teachery resources which maybe aren't purely looking at the text. Having the actual sort of piece of paper in front of you. So, I think that's good for children to actually see where it comes from rather than it's on an overhead projector and they see an extract or a version of, so that's been good."

Teaching Assistant, School B (Community Primary)

Another teacher spoke about how her pupils' knowledge of key concepts within Christianity and how this has improved since using *Understanding Christianity*.

"I think they've definitely got better at it. I mean I was doing some pupil conferencing with them and I think they've got better at using for Christianity, and well for some of the other religions, but for kind of using the proper words. Kind of Pentecost and incarnation and salvation and those kind of things. So it's kind of improved as it's been taught probably better and in a bit more structured way."

RE Lead, School B (Community Primary)

Pupils themselves during focus groups would discuss the concepts they learned during RE lessons on Christianity. One pupil from a community primary school discussed what she had learnt about Christians' beliefs about God and was able to describe the basic concept of the Trinity.

"And how Christians believe in one God, father, son and holy spirit... the trinity. They kind of work as one."

Pupil, Year 5, School B (Community Primary)

Pupils' knowledge regarding core concepts did vary across the field sites. The majority of pupils knew the core concepts relating to the topics of *Understanding Christianity* they had covered in their RE lessons. In particular, both Creation and 'the Fall' were understood by the vast majority of pupils and they were able to talk in detail about what Christians believe. Knowledge about salvation varied and was dependent on whether the class had covered that topic. However, there were common misunderstandings between 'incarnation' and 'reincarnation' and this was prevalent amongst all schools with pupils often using the words interchangeably and using definitions of reincarnation to

describe incarnation. Reflecting on the core concepts taught, two pupils from a Church of England Primary School said:

Pupil 1: "It was confusing because lots of the words were similar and they had similar meanings and they were around the same part of the story. So you've got confused but then after a while you got used to it."

Pupil 2: "Yeah, every lesson she [the class teacher] would describe it. She [the class teacher] would touch on it."

Pupil 3: "Every time she [the class teacher] came across that word when she was reading something, she would explain what it was over and over again."

Pupils, Year 6, School D (Church of England Primary)

These pupils continued and discussed how the teacher's approach to continually referring to key concepts and going into greater depth as lessons went on to support their learning. After remembering the meaning of incarnation in Christianity, the pupils said:

Pupil 1: "step by step it gets more complicated."

Pupil 2: "cus at the start she was like – God came down, and well Jesus came down, he was helping people and it gets harder, Jesus came down in God's form and stuff."

Pupils, Year 6, School D (Church of England Primary)

During one observation of an Upper Key stage 2 lesson (ages 10–11) at a Church of England Primary, the activities focused on the different meanings of the Bible and in particular how Christians can understand the creation story in different ways. Pupils, after being placed into groups were tasked with providing reasons as to why Genesis 1 could be understood as a poem, science textbook, news report or a story. The different groups, all arguing one of the perspectives, used examples from the text to defend their position. For example, pupils drew on the writing style and chronological order of the text to explain why it might be read as a science textbook. The teacher then explained that the reason behind this task was to understand how Christians may interpret stories within the Bible in different ways, ranging from more metaphorical understandings to literal ones. This message was clearly understood by the pupils in the focus group discussion after the lesson. One pupil reflecting on this lesson said:

"I took away from it the different ways Christians view Genesis 1, the Creation story."

Pupils, Year 6, School D (Church of England Primary)

Another pupil discussed the variety of beliefs Christians may hold and the different interpretations they might have.

"I got out of it that Christians can still believe in kind of the same thing but they can think it in, believe it in different ways. So some people think it [the creation story] was in seven days and its true but then some people think it was in poem form."

Pupils, Year 6, School D (Church of England Primary)

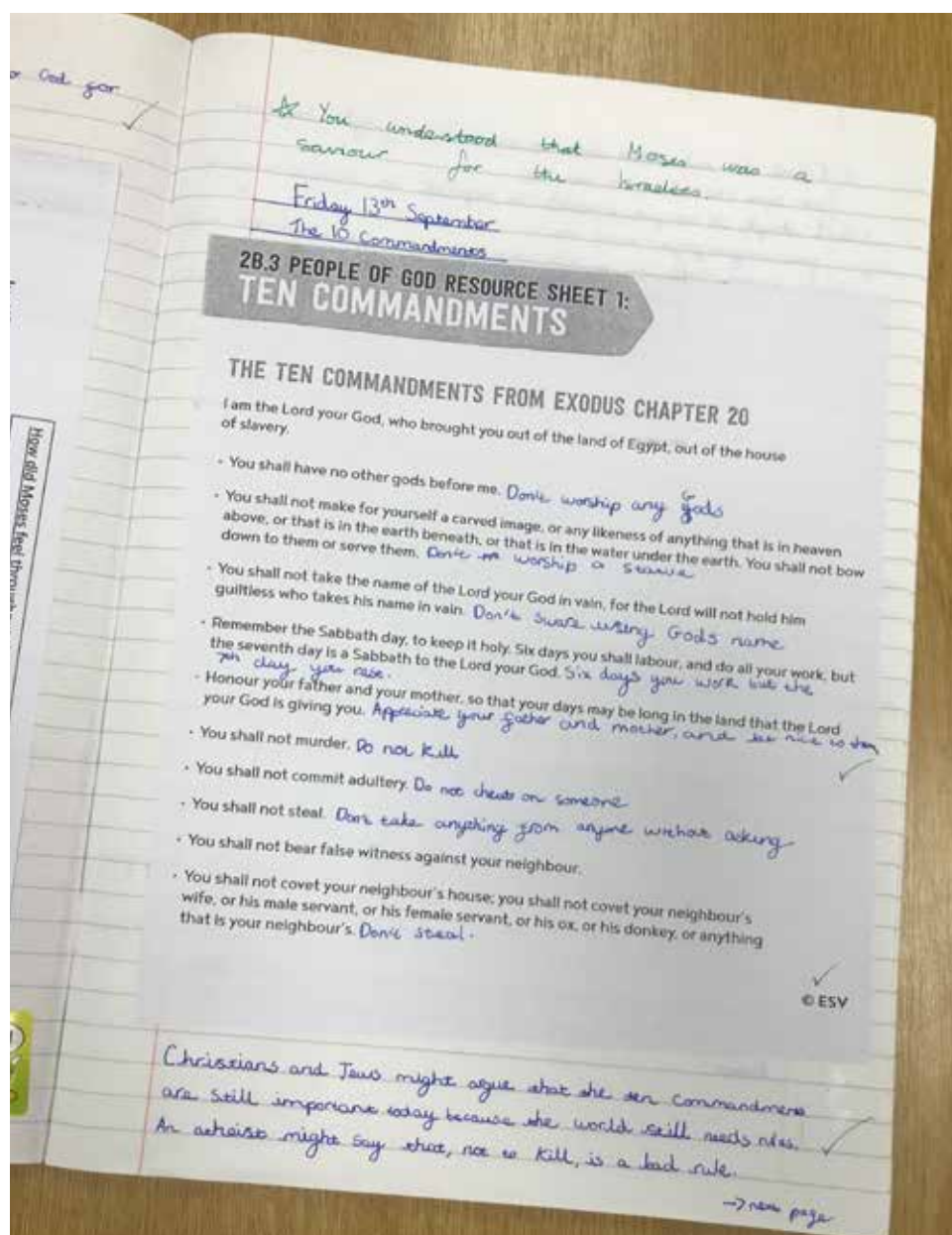
Reflecting on this, two pupils discussed how learning about different perspectives changed and challenged their own assumptions about belief and what the Bible means to Christians.

Pupil 1: "In year 4 and year 5, I actually thought that if you were a Christian you thought the Bible and all about that and then at start and end of year 5, year 6, we started to learn that some of it, that some Christians think different things."

Pupil 2: "I really like that its discussion based and you get to hear different people's options about it."

Pupils, Year 6, School D (Church of England Primary)

In Year 6 at a Church of England Primary, to help pupils thinking about the meaning of the Ten Commandments, they were asked to translate the meaning of each commandment in their own words.



The symbols of the key concepts also supported pupil's understanding. These icons also designed by Emma Yarlett, were designed to represent the core concepts covered in *Understanding Christianity*: God, Creation, Fall, People of God, Incarnation, Gospel, Salvation and Kingdom of God. When conducting focus groups with Key Stage 3 pupils, (ages 11–14) all the pupils were able to quickly and accurately identify the core concepts they have been taught according to the corresponding symbol and provide an accurate definition of them.

When asked about what Christians believe about God, pupils from school E (Church of England School) were able to describe how Christians think about God using terms such as omniscient and omnipotent while correctly defining them. Pupils at School H (Community Primary School) discussed how they enjoyed using the resources which contained excerpts from the Bible, learning about what they meant and drawing on them for their activities.

"I found it very fun because when it came to my challenge it helped me quite a bit, the underlined parts [pointing to her work]. So, I could write it in here and get the better grades and understand it more."

