Teaching Religion in the Primary School

Issues and Challenges
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The vision for education as expressed in the primary school curriculum is to enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual. The curriculum, therefore, takes into account the affective, aesthetic, spiritual, moral and religious dimensions of the child’s experience. Religious Education is that part of the curriculum which specifically enables the child to develop spiritual and moral values and to come to a knowledge of God. According to the Rules for National Schools, it is the most important part of the primary curriculum.

The religion curriculum is not determined by the State, but is the responsibility of the different churches or patron bodies. The Irish educational system is mainly a denominational system for historical reasons but the number of multi-denominational schools has been steadily increasing in the last twenty years. There is also the recent emergence of a number of inter-denominational schools. The growth of such schools is a reflection of the increasing diversity in Irish society. It is a challenge for the system to cater for and manage such diversity. The question arises as to whether diversity is best accommodated through providing a choice of different types of schools or by ensuring that all schools reflect the diversity within their own communities. The role of the primary school in relation to religious education or religious formation needs to be considered in the context of responding to diversity. The government has signed up to the National Convention of the Rights of the Child. Article 14 states that “States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”. It is time to question how we are responding to this right, particularly in circumstances where children have no option but to attend the local denominational school.

Current changes in society are also reflected in the teaching profession. Primary teachers have always played a central role in passing on the faith and have traditionally been members of the same faith community as the pupils they teach. However, though the majority of teachers still support the teaching of religion in primary schools, the thinking among teachers is changing. What are the implications for teachers who do not belong to the faith community of the school in which they teach? Perhaps, in the context of the recent Education Act which respects diversity of values and beliefs, and which promotes a spirit of partnership, it is time to reflect on the purpose of religious education in primary schools.

The INTO adopted a resolution at its Annual Congress in April 2003 welcoming the increasing diversity of religious faiths in our primary schools and calling for the initia-
tion of discussion with a view to establishing an appropriate religious education programme for all schools which would reflect this diversity. The INTO has also called for a forum where the particular challenges and difficulties faced by teachers in inter-denominational schools could be discussed. By engaging in open debate and dialogue it is hoped to initiate a reflective process involving all the partners in education in order to find accommodation and inclusiveness.

This report includes the background paper on Religion in Primary Schools, which was presented at the Consultative Conference on Education in November 2002, in addition to the proceedings of the conference. It also includes two invited contributions from Sr Eileen Randles, former General Secretary of CPSMA, and Patricia Kieran, of Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all contributors to the report and guest presenters at the conference. I would also like to thank members of the INTO Education Committee who were involved in the research which was carried out in preparation for this report and Mr Joe Conway, Ms Anne Fay and Mr Sean Balfe who presented this research at the conference. The contributions of all teachers who responded to the questionnaire, who participated in the focus groups and who wrote descriptions of current school practice are greatly appreciated. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Mr Patrick Lonergan, who carried out the initial analysis of the questionnaire and focus groups on religion and Mr Don Heron, who was commissioned to write the concluding chapter of the report and to assist with the editing process. The Organization appreciates the work of Claire Garvey, Sharon Kane, Ann McConnell and Lori Kealy in preparing the report for publication. A special word of thanks to Deirbhile Nic Craith, Senior Official / Education Officer, who had overall responsibility for the compilation and editing of the report.

It is hoped that this publication will be seen as a constructive contribution to the continuous discussion and dialogue on the place of religion and religious education in the primary school.

John Carr, MA (Ed)
General Secretary
December 2003
Acknowledgments

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All members who responded to the questionnaire, who participated in focus groups and who wrote descriptions of current school practice.
Introduction

The majority of primary schools in Ireland are denominational in character as a result of the particular historical evolution of the education system. The system of national schools can be described as a state-aided system rather than a state-owned and administered system. Traditionally, church authorities established schools and sought state aid and recognition. However, in more recent times, other bodies have sought state aid and recognition for schools established under their auspices which has led to the establishment of certain special schools, Islamic schools, multi-denominational schools and, more recently, to inter-denominational schools.

Religion is offered as a curricular area in all primary schools. The primary curriculum seeks to develop the full potential of each child, taking into account the child's spiritual, moral and religious needs. Religious education is seen as enabling the child to develop spiritual and moral values and to come to 'a knowledge of God'. Responsibility for the religious curriculum lies with the respective patrons. The aims and objectives of the religious programme, the prescribing of its content and methodological approach, and its supervision and examination are functions imparted by the various denominational authorities. It could be argued, therefore, that the state has ceded its responsibility in the areas of moral development and religious education to denominational religious authorities.

