

...there arose a new king in Egypt who did not know Joseph...

It is not part of the Anglican style to blow one's own trumpet loudly, nor to boast or display undue pride in public, but I want in this article to celebrate the crucial role that representatives and members of the Church of England have played in enabling SACREs and ASCs across the country to fulfil their statutory remit harmoniously and successfully over the last thirty years.

The 1988 Education Act made it compulsory for each Local Authority (LA) to set up a Standing Advisory Council in Religious Education (SACRE). The SACRE's structure would copy the "four groups" of the existing (1944) provision for Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASCs), with the "other denominations" group expanded to include non-Christian faiths. ASCs themselves were to be similarly expanded.

Prior to 1988, only a few LAs had run an (optional) SACRE, though a number had been engaged in rewriting Agreed Syllabuses via their ASCs. Experiences of ASCs in previous decades had not always been happy. For most LAs and RE stakeholders in 1988, therefore, SACREs were a new, problematic and mysterious creature, and their statutory role was innovative. What would they be like? How would they work? What advice and support was available? (Precious little, I seem to recall.)

When the 1988 Act occurred, I was Director of Education for a large midlands diocese which related to six LAs, three being shared with other dioceses. I and fellow Directors across England readily set about the task of collaborating with LAs to turn these embryonic SACREs into reality. Group B numbers had to be negotiated, and Anglican representatives identified and put forward. Goodwill and a modus operandi had to be established. In one case in my area, the LA had to be helped firmly to resist the efforts of atheist councillors to stop a SACRE being convened at all.

In those early years, many LAs kept a tight rein on their SACREs and ASCs, with meetings being chaired in formal mode by a local councillor. However, as time passed, and as LAs became more familiar with how SACREs worked and with the people on them, meetings and relations became more relaxed and less formal. A sense of shared purpose, partnership, mutual respect and collegiality developed, which transferred readily to ASCs when these occasional bodies were convened. Many SACREs became models of inter-faith cooperation, and contributed significantly to promoting good community relations.

Over recent years, the waters have become more choppy for SACREs and ASCs, as we all well know. Academisation and the emasculation of local authorities have fragmented the state education situation, so that the role of SACREs within their own areas has dwindled. LA support for SACREs has been squeezed. Schools have struggled to sustain good RE. Within the RE world itself a powerful lobby has emerged which appears to be hostile to SACREs as such, and sees them as an obstacle in the way of achieving a utopian vision of a reformed national provision for RE.

Throughout this narrative, a narrative of pioneering development, of fruitful maturity, and of current uncertainty, it is my contention that the distinct Church of England presence on SACREs (and ASCs) has been an essential part of the story, not just in fulfilling the Church's legal obligations, but proactively in enabling SACREs and ASCs to function, and to function well. Group B has been a kind of backbone, providing stability, continuity, cohesion and moral commitment to the work in general.

More particularly, Anglican members have deployed resources at their disposal in numerous ways, as appropriate and as the needs of SACREs have become more urgent and critical. These ways can range from the basic practical provision of venues and clerking to the more professional and frequent contribution of advisory support, and in many cases to the chairing and actual leadership of the SACRE (and ASC). These collaborative contributions have been offered in a spirit of servanthood, and not in any sense as an expression of supposed superiority or dominance.

Of course, many non-Anglican members of SACREs are equally committed to the work of SACREs, and make significant contributions to that work. Further, almost all SACREs have richly benefitted

from the guidance, hard work and dedicated support of their LA's RE Adviser. What I am saying is that for a great many SACREs it is inconceivable that the other three Groups would have been able or willing to offer the range, quality and sustained effort of the contributions made down the years and across the country by representatives of the Church of England. It is inconceivable that, without Group B, so many SACREs would have been able to cohere as well as they have, and to serve the pupils and schools of England so effectively.

More broadly, Anglicans have been a moderating influence in a field where feelings and tensions can run high. Anglicans have sought energetically to model tolerance and inclusivity, and have led the way in exploring and showing how faith and diversity can be held together. This whole Anglican strand in the complex story of RE, SACREs and ASCs needs to be recognised, applauded and celebrated. It needs to be recorded and remembered. It needs to be heeded and reflected upon.

It is therefore something of a slap in the face to find that the Commission on RE's Final Report makes no reference to any of this, and indeed seems to have little appreciation of how SACREs have been able to carry out their work at all in these years of challenge and change. The Report's orchestrated narrative leads to recommendations which include proposals for SACREs to be replaced by Local Area Networks (LANs) dominated by professional educators, a good number of whom may privately be antipathetic to religion if not downright hostile.

In the proposed list of potential members of LANs, faith communities are grudgingly mentioned last of all, and are lumped in with libraries and galleries. "Dioceses" (inclusive of RCs) appear just before this, last in the list of school providers. Whereas an invaluable spirit of democratic partnership among equals has enabled SACREs to thrive so far, the new proposals convey rather a sense of authoritarian dogmatism on the part of a centralised elite, who are determined to dismantle SACREs and ASCs as currently and statutorily established.

At a stroke, the experience and goodwill built up in SACREs over thirty years are thus to be callously and carelessly tossed aside. The Church of England's key and honourable role in SACREs is to be written out. Its capacity to support and enable the work of a complex body through the professional expertise of its own representatives and advisers, and crucially through its own ethos and values, is to be totally discounted. A new king who did not know Joseph indeed.

Already much effort is going into the establishing of regional RE Hubs independent of SACREs, and potentially competitors to SACREs, whatever polite noises are made to the contrary. It is deeply ironic therefore that much of the funding behind this development seems to come from Anglican trust foundations whose principle charitable purpose must surely be the promotion of Christianity or "Christian education" according to the beliefs and practices of the Church of England.

The signs are that we are approaching the end of an era, even if there is to be no new legislation as such in relation to RE, SACREs and ASCs. Change is happening, some of it beyond the control of the RE world, some of it initiated by pressure groups within that world. It would be a great loss if, in embracing some of the more welcome, workable and positive recommendations of the CoRE Report, we allowed ourselves also to be shunted into this brave new world heedless of the strengths, lessons and success stories of the immediate past.

#### Footnote

The stimulus for the above thoughts came from a tweet in RE:ONLINE linked to an article about Recommendation 4 of the CoRE Report. The tweet quoted the assertion that SACREs (the writer meant ASCs) were composed of "the wrong people doing the wrong job with the wrong motives". The tweet and article were greeted enthusiastically by some. The article was however laughably ignorant as well as gratuitously insulting. It has since been substantially rewritten.