Year 5 Pupil, School H (Community Primary School)

Another pupil also expressed their enjoyment of using the text in lessons and although struggled to articulate why, did want to comment that it was an important part of their learning which he enjoyed.

"Yes, I enjoy using it [using the text], I can't think of why... but I know why but I just can't explain it."

Year 5 Pupil, School H (Community Primary School)

Regarding the accessibility of the text, pupils discussed how a collaborative approach to understanding excerpts from the Bible helped them understand the meaning and enabled them to reflect on how Christians understand such text. In particular, the process of reading, interpreting and analysing the text with the teacher, highlighting sections and discussing this as a class, aided their understanding of the text. Pupils at School H had a very good understanding of the Bible and were able to read through sections from the Old and New Testament and discuss the meaning of this text (Isaiah 7:14; Micah 5:2; Isaiah 9:6–7; Isaiah 11: 1–5). These pupils were subsequently able to go on and find evidence from Matthew chapters 1 and 2 to support why Christians believe Jesus is the Messiah. The activities of analysing the text, searching for evidence, class discussion and creative activities (e.g. poster making), enabled the students to embed their learning about Christian beliefs in a way that was not repetitive. Rather it allowed pupils to learn more and go more in-depth in their learning.

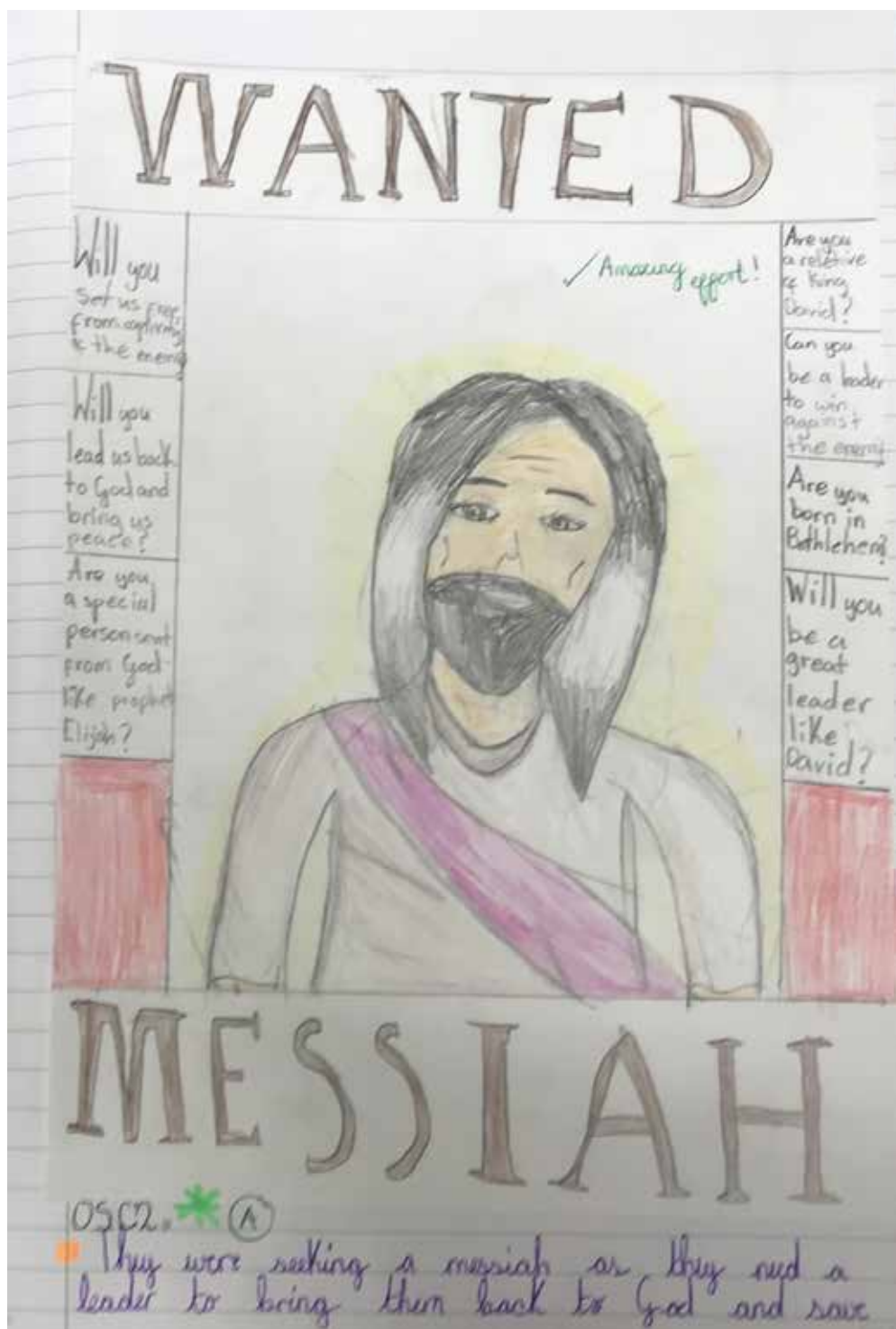


Image from a Year 5 pupil's workbook at School H (Community Primary School)

Younger children were also able to explain some of the more basic beliefs Christians hold. For example, pupils from reception at School I (Church of England Primary) discussed Easter and were able to use the 'Big Frieze' to describe the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Although they struggled with the detail, the pupils were able to look at the frieze, observe the differences in colour and reflected on how the grey colours may symbolise sadness over the death of Jesus but how that the introduction of the brighter colours may mean that "something is getting better" (Reception pupil, School I).

27.2.20

Can I: recognise which parts of the
Salvation pizee black brings sadness
and which parts bring happiness?



Happiness

happines make us
happy Jesus came
back to bring the
church.

Sadness

sadness Jesus
died on the cross
the houses were black

(IOP)

Image from a Year 1 pupil's workbook at School I (Church of England Primary)

MAKING CONNECTIONS AND INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

"I suppose what the picture does, it really helps children relate religion to their own lives."

Teacher, School C (Community primary school)

Pupils often reflected on what they had learnt in RE in relation to their own lives and beliefs.

When asked about their own reflections and making these connections, pupils were able to talk about this and often remembered particular lessons. For example, a group of year six pupils, drawing on the 'Big Story' and in particular, Creation, discussed the different beliefs Christians might hold about creation and what non-Christians might believe about the origins of the world. One pupil said:

Pupil 1: "Some Christians think God made our world and everything in it and other people have different opinions who might not be Christian."

Pupil 2: "they also sort of think the same thing that definitely God made the world. But they might have different options on how he did make the world in seven days or he didn't."

Pupils, Year 6, School D (Church of England Primary)

Another pupil also reflected on the range of opinions and beliefs explored in Christianity lessons and how this was one of the highlights of the lessons.

Pupil: "You get to learn other people's options and go back and forth and see what other people think."

Year 6 Pupil, School D (Church of England Primary)

Pupils then reflected on the different things Christians might believe about God and the creation story and what can be learned from this.

Pupil: "they think that it's good because after everyday he said 'and God believed this was good.'"

Year 6 Pupil, School D (Church of England Primary)

The pupils then went on to discuss what the implications of belief about the creation story might have for Christians in their everyday lives with some pupils then trying to relate their own lives to it. One pupil reflected on the ten commandments and how this might link to the creation story in terms of Christian's responsibilities towards to world and their duty to take care of it.

Pupil: "I think that it (the ten commandments) kind of links to the creation because God's made this world and then ten commandments are kind of like the rules like in school we have the golden rules. So that's (the ten commandments) is kind of like the rules of the world."

Year 6 Pupil, School D (Church of England Primary)

During one lesson observed of a Year 6 (age 10–11) lesson at School D on creation and the Genesis story, the teacher had organised videos from different individuals to discuss their own beliefs and interpretations of the story. These ranged and often included personal reflections on how belief had changed over time. After the videos were played, the pupils were encouraged to talk with the person next to them about what they think about the creation story. This resulted in children discussing the relationship between religion and science, reflecting on how both understandings could be complementary. The pupils were keen to reflect on their own beliefs in relation to what they have learnt in RE and discussed the range and variety of beliefs Christians might hold. During one lesson, the topic of science and religion came up in relation to the creation story. The pupils discussed how, during this lesson, they learned about the perceived conflict between religion and science and how, for some people, the two are actually compatible.

“My personal belief... because there are scientific beliefs about the Big Bang, I believe that God created the Big Bang.”

Year 6 Pupil, School D (Church of England Primary)

In terms of how lessons encouraged individual reflection and for pupils to make connections, some pupils reflected on how their lessons involve a lot of discussion-based work and how this can increase their engagement and understanding.

Pupil: “I like the discussion work rather than writing loads and loads of writing. Just writing loads. Because personally when I am writing, I just want to get it done so I don’t really take into consideration what I’m actually writing.”

