

Worship-enabling assemblies

There is a great variety of material available to help prepare worship-enabling assemblies. Possible websites to consult are listed under the separate List of Websites. See those for chapter 11.

Published materials

Among books randomly noted in Blackwells, Oxford, this September:

Even More Instant Assemblies: 12 complete acts of worship for primary schools by Sue and Chris Govus (Kevin Mayhew 2006) which includes Bible reference and Aim, Introduction, Story, Application, Suggested songs, Closing Thought/Prayer and Possible Classroom Follow-up. This is a continuation of earlier suggestions with photocopiable art-work.

Stories for Interactive Assemblies: 15 story-based assemblies to get children talking - ideal for KS1-2 by Nigel Bishop (Bible Reading Fellowship 2006) Gospel parables are told in a modern setting and links with the curriculum are given with further sections: So What? Prayer, Possibilities-visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, tactile and group ideas.

Gimme An Assembly: 50 special acts of collective worship for primary schools by Denis O'Gorman (Kevin Mayhew 2005)

Assembly Today for KS2: practical ideas for successful assemblies that will capture every child's imagination by Andrew Brodie (A&C Black 2005)

Assemblies to teach Golden Rules by Margaret Goldthorpe and Lucy Underwood (LDA 2005)

From Now to Eternity: 50 assemblies for older secondary students by Margaret Laird (RMEP 2001) This has much interesting material followed in each case by a Thought and a Prayer.

Already Assembled: over 30 ready-to-use secondary school acts of collective worship by Tony Bower (Kevin Mayhew 2005). These are carefully thought out with Message summarised, Equipment needed (realistic), Outline and Application.

Challenges for Living: 50 assemblies for secondary schools by Ian Stuart (RMEP 2002)

Care in using such materials

Care is needed in introducing prayers which are offered in such books. The educational purpose of assemblies should be constantly articulated for the benefit of teachers as well as pupils who do not believe in God. Phrases given on page 192 of the book can act as a guideline here.

Such websites and books can be raided for material, but it is far better to prepare one's own, and let pupils help, relating it to what is being studied in class or relevant to current concerns in the school or outside world. We give here a few examples of what can be done.

The value of silence in assemblies

A valuable form of assembly, which also has the important advantage of not being over time-consuming to prepare, is one in which silence plays quite a prominent part. Such an assembly would have:

- (i) Stimulus material - art, music, story, quotation, newspaper cutting, drama and it may be teacher-initiated or pupils/class initiated, followed by
- (ii) a period of absolute quietness before
- (iii) a conclusion when we say together as a thought to think about, or as a prayer, an extract (from our own assembly collection?).

To establish assemblies in which silence plays an important part we need to share with pupils the thinking behind this - perhaps along lines similar to the following. We could encourage pupils who may find the whole idea un-cool by focussing on the theme of Freedom, Space for oneself and Silence -.

None of us wants to be conned. We like to feel we're free to choose for ourselves - we don't want to be fed ideas. We want to be ourselves, not just the same as everyone else, or doing what we're told.

The kind of assemblies we're going to hold (maybe one day each week?) may seem very un-cool. Instead of constant noise, there's going to be a lot of silence - yes real silence when no-one says anything. Or if we have some music playing, it won't be to hype us up or create a mood - which after all is a subtle way of trying to control us. It will be listening to music which is worthwhile in itself. And if we have something to look at, it won't be visuals aimed at mesmerising us with quick changes as so often on television, when we are assumed to need constant stimulus from fresh sound-bites. What we use will be there to be looked at steadily and quietly.

This could be a culture-shock for a lot of us. So why do it? Why not the more noisy, with-it, easily-accessible assemblies all the time? The short answer is: because we all need time and space to learn to be ourselves, to think for ourselves, to decide who we want to be, away from all the distraction and compelling voices of other people.

So these assemblies will be times when the outer world with all its hub-hub is for a moment switched off. As though we're in an air-bubble instead of hurtling along with the torrent. It's a time to enjoy thinking who one is, what the world's about, what is the point of life etc. and why one thinks as one does. It's a time paradoxically for thinking not just about oneself, but getting on the wavelength of other people, perhaps especially people whom we know little about, and don't understand, and perhaps who we dislike. [In our society today this will include religious people who tend to be viewed as odd and outsiders.]

