

Evaluation of Middle School Visit to All Saints Church and the Jamia Masjid Gulshane Baghdad Mosque - 28th November 2007

Introduction

This visit evaluation was initially intended to cover all three places of worship, the church, mosque and gurdwara. However, the reporter had to leave for another commitment at 12.30pm, so it was not possible for her to follow the visiting school into the Guru Nanak Gurdwara. The second evaluation of the Gurdwara will therefore be arranged for early in 2008.

The visit involved all the pupils in Year 8 from Lincroft Middle School. They were accompanied by the RE Subject Leader and a number of teachers, students and voluntary helpers.

General Comments

The school arrived a few minutes late, but the ratio of support staff was good. The pupils had been well prepared for their visit. They had all brought the appropriate head-coverings and were carrying a booklet in which to record their thoughts and feelings as they toured the faith buildings. The pupils were genuinely excited about the prospect of the tour. The majority of them had been inside a Christian church previously, but most had not visited a mosque or a gurdwara and they were looking forward to this.

All Saints Parish Church

The school visitors were greeted warmly inside the front of the building by the Faith Based Community Support Worker. She ensured that all present could hear her and made two main points :

1. The party was visiting places of worship, all three of which were very special and important to the faith congregations. Therefore it was appropriate to behave with respect and consideration in each.
2. She could not show the pupils 'the church' as this consisted of the worshipping congregation, who were not available that morning, but that there was a lot to see within the building which would show by signs and symbols that this was a Christian faith building.

Once inside the church. The pupils and the accompanying adults sat on chairs towards the front and listened again to the Faith Worker explaining the importance of the Church within the Queen's Park Community, serving the local people. The strong links were emphasised between Muslims and Sikhs living alongside each other within the area, but each having their own special building to worship together and follow their chosen faith.

The point was made that there were similarities and differences between the three faiths and the name of God took different forms, but was always very special and revered in each faith.

The priest of All Saints Church then spoke to the pupils about the fact there were three artefacts to be found within a Christian church which are of central symbolic importance for Christians. He invited the pupils to suggest which they were. The pupils made very good suggestions and the three were identified as :

1. Altar

2. Lectern and pulpit

3. Font

When talking about the importance of the Bible to Christians, the point was made that the Holy Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) over a period of 23 years, but the Bible being a library of books, came together over several thousand of years.

The tenets of the Christian faith were explained in a very engaging and passionate way . The point was made that God was the same across the faiths, but was understood in different ways and called by different names.

The importance of Jesus Christ for Christians was explained and rites of passage, such as baptism were related back to the life and teachings of Jesus. Around the Church there were many Christian signs and symbols which had specific importance to followers of this faith.

The importance of the building to the community members was emphasised. Many of the features, such as the East Window were gifts from the parishioners in memory of past community members.

The fact that the Christian Church is a broad church was also emphasised. The Church of All Saints was Anglo-Catholic within its tradition, but also within the community there was a Moravian Church, still Christian, but with different worshipping traditions.

After the talk and the opportunity to ask questions, the pupils were allowed to discover the different parts of the building. Some had their own cameras and were keen to take photographs, which they were given permission to do.

The pupils were keen and eager to explore and did so respectfully, asking lots of questions with their adult helpers. They were keenly observant of small details and these became apparent during the concluding session, when they were encouraged to comment on what they had seen.

The priest had put on various vestments – alb, chasuble and stole. The way in which the Church marks different seasons in its calendar was demonstrated through the use of the purple stole in Advent. It was explained that for Christians, the Festival of Christmas begins on Christmas Eve and concludes on the 2nd February with Candlemass.

During question time, the importance of the Sacrament Chapel was explained with candles burning continuously and the aumbry to keep the bread and wine that had been blessed by the priest.

Pupils were able to ask questions without fear of looking foolish. Their questions were encouraged, celebrated and answered in a full and open way.

A frankincense candle was lit and the pupils listened intently to the priest explaining that the smoke represented prayers rising up to God , showing the way to Heaven and enabling through prayer, communion with God and each other.

The Faith Based Community Worker concluded the session by sharing the projects that are established within the Queen's Park Community for young people and how these also bring friendships and links between the three faith communities.

On thanking the the hosts for the visit to All Saints, the school's RE Subject Leader stated that, 'This is the best visit that I have ever been to in 30 years of teaching. It is such a good example of the community working together.'