Year 6 Pupil, School D (Church of England Primary)

For many pupils, lessons on Christian beliefs (particularly those on creation) often prompted deeper, existential questions, allowing children to reflect on their own beliefs in a way they would not normally do in other lessons and everyday school life more broadly. Pupils at school H, for example, were keen and confident to discuss this with each other, reflecting on each other’s position and consider their own position in relation to what they learned in their RE lesson.

“I think that no one has proof that God was real and made the earth and that no one has proof that he didn’t either.”

Year 5 Pupil, School H (Community Primary School)

Pupils at School H also reflected on their learning about creation and thought about this in relation to science and the centrality of the big bang to their beliefs about the origins of the world.

Pupil 1: Yeah, the Big Bang,

Pupil 2: That kind of makes the debate of whether God made the earth or not

Pupil 1: Yeah that kind of makes the debate

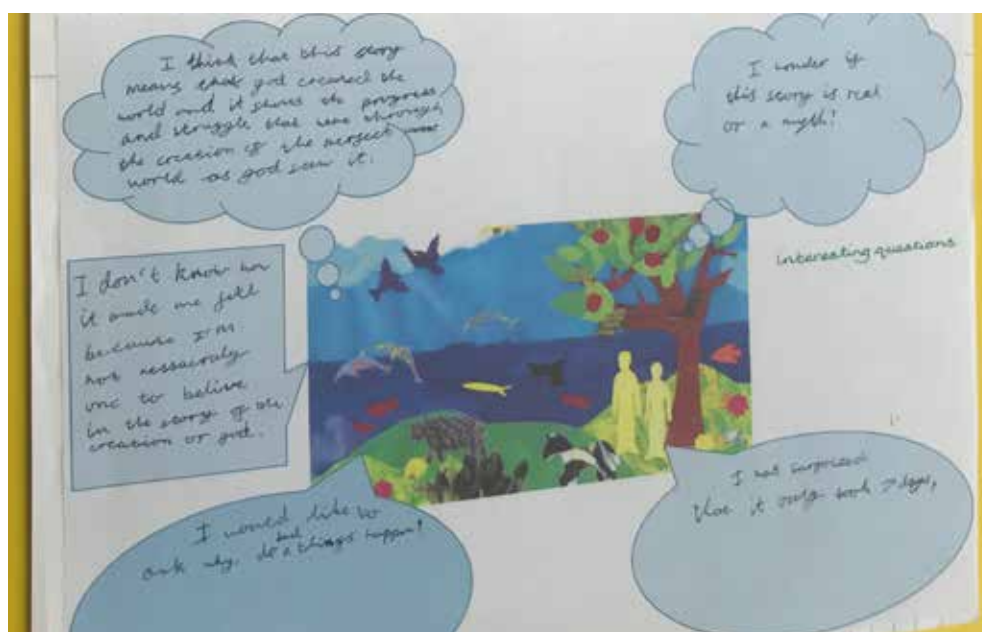
Year 5 Pupils, School H (Community Primary School)

When discussing what Christians believe about God, a year 5 pupil from School E (Church of England School) discussed what she thought about God and linked in what she had learnt during RE to her own beliefs about God.

"Well personally I think there are many different sides to God. In the new testament he's described as caring and peaceful but in the old testament he's very strict"

Year 5 Pupil, School E (Church of England School)

Encouraging individual reflection was something that all pupils commented on and could be seen in their workbooks. For example, at School D (Church of England Primary), pupils had been tasked to think about the creation story, their beliefs and the key message of Genesis for Christians. After drawing their own storyboard of the creation story in order as described in Genesis, the pupils were then asked to describe the key message of the story in their own words and write any questions or reflections they had. The image below is from one pupil's workbook demonstrating this.



"I think that this story means that god created the world and it shows the progress and struggle that went through the creation of the perfect world as god saw it."

"I don't know how it made me feel because I'm not necessarily one to believe in the story of the creation or god."

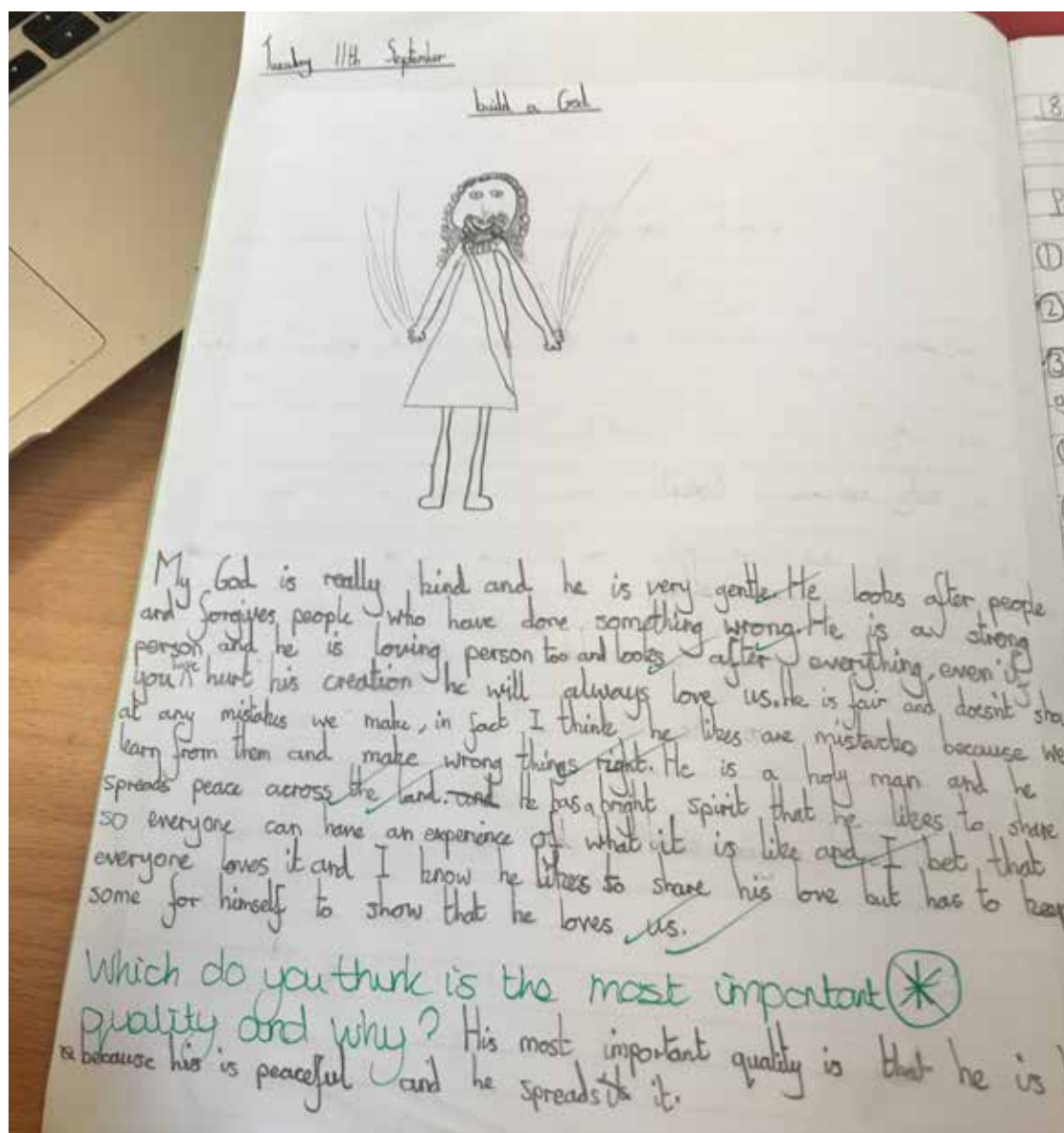
"I would like to ask why do bad things happen?"

"I wonder if this story is real or a myth."