So besides the silence, these assemblies will have themes and stimulus material related to understanding religion. You won't be asked to agree - or expected to. The themes are there for you to think about in your own way and come to your own conclusion - but based on some knowledge and reflection, not on ignorance or just dismissing things. For without trying to understand people first we cannot judge whether they are sensible or not. That's the purpose of these assemblies. They are an "over to you" but in such a way that every single person is free to think and none are intimidated. So everyone has to contribute to setting up the right atmosphere of quietness and attentiveness. Please help this to happen.

Example of such an assembly

Theme: Courage linked to faith in God

Tell the story of Abigail Witchells, a young Catholic mother walking with her child close to her Surrey home early in 2006, who was stabbed in the neck and is now paralysed.

She can only communicate by blinking her eye-lids. Imagine what that must be like - a young person facing the rest of her life totally dependent on others, unable to move or even speak freely. Imagine the anger and resentment at what has happened to her. Wouldn't hatred be the predominating attitude towards the man who tried to murder her? Not much consolation to know he had committed suicide as a schizophrenic. The terrible

damage he did lives on. The fact he didn't succeed in murdering her, but left her helpless for the rest of her life is perhaps far worse than dying. Imagine how her thoughts might obsessively centre on herself - feeling overwhelmingly sorry for herself, desperate, mad indeed.

Read, or better still project on a screen for all to see, this haiku (short Japanese poem) which she blinked out to her father a few weeks after being attacked:

"Still, silent body
But within my spirit sings
Dancing in love-light".

Conclusion: Two questions

1. What could she mean by *singing* when she's lost the use of her voice?
or by *dancing* when she can't physically move a limb?

2. Is this just sentimental twaddle with which she pretends to cope with an intolerable situation? Or is it evidence of a remarkable example of religious conviction in loving God and delighting in His presence despite the worst that can happen in this world?

Another assembly could tell the story of Helen Keller who became blind and deaf in infancy and who wrote something quite similar:

"I believe that God is in me
as the sun is in the colour and fragrance of a flower -
the Light in my darkness, the Voice in my silence."

A possible series of assemblies on The Pilgrim's Progress

Source: Oxford World's Classics paperback *The Pilgrim's Progress* - a version for children

1. Is life a journey? If so, what kind, and where to?

The Pilgrim's Progress is a description of a journey through life. Its appeal has been universal, far beyond just those who share the religious beliefs of John Bunyan. This is because the notion of life as a journey which each undertakes uniquely is true to experience. We are all unique individuals and we have very different experiences, difficulties, happinesses, etc.

The Pilgrim's Progress raises the question of whether the journey is meaningful, or whether what Bunyan described should only be interpreted in psychological terms as describing what it is like to be a human-being.

The possibility of either a religious or a purely humanist interpretation makes *The Pilgrim's Progress* particularly appropriate for today. People can be inspired by its imaginative character even if they do not believe that there is any Celestial City to which they are traveling. Equally, it raises the question of how are we sure that there is, or is not, such a City.

2. The power of metaphor

The Pilgrim's Progress is an allegory of life, and is full of metaphor, most clearly in the personification of problems meeting people as they journey through life, and their reactions and feelings towards them. Most of the metaphors are obvious e.g. the Slough of Despond, the Hill Difficulty, Giant Despair, Doubting Castle, Lucre Hill, By-path Meadow, Vanity Fair, Delectable Mountains, City of Destruction, Celestial City etc.

Probably *The Pilgrim's Progress* is auto-biographical to some extent. It is interesting to reflect on what enemies and difficulties Bunyan encountered and represented in the way he did. Why might it help to personify the temptations he faced?

3. Understanding of religion: (i) Discerning genuine from sham religion

The Pilgrim's Progress is about Christian being required to follow the narrow path set out in the Gospels as the only safe way to reach the celestial City, and of the many invitations he encounters to leave the path and pursue something more congenial and easy. This is a metaphor for genuine religion and the very many temptations to avoid it or change it into something false. Many characters show what happens when religion becomes sham: Talkative who says fine things but doesn't understand them; Formalist who bothers only about the externals of religion, Hypocrisy who says one thing and lives another, Mr. Worldly Wiseman who really is only interested in success and comfort in this world, Sloth, Simple and Presumption who represent so many so-called religious people who are unreflecting and naïve. The capacity to discern true religion from false is perhaps the most crucial purpose of RE in schools and of worship-enabling assemblies.

4. Understanding of religion: (ii) The difficulty of pursuing genuine religion

Karl Marx famously spoke of religion as "the opiate of the people", and many people see religion as a kind of prop for the psychologically immature. *The Pilgrim's Progress* should correct this impression. According to Bunyan, being a Christian is very hard work. The difficulties and temptations facing the genuinely religious are many and varied, and continue right to the end.