The current religious programmes, in both Catholic and Protestant schools, are broad-based religious education programmes in comparison to their predecessors. Though still denominational in character, many such schools are increasingly becoming more multi-faith and multi-cultural, reflecting the diversity within today's society. Multi-denominational schools offer a core religious education programme which seeks to reflect the diversity and cultural richness of their school communities. These schools facilitate denominational religious instruction outside school hours.

The religious programme in primary schools is generally taught by the class teacher. Teachers are contractually obliged to teach the religious programme, as they are obliged to uphold the Rules for National Schools. The Rules for National Schools state that religious instruction is the most important part of the school curriculum and a fundamental part of any school course. Teachers are, therefore, required to study it and teach it in the manner prescribed. Traditionally, teachers have taught religious programmes willingly and have prepared children for various religious ceremonies. There have been cases, however, where teachers have sought to be released from such obligations, and local arrangements have, on occasion, been made to facilitate such teachers.
Teaching Religion in the Primary School

The issue of whether or not the Rules for National Schools are repugnant to the Constitution has not as yet been challenged. Article 44.2.1 of the Constitution states that; “freedom of conscience and the free practice and profession of religion are, subject to public order and morality, guaranteed to every citizen”. Furthermore, Article 44.2.3 states that; “the state shall not impose any disabilities or make any discrimination on the grounds of religious profession, belief or status”. However, under the Employment Equality Act (1998), Section 37, schools, being ‘religious institutions’, are free to appoint teachers on the basis of their religion. Student teachers are expected to follow a course of denominational religious studies in order to prepare them to teach in a predominantly denominational school system. Duly qualified teachers who may have no religious affiliation may, therefore, find it difficult to secure employment. It will be interesting to see how the issue of religious studies will be addressed by Hibernia College in their new post graduate course for primary teachers.

It is also noteworthy that the Rules for National Schools prescribe that formal religious instruction must be provided at fixed periods and be shown on the timetable to facilitate the withdrawal of the pupils whose parents or guardians disapprove of the instruction (Rule 69). However, at the same time the Rules state that “a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school” (Rule 5). The issue of religion in national schools is, therefore, a complex matter. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that; “States parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of both conscience and religion” (Article 14 (1)). Are the rights of a child affected if s/he has no option but to attend the local denominational school where a religious spirit informs and vivifies the work of the school, even though s/he is not obliged to attend religious instruction? As society becomes more diverse, and as the number of children of different faiths – or none – continues to increase in our national schools, the place of religion in the primary curriculum needs to be reviewed. Is it a question of accommodating diversity in the system by offering a choice of different types of schools or to what extent should all schools reflect the diversity within their own communities? Perhaps, in the context of the recent Education Act (1998) which respects diversity of values and beliefs and which promotes a spirit of partnership, it is time to reflect on the purposes of religious education in primary schools.

This report is in four parts. The work of the Education Committee is contained in Part One and considers religion in the primary school at present. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the main religious education programmes. This chapter also includes contributions from practising teachers which describe practice in their own schools in relation to the teaching of religion and upholding the religious ethos. Teachers from a variety of different types of schools were invited to contribute to this chapter. Chapter 2 presents the results of the INTO questionnaire which was issued to a random selection of members (3%) in September 2002, seeking their views on the teaching of religion in primary schools. Findings from focus groups on religion also
permeate this chapter, though the full reports from the focus groups are contained in Appendix 3. A number of issues and concerns which emerge in Part One and which pertain to the broader institutional framework within which schools operate, are considered in later chapters which address policy issues.

Part Two of the report contains the proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education which took place in Mullingar in November 2002. Chapter 3 contains Dr Pádraig Hogan's presentation on Religion in Education and the Integrity of Teaching as a Practice. The reports from the rapporteurs in the discussion groups are summarised in Chapter 4. Contributions from the Open Forum are included in Chapter 5.

Part Three of the report consists of two challenging papers in relation to Catholic schools. The majority of primary schools in Ireland are Catholic denominational schools (93%) and face particular challenges in an increasingly diverse society. In Chapter 6, Sr Eileen Randles, former General Secretary of the Catholic Primary Schools Managers' Association (CPSMA), has written on the ethos of the Catholic school. Sr Eileen Randles previously delivered this paper to a meeting of primary principal teachers and it is included here with her kind permission. In Chapter 7, Patricia Kieran of Mary Immaculate College has written on the teaching of world religions in the Catholic school. Both these chapters provide a stimulus for reflection in relation to religious education and the ethos of Catholic schools.