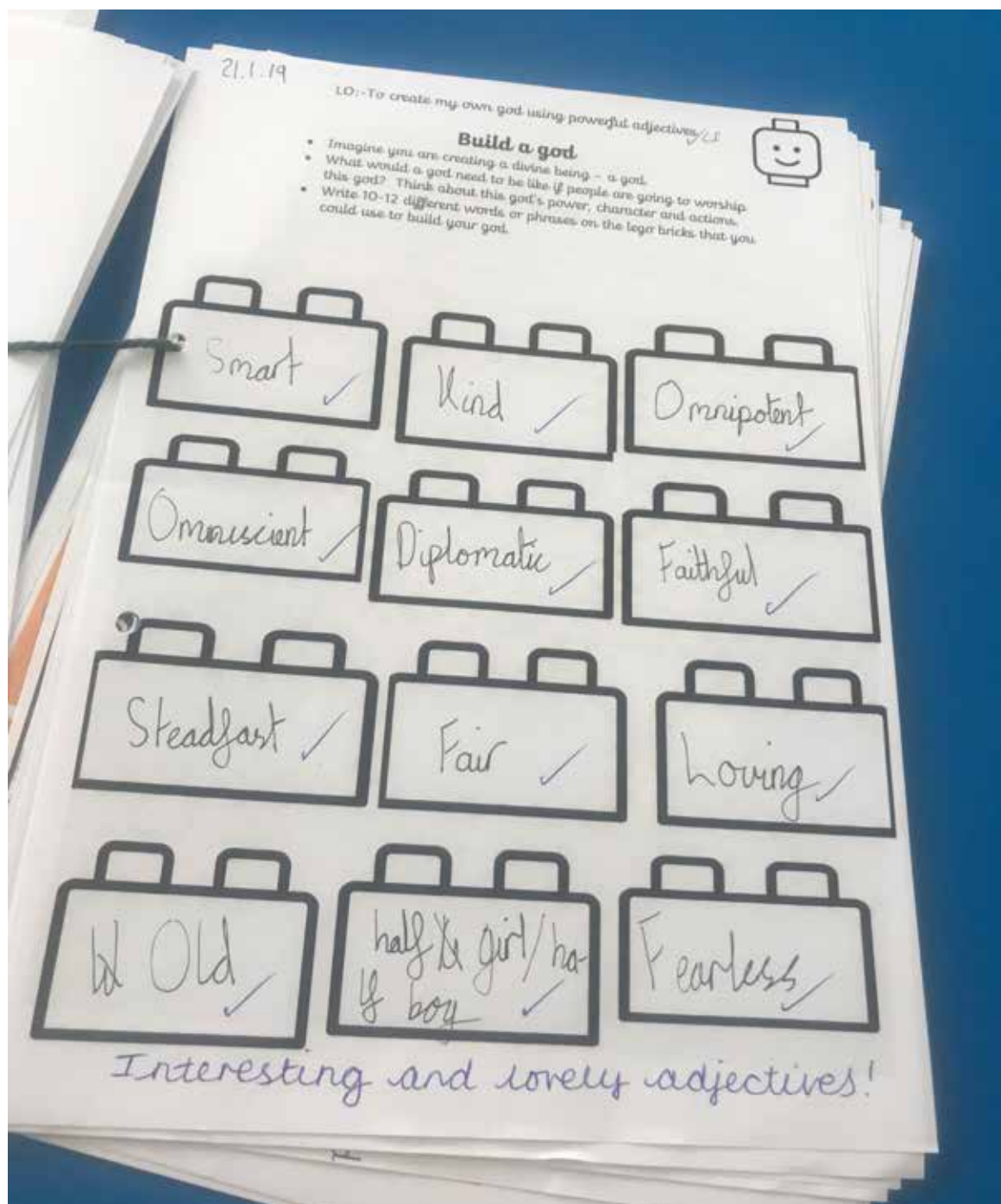
"I was surprised how it only took 7 days."

Pupil workbook, School D (Church of England Primary)

There were various creative activities used in Christianity lessons across all schools which sought to encourage individual reflection and meaning making. For example, one pupil in Year 5 at School D, built their own God and all the attributes their God would have and why.



A Year 4 pupil, at School B, undertook a similar task. In this exercise, pupils were asked to think about the different words you might use to describe your God. The task encouraged individual agency and reflection, with this pupil specifically noting that their God would be 'half Girl/half Boy'.



ACTIVITIES, LESSON PLANNING AND ASSESSMENT

The majority of teachers interviewed spoke about how supportive the resources and materials are and how they use *Understanding Christianity* in their lesson planning and assessment. One teacher spoke about how the *Understanding Christianity* resources helped to place the lessons within the greater story. In previous years, they would teach standalone lessons on special days such as Christmas and Easter, but these were not placed within this wider context of Christianity.

"I just think it's a richer, a richer way of doing things way of doing things and it means that erm... I like the fact that it's, I like the fact that it's in order of events and I like the fact that the children can then follow that up the school as well... before you would just learn about the Christmas story or the Easter story and then, this [*Understanding Christianity*] has just helped me put everything into context."

Teacher, School C (Community Primary School)

Some teachers spoke about how accessible they found the resource and that it's a ready to use resource that even newly qualified teachers would feel confident using.

"With this [*Understanding Christianity*], anyone can pick it up. It's quite user friendly. My NQTs [Newly Qualified Teachers] can pick this up and they get it."

RE Lead, School A (Community Primary School)

Speaking directly in relation to the three strands of learning within the resource (Making Sense of the Text, Understanding the Impact and Making Connections) and how useful this was as a pedagogical approach to RE lessons, one teacher notes that it made planning easier and that the resource pack lent itself to teachers being able to pick and choose the topics and activities they wanted to cover that lesson or term.

"Fantastic. I have to say having received the training and resource pack there are so many ideas and so many materials that you can pick up and use has just been fantastic as a resource. The other that is brilliant is that I absolutely love the three elements of the teaching, so you've very much got the understanding the biblical text, you've got the what that actually means for a Christian and then obviously you've got the making connections just to develop pupil's understanding of that big picture. So, I love the fact that you've got those three elements because actually it makes planning and delivering teaching so much easier because you can therefore...even when we know we have a really short term. Instead of er running out of time and then think 'ah I haven't even touched on that' you can plan a short term from at least one from each area just to make sure you've still got all those links which is just lovely."

Teaching Assistant, School B (Community Primary School)

Again, speaking on the flexibility of the resource, this teacher felt it was a helpful guide and enabled her to tailor make the lessons to her own class needs.

"I think that because it's set out like this [pointing to one of the topics in Key Stage 2] ...You, because having it like that you can't go wrong because you know what to cover there, you can pick activities out from there and you know how to move it on."

RE Subject Leader, School A (Community Primary School)

This teacher spoke about the difference it has made to her terms which focus on Christianity. Whereas in previous years, she would always struggle when it came to Christianity, using the *Understanding Christianity* resource increased her confidence and ability to create engaging lessons with ease.

"Compared to what we had previously, we probably didn't have anything. It was just, you know well, the SACRE, the syllabus that comes from there, a little bit of stuff from there and I used to find, really easy to teach ... Islam, Judaism and Hinduism. But every time I got a Christianity unit I would just be like thinking of ideas and I found it really difficult. Whereas now I could flip it around totally. I just find its... I don't know I just... Teachers who have embraced it and children who are doing it, absolutely love it."

RE Subject Leader, School A (Community Primary School)

"I tried out a couple of [*Understanding Christianity*] activities, just picked out from what I saw and the results were phenomenal. The imagery, the symbolism, the fact the kids were totally engaged in what I was doing."

RE Subject Leader, School A (Community Primary School)

An early year's teacher at School I reflected on how 'dry' previous teaching on Christianity used to be and how helpful she has found the *Understanding Christianity* resources in increasing pupil engagement but doing so in a way that is still accessible for children aged 4–6 years. This teacher spoke of how *Understanding Christianity* inspired them to change their approach to teaching and how for some children in early years, instead of using pictures, abstract images and languages which they found difficult to understand and make sense of, the teachers now favour the use physical objects and more experiential learning.

"The resources in the pack just give you more variety of how simple it can be. So if I am talking about creation and we're talking about the animals in the sea, instead of, years ago I would've either had a power point or some printed picture from sparkle box that were so abstract the children, our children couldn't relate to that picture, whereas now I would use small world objects and I would have a water tray and we would go out on walks on the field and explore it that way."

Teacher, School I (Church of England Primary School)

IMPROVING ATTITUDES TO RE

When asked if staff had noticed a change in pupils' attitude and enthusiasm towards the subject, all staff noted improvement with more pupils now enjoying and looking forward to RE.

I think the range of activities that's suggested... just makes it more engaging for the children. RE a long time ago, I would say, always used to be that 'oh it's RE' and maybe it's not fun, it's not stimulating, it's not interesting. Which if you think about all the faiths that there are and there's so many interesting things to do with them. That has changed. So, I feel now... I actually get, occasionally now wha- we erm all take a turn to be on our door in a morning to let the children in and I actually now get from certain children 'Gasp Oh its Tuesday its RE! OOOH!' [LAUGHS] do you know what I mean? Which you know, for certain children, that's amazing! To get that: Its RE today rather than 'its re' [spoken glumly] erm so I feel that children love learning about different faiths and they're actually starting to really enjoy it. I'm not saying it's for everyone. But then no subject is. Everyone's got their favourites. But I'm seeing more interest and engagement."

Teaching Assistant, School B (Community Primary School)

Another teacher similarly spoke of the change in some pupil's overall attitude to RE.

Massively. So, I think previously if you were like. Like the class that I'm getting next year, if you was like 'what's your favourite subject?' OK. 'What subject don't you really like' and they're like RE, RE, RE and I'm like right that's my mission next year... and certainly now, I teach in both classes, it really... they really look forward to doing it like little James who was in here this morning, often goes out for a music lesson on the day we do RE his music teacher comes in and he's like 'No no no no no no no no!'"

RE Subject Leader, School C (Community Primary School)

One teacher felt her entire RE curriculum would be vastly improved if the same resource was available for other world religions.