5. Understanding of religion: (iii) The joy of genuine religion despite pain and trouble

Another common misconception of religion is that it is a very negative activity with a negative view of life - Christianity particularly has been much berated for its over-insistence on the reality of sin and wanting a kill-joy approach to life. Once again the *Pilgrim's Progress* provides a corrective to this. Running through it like a thread is the sheer desirability of the wonderful goal set before the pilgrims, and of all the help and consolation they receive on the way. They find themselves strengthened, and are of a light spirit. A most obvious example is in the way that Christian and Faithful meet the accusations and ordeals of Vanity Fair. They show themselves remarkably calm and content despite the awful things that could happen to them.

The question to be posed is therefore: is life fundamentally something joyful because it has a purpose which is good and worthwhile and is leading to life beyond death which is greater, abundant and infinitely satisfying? Or is life just, as Macbeth put it, just like a candle to be snuffed out "signifying nothing"?

A few Thoughts and Prayers relevant, by way of example, to the third of the 5 aspects above, i.e., to discerning what is important and true in religion from what is purely external is appreciated within all religions .

The first four prayers below may be found in *1000 World Prayers* by Marcus Braybrooke (John Hunt Publishing 2003)

* A Hindu Kashmiri woman mystic wrote

"Flowers, sesame-seed, bowls of fresh water, a tuft of kusha grass,
All this altar paraphernalia is not needed

By someone who takes the teacher's words in
And honestly lives them, full of longing in meditation,
One sinks into a joy that is free of any impulse to act,
And will never enter a human birth again." (*1000 World Prayers* p.18)

* An example of Jewish humour makes a similar point about the need for utter sincerity in loving God

"The Baal Shem Tov once refused to enter a certain synagogue because he said that it was too full of prayer. Noting his followers' astonishment at his attitude, he explained that so many routine insincere prayers were uttered there that they could not rise to the heavenly throne and stayed on earth, cramming the synagogue full." (*1000 World Prayers* p.24)

* The Muslim mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi expressed a similar point like this;

"Fools laud and magnify the mosque
While they oppress the holy ones of heart,
But the former is mere form: the latter, spirit and truth,
The only true mosque
Is the one in the hearts of saints." (*1000 World Prayers* p.288)

* A simple prayer which shows awareness of what is wrong about viewing religion selfishly for what it can do for us in other ways

"Lord, help us not to
Look on you as an umbrella,
But as someone who
Helps us to enjoy
The rain." (by Ken Walsh) (*1000 World Prayers* p.66)

Biblical references are numerous e.g. John 4: 19-24 the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in which Jesus replied to the question about where true worship is offered - or on Mt Gerizim, or in the temple in Jerusalem: "neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem...(for) true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. These are the worshippers the father wants. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."

Here is a quotation from a Russian Orthodox Christian, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh who spoke of the danger of focusing in religion on anything but God himself

You cannot focus on things which are less than God. The moment you try to focus on an imaginary god, or a god you can imagine, you are in great danger of placing an idol between yourself and the real God. This is a thought which was expressed as early as the fourth century by St Gregory of Nazianus. He said that the moment we put a visible sign in front of ourselves, whether it be a crucifix, a tabernacle, an icon or an invisible image – God as we imagine Him – and we focus our attention on that, then we have placed a barrier between ourselves and God, because we take the image which we have formed for the person to whom we address our prayer. What we must do is to collect all the knowledge of God which we possess in order to come into His presence, but then remember that all we know about God is our past, as it were, behind our back, and we are standing face to face with God in all His complexity, all His simplicity, so close and yet unknown. Only if we stand completely open before the unknown, can the unknown reveal itself, Himself, as He chooses to reveal Himself to us as we are today. So, with this open-heartedness and open-

mindedness, we must stand before God without trying to give Him a shape or to imprison Him in concepts and images, and we must knock at a door.

(Anthony of Sourozh *The Essence of Prayer* ,
Darton, Longman & Todd 1986: 146f)

A passage like this is worship-enabling, but yet open and informative about religion for someone on the outside. It is also couched in language which transcends confinement within one particular tradition, and yet it does so in a way which illuminates the tradition which gave it birth. The passage, short as it is, touches on themes of prayer, of the need to get beyond concepts, of the dangers of mistaking external features of religion for the purpose of religion, and on an insight claimed by most religions – that of the need for revelation, for the Divine has ultimately to be revealed, not worked out by human reasoning.