Part Four contains a concluding chapter, Chapter 8, which highlights current issues in the context of moving forward with the debate on religion in the primary school.

Additional information is provided in the appendices. Appendix 1 provides a breakdown of primary schools in the Republic of Ireland by denomination. Appendix 2 outlines the main articles of the Constitution of Ireland and the Rules for National Schools which pertain to religion. Appendix 3 contains the reports from the focus groups.

Finally, we have taken the opportunity to publish the findings of an earlier survey on religion in primary schools which the INTO carried out in 1996 following a resolution adopted at Congress in 1995. This report, previously available in unpublished form, is included in Appendix 4.
TEACHING RELIGION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL
CURRENT PRACTICE

Chapter 1: Religion in Primary Schools – Purposes and Practice

Chapter 2: INTO Survey on Religion in the Primary School
Religion in Primary Schools
Purposes and Practice

This chapter provides an overview of the purposes and practice in relation to religion in primary schools in Ireland. A brief outline is given of the philosophy and approach of various religious programmes. The descriptions that follow have been written by primary teachers who have described current practice in their own schools regarding the teaching of religion and upholding their school's religious ethos. The purpose of these contributions is to illustrate how policy concerning the teaching of religion and upholding a school's religious ethos is implemented in practice. These descriptions are personal to the schools concerned and it is acknowledged that practices differ between schools. Consideration of religious education, essentially a curricular area, cannot be viewed in isolation from the wider cultural and institutional framework, within which schools operate. A number of issues which emerge in Part One are considered in later chapters in the report.

This chapter contains four sections as follows:
- Religious Education in Catholic Schools;
- Religious Education in Protestant Schools;
- Religious Education in Other Denominational Schools;
- Religious Education in Multi and Inter-denominational schools.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

The Religious Programme–Alive-O

The programme for religious instruction in schools under the patronage of the Catholic Church is the Alive-O series. This replaces the Children of God catechetical series which is being phased out over a period of years. The Alive-O series will be fully

1 Based on the introduction to the Alive-O Series for second class
in place from September 2004. The title *Alive-O* reflects one of the overriding aims of religious education, namely, to enable people to become fully alive to the presence of God in themselves, in others, in the Church and in the world around them.

**AIM OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

The aim of religious education is to foster and deepen children's faith. The *Alive-O* series seeks to evoke a response in children to the presence of God in their lives. This presence is revealed through the person and the teaching of Jesus Christ. The series places great emphasis on the role of parents/guardians in religious formation and the co-operation required between home and school in religious and moral education. The role of the parish and the community is also seen as a valuable resource. The growing importance of the teacher's role in faith formation is acknowledged in a changing cultural climate. The importance of the teacher's role in the lives of children not only as an educator but also as a significant adult and model in the lives of children is highlighted in the *Introduction to the Teacher's Book*. The *Alive-O* series seeks to be a resource for teachers to help in the development of children's faith.

**FAITH AS A RESPONSE TO REVELATION**

The programme is designed to develop faith which is based on our response to revelation. The signs of God's presence and actions are found in scriptures, Church traditions, the liturgy and the lives of believers.

*Scriptures*  
God is revealed through the bible but, in particular, through the *New Testament*. The greatest emphasis is placed on the teachings of Jesus.

*Traditions*  
The teachings of the Catholic Church as it has evolved since the time of Christ makes up its tradition.

*Liturgy*  
Jesus continues to speak to us through Mass and the sacraments.

*Lives of Believers*  
The Saints and others have shown us by their lives, their word and their prayer, what God is asking of us.

God is also revealed to us in the natural world and through human experience. The development of faith in the child is a gradual and growing process. The many signs of God's presence and love are introduced progressively in the course of the primary catechetical programme in a manner appropriate to their age, stage of faith development and life experience.

**MORAL EDUCATION**

The aim in the moral education of children is to help them to grow into mature Christians. This involves personal and emotional development as well as rules and regulations. The programme is designed to help children become more aware of themselves and of people and things around them. They are asked to reflect on their
relationships with God and with other people. They are helped to discover the values of co-operation, sharing and respect for other people and their property.