"If I could get an *Understanding Christianity* for everything else, an *Understanding Islam*, *Buddhism*, *Hinduism*, *Sikhism*, *Humanist*, or whatever else, I honestly think the subject would be up levelled by a million degrees."

RE Lead, School A (Community Primary School)

One RE Lead at School G had rewritten the curriculum in RE so that units exploring other religions followed a similar structure and approach to *Understanding Christianity* due to the impact the resource had on students learning. When asked about pupils' attitudes towards RE this teacher reflected:

"I have to say the children, the difference in children's attitude to RE. The head came up to me other day and said you know what, the children never went on about RE and she said that's all they're talking about in school!"

RE Subject Leader, School G (Church of England Primary School)

Year 4 pupils from School G (Church of England Primary School) also commented on how they enjoy RE more since using *Understanding Christianity* in their lessons and reflected on how they achieve more and enjoy the different activities.

Pupil 1: I didn't know much about Jesus but now I've got to know more... and you get to do posters and stuff

Pupil 2: I like it because you do get to learn new things and sometimes you get to do stuff like this [shows poster]

Year 4 Pupils, School G (Church of England Primary School)



PUPIL ENGAGEMENT AND PROGRESSION

Connected to improving attitudes to RE is pupil engagement and progression. All teachers spoke of the engagement their pupils express when learning from the *Understanding Christianity* resource, particular the frieze. This teacher reflected on the excitement her pupils have for the lessons and their deep, existential reflections during the lessons.

"I think I do feel confident using it. I am looking forward to kind of changing it or playing with it a bit so now I've done it for one year erm actually I suppose what I've learnt from it [*Understanding Christianity*] mainly is that children have got the most amazing deep thoughts....erm and what really lovely is us not telling them what to think but them drawing it out themselves using this [taps on the Frieze]. so they are I know, get very excited about what the next picture is going to be. So the re becomes like a story telling exercise that they're kind of part of rather than them being told that this is the story and this is what we need to know."

Teaching Assistant, School C (Community Primary School)

One teacher spoke about how inclusive she found the resource and how previously, some pupils, particularly non-religious or non-Christian pupils would not have engaged in the lesson, now enjoy the lessons and learning about what particular beliefs, texts and traditions mean to Christians.

"I would say what I've found is that whereas perhaps previously it was very much a 'well I'm not a Christian so I don't believe in that' and I'd be like 'well that's absolutely fine but let's look and learn about what a Christian does believe', I think they've actually quite enjoyed unpicking the text and seeing what it actually means to a Christian. Erm and things like Bible stories which they may have come across either at school or at different events suddenly it's like 'oh that's where that story comes from! 'It just makes it more real to them."

Teaching Assistant, School B (Community Primary School)

"The way that the units are introduced is so child friendly because it's not a scary RE lesson.... THERE'S always something that everyone can take part in."

RE Lead, School C (Community Primary School)

One teacher at School H (Community Primary School) spoke of the significant improvement pupils made after using *Understanding Christianity* and in particular, how the range of resources to draw upon, supported the development of pupils' knowledge and understanding.

"Since introducing this scheme, *Understanding Christianity*, I'd say from Year 1 to Year 6 you can see a big big improvement because when you're teaching it you're getting a lot of understanding from the texts that's inside and it's like a big guide and it will give you websites where you can link on to or it will give you a piece of text or suggest something that you could watch. So, everything is there really for you to deliver a lesson."

Teacher, School H (Community Primary School)

This teacher then went on to discuss how *Understanding Christianity* allowed them to have 'a proper scheme in place' and as a result, RE lessons at this school began to take a more in depth and detailed approach, focusing on specific concepts such as incarnation, salvation and creation which they had not done prior to using *Understanding Christianity*. Staff commented on pupils' ability to recall information they learnt in previous lessons had improved. Pointing to a year 6 *Understanding Christianity* lesson taking place in the adjacent classroom, this teacher, from school H, explained how the lesson is a follow on from one the pupils did in the previous year but how the pupils were able to pick up and remember what they had learned in year 5.

"they're [pointing at children in an *Understanding Christianity* lesson] picking it up a lot more and they're remembering it a lot more."

Teacher, School H (Community Primary School)



CROSS CURRICULAR OPPORTUNITIES

A number of schools, for example schools A, B and H (all community schools), were able to link *Understanding Christianity* to other areas of the school curriculum. One community primary school connected *Understanding Christianity* with PE, and with the support of an external Christian organisation, they were able to teach units of the resource through 'Active RE'. The pupils from the school were able to talk in detail about the topics they had covered in RE and, in particular, drew on their Active RE lessons as a way to narrate this. The pupils described learning about both the Good Samaritan and the Trinity through such lessons and that they all enjoyed these lessons and were able to retain a lot of information from them.

The RE Lead for school A discussed how the topics and areas covered in *Understanding Christianity* linked in with both the History and English curriculum. In particular, the Upper Key Stage 2 People of God Unit. Here the class teacher links the broader theme of Freedom and Justice with lessons in English and History which cover World War Two.

The RE Lead at School H (Community Primary School) spoke of the pedagogical approach used within the resource, particularly the use of learning questions and due to the impact this was having in RE, teachers decided to adopt this approach more broadly and as a result, *Understanding Christianity* was now used as a model for other subjects in the school.

"it's turned the whole thing round now into learning questions and we've put that now into geography, history, art, D&T, it's all learning questions, it's about finding out, it's much more fun."

RE Lead, School H (Community Primary School)

RAISING YOUR GAME

Many of the staff noted the resource could be fairly challenging and such reflections typically fell into two responses. Some staff explained how they often had to refer to units below the Key Stage of their respective classes due to lack of existing knowledge and understanding. Teachers did not necessarily see this as a problem and instead commented on how helpful it was that all the key stage units' resources came together so that they were able to do this. On the other hand, some teachers spoke of the high standards the resource expected and how this was having a positive impact on both their teaching as well as pupil progression.

One teacher from a community school spoke of how her standards and expectations of RE lessons have changed since using *Understanding Christianity*:

"What I really like is that the whole *Understanding Christianity* and the resource makes you have really high expectations of what you deliver and what you get from pupils. I think in the past I've not had that high expectation from the start. So that's been really good. Whereas it's just been more of a general teaching with the syllabus, whereas now it makes you raise your game and therefore the pupils do."

Teaching Assistant, School B (Community Primary School)

Another teacher from a different community primary school reflected on how lower ability pupils in other subjects would opt for the more challenging topics in RE lessons resulting in the class teacher having to provide 'digging deeper' activities in instances where such pupils had moved beyond 'core learning'.

"It doesn't matter who the child is or what English group they're in. I found through *Understanding Christianity* in particular that those lower ability pupils in English will be the ones who go for the highest challenge set in UC and obviously other re lessons...I really like the fact its teacher friendly, it sets high challenge, it very clear in what it is does and it gives you loads of ideas for the resources it doesn't leave you with one idea and that's it."

RE Lead, School A (Community Primary School)

Pupils from school D, a Church of England primary school, also reflected on the challenging lessons and how topics were repeated in order to in go in more depth.

"Sometimes it [topic of the lesson] gets repeated. The second time it gets repeated it will be more complicated and it will keep going like that."

Pupil Year 6, School D (Church of England Primary School)

"It [difficulty of the lesson] will go up. It won't go back down."

Pupil Year 6, School D (Church of England Primary School)

Regarding classes of varied ability, one teacher from School H spoke of how *Understanding Christianity* allowed her to plan and prepare for lessons for pupils with different needs. The resource allowed her to easily 'differentiate' between the activities within the pack and use them to 'cater for children with different needs'.

FURTHER OPPORTUNITIES AND AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

One challenge identified particularly by a Key Stage 3 (11–14) teacher concerned the difficulty of the Key Stage 3 lessons for Years 7 and above. This issue has been noted earlier with pupils and staff speaking positively about the units and resources, and the high standards it expects. However, one Key Stage 3 teacher discussed the challenge she faces when planning lessons as some of the resources and topics are far above the knowledge base pupils have. This resulted in the teacher often having to use a Key Stage below her year group and either refer to upper Key Stage 2 materials, (9–11) or on occasion, lower Key Stage 2 materials (7–9).

On the one hand this speaks to the benefit of ensuring good RE that encourages continual progression at Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. The difficulty this Key Stage 3 teacher faced shows the impact primary RE can have on RE in the secondary schools. If pupils use *Understanding Christianity* in their primary schools, it might well be expected that there would be a smoother transition to engaging in Key Stage 3 lessons as the learning and progression from engaging in KS1 and KS2 *Understanding Christianity* resources would be there. However, the teachers also reflected how a variety of Key Stage 3 levels, like those that can be found in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, would be very helpful and support teachers in preparing lessons for Key Stage 3 with pupils who enter secondary schools with varying degrees of knowledge about Christianity. This challenge was particularly felt by the Key Stage 3 staff but was also noted by primary too. The head of RE at one primary school reflected on her first year of using *Understanding Christianity* and after speaking of the benefits and progression, noted some of the challenges she faced.