The pupils left the Church and made the short walk down to the Mosque, where the party was handed over to another Faith Based Community Worker, who is a Muslim and worships at the Mosque, but who also lives and works within the Queen's Park Community.

Jamia Masjid Gulshane Baghdad Mosque

The pupils took off their shoes on entering the mosque and placed them in the appropriate place. All of the women had head coverings ready and the party entered the main prayer hall. They were greeted warmly by the Faith Worker. The majority of pupils sat on the carpet, but there were chairs placed around the edge of the group space for adults.

Two additional helpers were also available to talk with the group, one was the neice of the Faith Worker. She work the traditional Islamic dress of a jilbab and hijab.

Whilst the pupils were sitting on the carpet, they were shown a 'Power Point' presentation which explained the five pillars of Islam and explained the importance of these to Muslims.

It was explained that the carpet pattern is made up of individual prayer mats, pointing in the direction of Kaaba. That it is a requirement for Muslims to pray five times each day. One unit of prayer was explained to the pupils and they were invited to go through the various positions and postures. It was explained that these units of prayer increase throughout the day and that the final prayer of the day, Isah, has seventeen units of prayer within it.

The first two pillars of Islam, those of testimony, Shahadah, and prayer, Salat, are regarded by Muslims to be essential.

The process of 'Zakat', giving to those who are needy, was explained as the third pillar of Islam. The money frequently goes to assist the poor in countries such Pakistan, India and Africa.

The fourth pillar, Sawm, was explained through Ramadan, being the ninth month in the Islamic calendar and the fasting expected between the hours of daylight over a thirty day period .

Hajj, the fifth pillar, was explained to the pupils with the assistance of the male helper present putting on the two white sheets, demonstrating how dressing in this way makes everyone on the Pilgrimage equal.

The PowerPoint slides were helpful in enabling the pupils to understand the route of the journey and key points of this. The Faith Based Worker was able to speak from first hand experience of having been on the Hajj.

The Qur'an was emphasised as being the revelation from Gabriel to the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Pupils were shown the Arabic alphabet. Interesting facts such as it takes approximately seven months to learn the Qur'an were also mentioned. The pupils were told that the Imam recites part of the Qur'an each day and that the Holy Book has a total of thirty parts.

After the talk had concluded, the Imam joined the group, but as he was unable to speak English, the translation was done through the Faith Based Worker, which meant that it lacked the impact of direct communication.

A discussion and question time was invited. Pupils were reticent at first to ask questions, but soon found their confidence and there were a number of interesting questions asked about the building, diet and Islamic dress.

The Mosque itself will accommodate 1500 worshippers over both floors. It was explained that there was no call to prayer at funerals as this had happened as part of the birth ceremony. Weddings could be held anywhere, not just in a mosque. As part of the wedding ceremony, passages from the Qur'an would be read out.

After the pupils had finished their question session, they were invited to go and look around the mosque.

The females present were invited to go upstairs with the female helper. On arrival in the upstairs room, various features were explained such as the benches for the children who attend to learn the Qur'an after school finishes at the end of a day. The worship is relayed upstairs so that the women can participate. The importance of female dress code was explained to the visitors, including the reasons why women are not permitted to worship alongside the men.

The role of women within the Islamic culture was also explained and the girls were clearly very interested in this, comparing it to their own cultural experiences.

After the short talk, the girls rejoined the rest of the party.

Conclusion

The strengths of these visits is that pupils and the adult helpers have an excellent opportunity to talk first hand to faith leaders and followers who are able to talk confidently and articulately about their chosen faith and the impact that it has on their lives within the wider community.

The ability of the pupils to explore each building in a respectful and appropriate way is also very good. This prevents too much listening and overload of information. The way in which the females were able to see and hear about the Islamic faith from a woman's perspective was also good, although this aspect is also important for the boys to understand, time was a factor which prevents this from happening.

The pupils at all times were encouraged to ask questions within a secure framework, understanding that these would be welcomed and answers given would be open and honest, seeking to promote further understanding of each faith.

The pupils left the Mosque 'buzzing' with excitement at what they had seen and heard.

A small point that perhaps, greater clarification on the taking of photographs would be helpful to schools before the visit takes place. This can be included in the 'Pre Visit' pack currently being compiled, once this has been agreed with the 'Faith Tour' leaders.

Report by Judy Ruff
LA Adviser to SACRE