“I’ve really really enjoyed using it. Its not been particularly easy. Cus obviously going straight at it at year 4, there was a lot of gaps in the children’s knowledge that obviously hadn’t come through. So for example, the first time I used it... the first unit was ‘why do Christians call the day Jesus died Good Friday?’ and I was actually...none of the bit before, it makes no sense whatsoever. So I almost had to pre-teach before I got to the unit.”

Head of RE, School C (Community Primary School)

Another opportunity for development would be to produce learning and teaching resources for other major world religions and non-religion. All staff spoke of the benefits of having resources like *Understanding Christianity* for all religions taught in RE. Although cost was noted by some as a potential barrier or issue, staff spoke about how much easier lesson planning would be if a similar resource pack was made for the other major world religions. For example, one RE lead said:

“I had a conversation with [RE Lead] only this morning which was along the lines of: wouldn’t it be amazing if we had this resource for all the different faiths that we teach?”

Teaching Assistant, School B (Community Primary School)

CONCLUSIONS

The data collected and findings shows that *Understanding Christianity* is highly effective and having a positive impact on RE lessons at the participating schools. From the teacher's perspective, we can observe increased confidence, knowledge and understanding of Christianity. Teachers have noted the useful and practical ways the resource pack supports lesson planning, teaching and assessment. Many teachers also observed increased pupil engagement in the subject and improved attitudes towards RE more broadly. Although the units and topics within them proved challenging for many teachers and schools this, in the main, was viewed positively by both teachers and pupils, who reflected on the improved standards and higher expectations of the subject. Where the materials proved to be too advanced for the year group in question, the ability to access the resources from the key stage below proved valuable. Regarding Key Stage 3, a recommendation of more resources at a higher and lower ability as can be found in Key Stage 2 is made. This is to support those Key Stage 3 teachers with pupils who have come from a range of primary schools where engagement in RE has varied considerably.

Pupils also spoke highly of their RE lessons and in particular learning about Christianity. Most noted their enjoyment of the subject and could reflect on what they had learnt this year. Most notable was their ability to remember key parts of the big story and their overall enthusiasm, engagement and excitement for the frieze. Pupils discussed at length and in great detail the story, message and meaning within each section of the frieze, with many pupils remembering key theological concepts during such discussions. The frieze also proved popular with teachers and is by far the most noted resource within both pupils and teacher reflection.

Regarding knowledge and understanding of key theological concepts, this was discussed and reflected on by all pupils. Most pupils were able to speak clearly, confidently and in detail about the Fall, Creation and the Trinity. Incarnation proved a trickier concept with many pupils confusing this with reincarnation. However, when utilised with the frieze, many pupils were able to quickly and accurately describe incarnation and what this means for Christians. In terms of understanding the text, this was noted as the more challenging aspect of learning. However, pupils were able to retell key stories and teachings found within the Bible and what they might mean to Christians. Pupils also showed a great degree of sophistication in reflecting upon such stories in relation to their own lives and how they might relate.

Finally, three schools showed the scope and potential of *Understanding Christianity* to integrate with other curriculums in the school such as English, History and PE. This was mentioned both in relation to the content of the material covered and intersecting this with other areas of learning and also in terms of the pedagogical approach adopted in *Understanding Christianity*. Although not mentioned in all schools, this is an area that could be further developed, with more connections made between RE and other subjects.

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RACHAEL SHILLITOE BIOGRAPHY

Rachael Shillitoe is a Research Associate in the Philosophy, Theology and Religion Department at the University of Birmingham. As a sociologist, Rachael's primary areas of interest are (non)religion, childhood, education and family life.

Her background has mainly focused on children's experiences of religion and non religion across both the school and home and how beliefs are encountered and transmitted across these spaces. Rachael's PhD was part of a wider Leverhulme Trust funded project and examined children's experiences of collective worship and assemblies in school.

She has also worked as a Research Fellow at York St John University and conducted an evaluation project on the organisation 'Prayer Spaces in Schools. Prior to joining the University of Birmingham, Rachael worked with Dr Anna Strhan at the University of York on a project which investigated non religious childhood.



APPENDIX 1: INTRODUCING THE APPROACH

The approach developed for *Understanding Christianity* is based on the use of core concepts of Christian belief, as expressed in the Bible and lived out in the lives of Christians today. The core concepts reflect a view that the Bible tells a 'big story' of salvation. The approach in RE is to revisit the core concepts throughout the different key stages, deepening pupils' understanding and making the links to the overall 'big story' or 'salvation narrative'.

This is not the only way to describe Christian thought and practice, and of course there is real diversity within Christianity itself, but it sets a good foundation for understanding the heart of the Christian faith.

The teaching and learning approach enables pupils to engage with a variety of Bible texts in order to explore how Christians understand the core concepts. It explores ways in which Christians might live in the light of these texts, within the Christian community and in their individual lives. It allows pupils to reflect on some of the questions and puzzles that arise from the Bible, and to consider any implications or connections with their own lives and ways of understanding the world.

These materials incorporate activities that explore Christian responses to the biblical text, as well as the pupils' own responses, whether they are Christian, atheist, agnostic, or from a faith tradition other than Christianity.

A summary of the components of the approach is found below, with each part explained in more detail on subsequent pages.

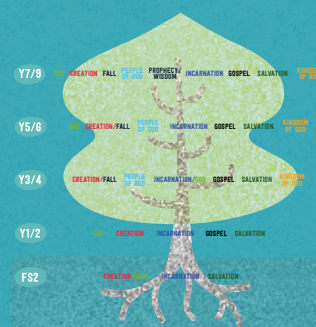
INTRODUCTION TO THE *UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY* APPROACH

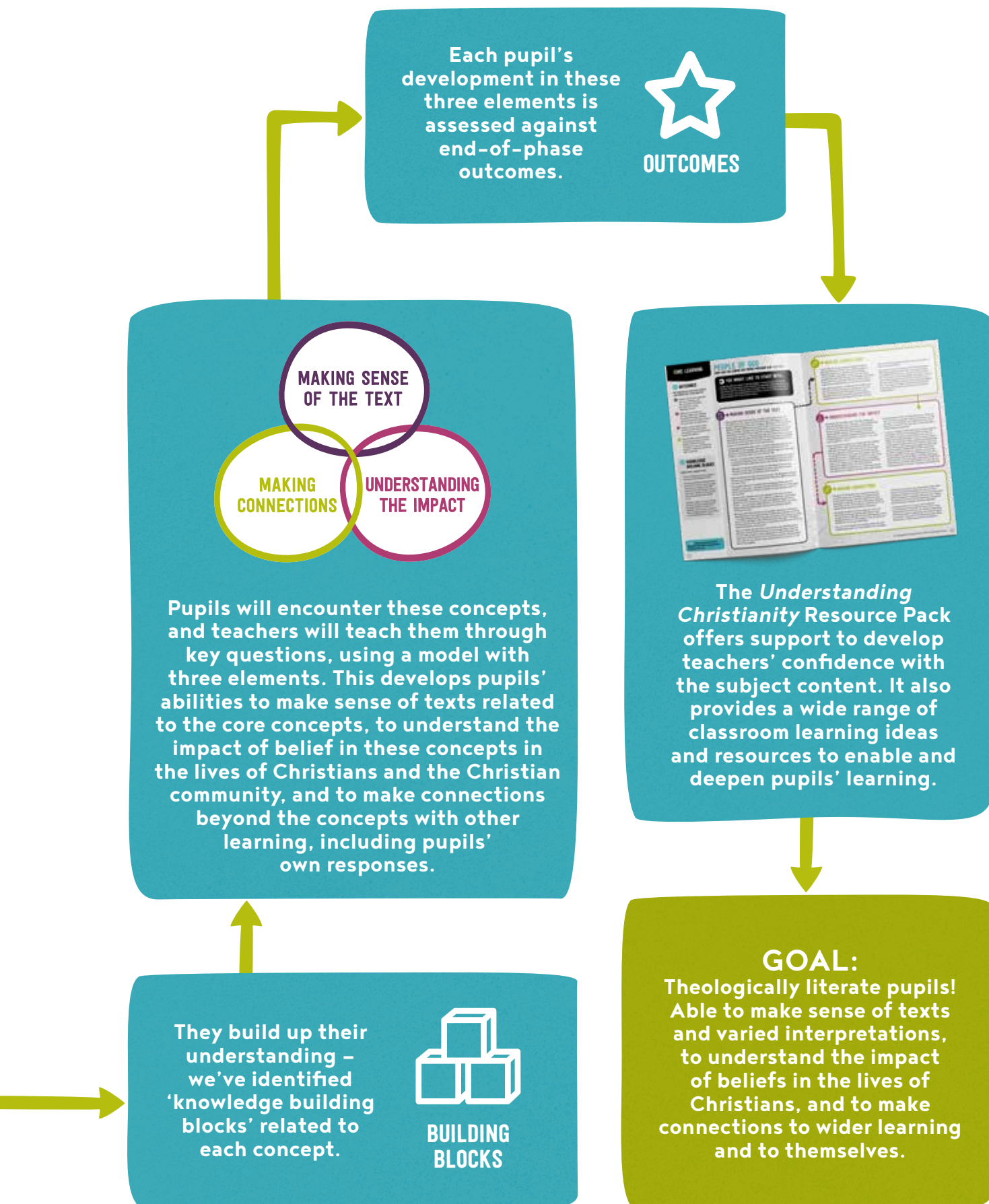
We want pupils to understand Christianity

So, we've identified eight core concepts at the heart of Christianity that pupils need to understand. These concepts tell the 'big story' of the Bible.



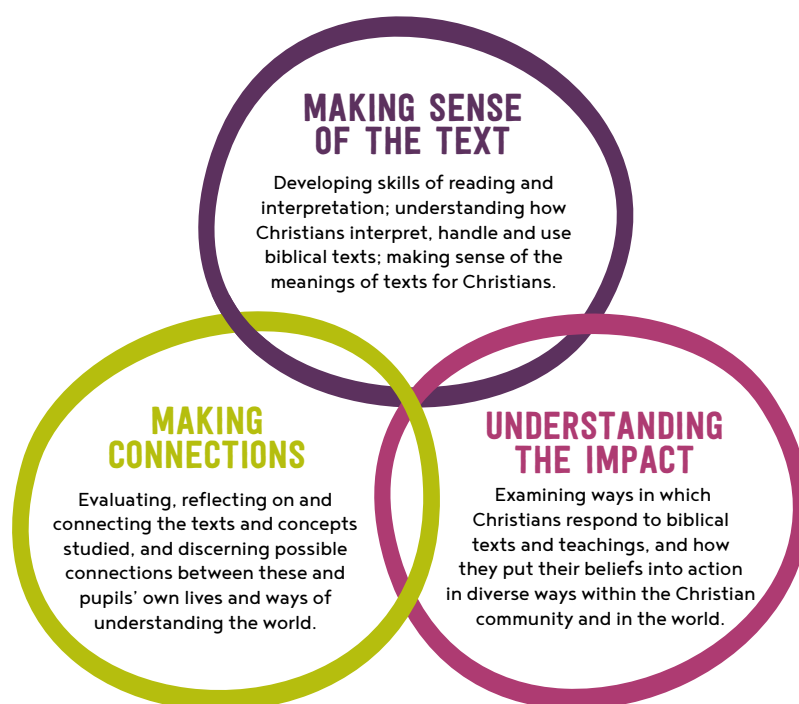
Pupils will encounter these concepts a number of times as they move through the school.





APPENDIX 2: THE ELEMENTS OF THE APPROACH

Understanding Christianity's approach to teaching about Christianity builds up pupils' encounters with biblical concepts through texts, placing the texts and concepts within the wider Bible story. Each unit addresses a concept, through some key questions, exploring core Bible texts, their impact for Christians, and possible implications for pupils. Each unit incorporates the three elements below:



The units of work usually begin with a 'way in', then flow from 'Making sense of the text', on to 'Understanding the impact' of the text and the concept on the Church community and Christian living, then explore 'Making connections'. This means that the move from text outwards through the world of the Christian and to the world of the pupil runs through each unit.

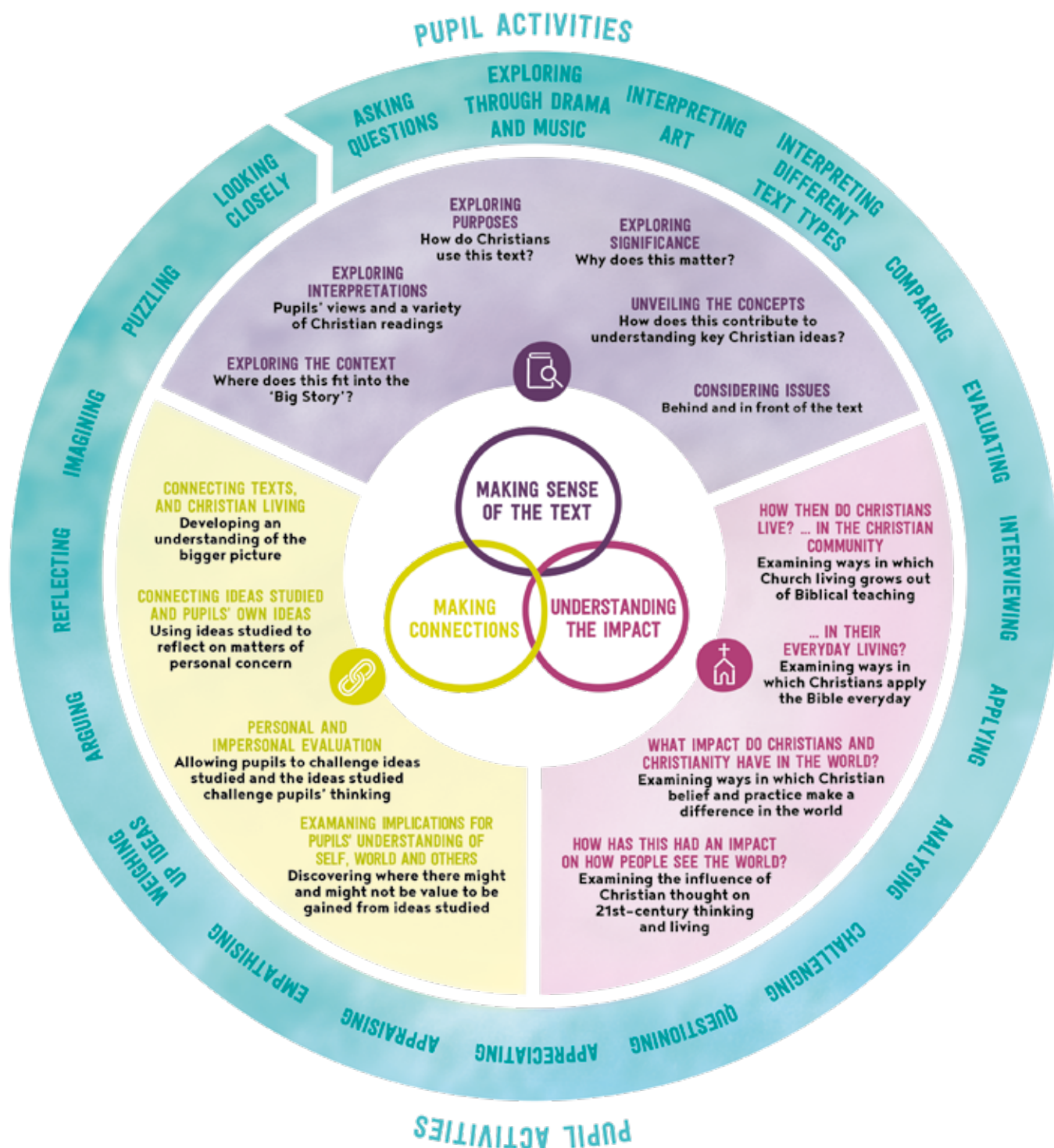
There is flexibility and freedom within this structure, however, hence the overlapping circles in the above diagram, and teachers are free to weave together activities from different elements to enable pupils to achieve the outcomes.

This model shows that the *Understanding Christianity* approach is not just getting pupils to learn what Christians think. Instead, it is about developing some skills to help them 'think theologically' alongside learning lots of knowledge about the Bible, Christian belief and practice. It also shows that these three elements do not represent rigid, distinct steps, but that pupils can 'make connections' whilst 'making sense of the text', or 'understanding the impact', as shown in the diagram below.

It also places the pupil's engagement with Christian texts, beliefs and practices clearly within the approach, taking seriously the role of the pupil as reader, bringing their own world to the text whilst giving them the opportunity to allow the text to enlarge their understanding of the world.

PUPIL ACTIVITIES/PROCESSES

The teaching materials use a variety of strategies and activities within each element, in order to engage pupils and develop their skills in RE and learning.



APPENDIX 3: CORE CONCEPTS AND THE 'BIG STORY' OF THE BIBLE



The following core concepts are explored in the *Understanding Christianity* approach, as part of the 'big story' of salvation:

1. GOD

Fundamental to Christian belief is the existence of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

2. CREATION

The universe and human life are God's good creation. Humans are made in the image of God.

3. FALL

Humans have a tendency to go their own way rather than keep their place in relation to their Creator. This attitude is called sin, and Genesis 3 gives an account of this rebellion, popularly called 'the Fall'. This describes a catastrophic separation between God and humans, between humans and each other, and between humans and the environment. This idea that humans are 'fallen' and in need of rescue (or salvation) sets out the root cause of many problems for humanity.

4. PEOPLE OF GOD

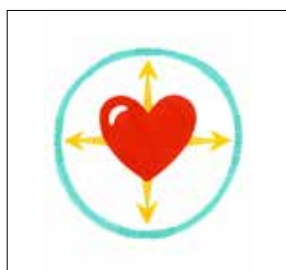
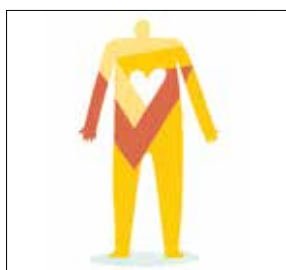
The Old Testament tells the story of God's plan to reverse the impact of the Fall, to save humanity. It involves choosing a people who will model a restored relationship with God, who will attract all other people back to God. The Bible narrative includes the ups and downs of this plan, including the message of the prophets,⁵ who tried to persuade people to stick with God. The plan appears to end in failure with the people of God exiled, and then returning, awaiting a 'messiah' – a rescuer.

5. Prophecy is a key concept that will be explored in the project resources, along with the concept of 'wisdom' – which encompasses writing and teaching about how Christians should live and behave in relationship with God.

This account and these concepts represent one way to make sense of Christian belief and practice. The brief version presented here is necessarily simplified, and there are other ways of understanding Christian teaching. Many Christians might prefer not to down-grade Jesus to being a mere 'solution' to the problem of sin, and argue that Jesus' incarnation represents the boundless love of the Creator seeking the best for human beings, regardless of the cost. The resources indicate some areas of disagreement and diversity.

Through these concepts, pupils encounter a range of biblical texts, placed within a wider theological context. They consider the nature of God and what it means for Christians to be in relationship with the Creator. They explore Christian understanding of the relationship between God and his people in the Old Testament, and make sense of messianic expectations and Christian belief in their fulfilment in Jesus.

Pupils explore the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus, within this wider historical and theological context. They consider the present and future aspects of the Kingdom of God. Pupils examine the impact of these beliefs and their outworking in the lives of Christians, through (for example) celebrations, festivals, rituals, creative and spiritual expression, actions and activism, expressions of love and compassion, calls for justice and ethical responses.



5. INCARNATION

The New Testament presents Jesus as the answer: the Messiah and Saviour, who will repair the effects of sin and the Fall and offer a way for humans to be at one with God again. Incarnation means that Jesus is God in the flesh, and that, in Jesus, God came to live among humans.

6. GOSPEL

Jesus' incarnation is 'good news' for all people. ('Gospel' means 'good news'.) His life, teaching and ministry embody what it is like to be one of the people of God, what it means to live in relationship with God. Jesus' example and teaching emphasise loving one's neighbour – particularly the weak and vulnerable – as part of loving God.

7. SALVATION

Jesus' death and resurrection effect the rescue or salvation of humans. He opens the way back to God. Through Jesus, sin is dealt with, forgiveness offered, and the relationship between God and humans is restored.

8. KINGDOM OF GOD

This does not mean that no one sins any more! The Bible talks in terms of God's 'Kingdom' having begun in human hearts through Jesus. The idea of the 'Kingdom of God' reflects God's ideal for human life in the world – a vision of life lived in the way God intended for human beings. Christians look forward to a time when God's rule is fulfilled at some future point, in a restored, transformed heaven and earth. Meanwhile, they seek to live this attractive life as in God's Kingdom, following Jesus' example, inspired and empowered by God's Spirit.

APPENDIX 4: PUPILS' PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

ACADEMIC RIGOUR AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

At the heart of this resource is the intention to increase the academic rigour of the teaching of Christianity, so that pupils gain an informed understanding, contributing to their religious literacy. However, this understanding is not limited to collecting information. Any real understanding of people's beliefs, practices and ways of living will affect the personal development of the pupil. Academic rigour and religious literacy are not just cognitive, they also have an impact on the pupil's understanding of themselves and the world. Note the key purpose of *Understanding Christianity* (see p.6):

The key purpose of these materials is to support pupils in developing their understanding of Christianity, as a contribution to their understanding of the world and their own experience within it.

The intention is that the exploration of Christian concepts, texts and practices develops pupils' understanding. The elements of the approach (Making sense, Understanding impact and Making connections) involve pupils understanding how Christians interpret and apply texts and beliefs. This also develops pupils' own abilities to interpret, apply and consider implications for themselves – skills which apply beyond the study of Christianity. This 'theological literacy' also contributes to a wider religious literacy as part of RE.

CONTRIBUTING TO WIDER EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES

The *Understanding Christianity* materials and approach contribute to wider school priorities:

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSCD): See pp.43–44 for detail on this.

Promoting British Values and handling diversity: the current requirement to promote fundamental British Values as part of SMSCD includes a desire to counter forms of extremism.

These resources do not directly address the specific 'British Values' of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, tolerance and mutual respect for those of differing faiths and beliefs, but they contribute to this wider aim in the following ways:

- At the root of extremism there is often very poor handling of texts. *Understanding Christianity* combats this by developing pupils' skills in interpretation and in considering the ways in which people use texts within and beyond religious communities.
- At the heart of this British Values agenda is the concern that pupils learn to live well in a diverse society. *Understanding Christianity* contributes by helping pupils to understand how biblical texts are interpreted differently by different people, and that it is fundamental to academic rigour that we have some humility in how we hold on to our own interpretations.
- *Understanding Christianity* and its approach allows pupils to recognise the diversity within the Christian community and to see how Christians and others handle disagreements (sometimes better than other times). As part of the wider RE curriculum, it gives opportunity for pupils to reflect on the many agreements between people with religious and non-religious worldviews about the importance of seeking truth, pursuing goodness and loving others.
- There are times in *Understanding Christianity* when pupils have opportunities to learn how to deal with controversial issues, such as questions of the relationship between science and religion (Unit 2b.2 Creation and science: conflicting or complementary? Unit 3.2 Should Christians be greener than everyone else?).

Of course, teachers and schools already strongly promote fairness, respect, tolerance and individual autonomy, although they might not use the particular terminology of the British Values agenda. These wider values need to underpin interactions in the classroom to allow discussion, debate and critical exploration to take place. Within *Understanding Christianity* these values are encouraged as part of good learning.

Values: For many years, RE has had strong links with values education, not least within schools of a religious character such as Church of England schools, where Christian values underpin school ethos and character. Many schools focus on specific values within and beyond the curriculum, and schools can make connections with values such as compassion, wisdom, forgiveness and justice as pupils encounter them through the texts and activities in the *Understanding Christianity* resources.⁶

Character education and virtues: There is a current interest in the contribution of education to the development of character and virtues.⁷ Traditionally, RE is concerned with encouraging pupils to develop the attitudes and virtues of self-awareness, respect for all, open-mindedness, appreciation and wonder.⁸

The *Understanding Christianity* resources and approach allow for the development of character and virtues as pupils encounter them in the texts, beliefs and practices studied. (For example, gratitude, kindness, justice, compassion.)

The focus of *Understanding Christianity* is not directly on the development of *moral* virtues, but it does offer a significant contribution to *intellectual* virtues in regard to interpreting and handling texts – or becoming ‘virtuous readers’.

DEVELOPING ‘VIRTUOUS READERS’⁹

Building on the view that character development is not limited to moral virtues, there is a particular focus in these resources on developing in pupils the virtues of being good readers: paying careful attention to texts, coming to them with open minds, intellectual curiosity and humility, seeking to find what the text is saying, being aware of different readings, as well as becoming aware of one’s own context and perspective.

Interpretation is a complex matter, of course, but a crucial one. These resources offer pupils a chance to encounter texts for themselves, to consider questions of interpretation (for example: What kind of text is this? What did the writer or editor intend? Why was this text included in the Bible? What can we learn about the community for whom the text was written? What might its meaning be for people in the twenty-first century? What *effect* might it have on readers?). They explore ways in which Christians interpret texts – and begin to make sense of why these interpretations vary. They also explore why, for Christians, these texts have an additional layer of personal demand – what should Christians actually *do* as a result of what this text says?

Clearly, the classroom is not the same as a Christian church; even within schools with a Christian religious designation, there are many pupils with no religious faith background or commitment, as well as pupils of different faiths. Within church schools, teachers might look to draw out personal application in ways that would not be appropriate in a community school. It is legitimate in all schools, however, to ask pupils to reflect upon their own personal responses to the texts, to weigh up whether the Christian ideas studied have value in helping them to make sense of the world, and whether the moral demands are universally or personally valuable. The extent to which they agree or disagree about their value is, of course, open.

⁶ One key resource for Church schools is www.christianvalues4schools.co.uk, which offers theological background and ideas for applying key Christian values within schools.

⁷ For example, note the work of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues www.jubileecentre.ac.uk and the Church of England discussion paper on Character Education, ‘The Fruits of the Spirit’ (The Church of England Education Office, October 2015).

⁸ Religious Education: The Non-statutory National Framework, QCA 2004, p. 13.

⁹ The idea of ‘virtuous readers’ comes from Richard S Briggs (2010), The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue, *Studies in Theological Interpretation*, Baker Academic. Briggs derives this from the work of Kevin J Vanhoozer; for example, Is there a meaning in this text? The Bible, The Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge (Zondervan 1998).

NOTES



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