PRAYER

The importance of prayer and developing prayerfulness is central to the Alive-O programme. Teaching prayer to children is based on fostering attitudes towards God’s presence, creating a prayerful atmosphere in the class, experiencing different forms of prayer – prayer of sorrow, prayer of thanks, prayer of intercession – and experiencing different expressions of prayer – vocal prayer, prayer through movement. Prayer in the classroom, both formal and informal is encouraged. This ranges from celebration of the liturgy and prayer services to shorter prayer occasions arising from religion lessons or occasions that arise from experiences. Prayer formulas are still important as the prayer language of the Church and are part of the programme but spontaneous prayer in the everyday language of the child are seen as complementary and to be encouraged.

RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Alive-O seeks to help children to grow and develop into healthy and mature adults, capable of realising their full potential as human beings created in the image and likeness of God. One aspect of that growth is the development of the children’s ability to relate to others and to have a positive understanding of their own sexuality. This is not seen as a separate element but is incorporated throughout the Alive-O programme. The topics dealt with are listed in the Introduction to the Teacher’s Book and are only relevant to schools in the Republic of Ireland. The Education for Love programme was developed for primary schools in Northern Ireland and has been in use since 1990. This programme places huge emphasis on the involvement of parents in planning and support and it is essentially about formation, initiation and information in the context of Catholic values.

USING THE PROGRAMME

Each lesson begins by focussing on significant experiences relevant to children of a particular age. They then reflect on the experiences being explored and are asked to respond to that experience and reflection. Each lesson is divided into five parts to enable it to be structured as a week’s work. However, the resource book contains a good selection of stories, songs, poems, prayers, artwork, pupil work and varied activities to choose from, so that a good degree of choice is available for the teacher in the development of each lesson.

A particular opportunity for dialogue/conversation between teacher and child and/or between children is provided under the headings ‘Chatting about...’ and ‘Thinking it Through’ and ‘Digging Deeper’. The learning process is helped by giving the children the opportunity to put words on what they are learning or experiencing.
The chatting can be changed and adapted as the interaction between the children themselves and the children and teacher evolves.

The programme also encourages memorisation of prayers, songs, hymns, Mass responses and doctrinal questions and answers.

**Practice in a Denominational Catholic School**

*A denominational Catholic school in a suburb of Dublin which caters for boys and girls in an area which is socially mixed.*

**SCHOOL ETHOS**

This school has a Catholic ethos inclusive of pupils of different persuasions whose religious outlook is respected. The Catholic status of the school is clearly stated to the parents of incoming pupils and while high academic achievement is valued, the social, personal and moral development of the pupils is of primary importance. The school shares close links with the local parish and the local community and respects the cultural and religious traditions of society.

**ASSEMBLIES**

School assemblies are held on a weekly basis and are attended by all pupils in the school. Sometimes individual classes hold assembly and at other times the whole school is involved. Assembly has a religious content and provides an opportunity for communal prayer and an occasion to teach new prayers and hymns. It also has a wider purpose in addressing other school issues, in celebrating achievements, communicating messages and providing pupils with a forum to express themselves.

**RELIGIOUS CELEBRATIONS THROUGHOUT THE YEAR**

Religious celebrations are held throughout the school year, beginning with a service to mark the opening of the year which also provides an opportunity to formally welcome new pupils. Services are held at appropriate times during the year, Christmas, Easter, Lent and also at the end of the year. Significant feast days such as St Patrick’s Day are acknowledged in a tangible way. While non-Catholic children may be supervised should they wish to opt out of these, in practice all pupils attend.

**DISPLAY OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS**

Religious pictures and icons are displayed in the school halls and corridors and all classrooms have some religious symbol such as a crucifix or statue. Many classrooms have an altar that is used for prayer services during the year.
PREPARATION FOR SACRAMENTS

The children are prepared for First Penance and Communion in second class. Some teachers may be supported by a parish team in the preparation. The priest practices with the children coming up to the event and usually all teachers in the school attend the ceremony and go for lunch afterwards. The senior children are prepared throughout the year for Confirmation. Meetings are held for parents and some preparatory services are arranged. All teachers have some involvement in the preparation and the ceremony.

TEACHERS

All teachers teach religion to their own classes. Religion is taught from 12 to 12.30 each day. Allocation of teachers to a sacrament class is determined by general school policy on allocation of classes and teachers are aware of the demands of teaching a sacrament class.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The levels of parental involvement vary. Some parents have very little involvement in the child's religious education and leave almost all the preparation for the sacraments to the school. Many parents do not bring children to church in the time approaching the sacraments. Other parents are very supportive and, while the parents may not practice themselves, they want the children to be involved. Teachers would welcome greater participation by parents in day to day matters pertaining to their children's religious formation.

CHILDREN NOT OF THE FAITH OF THE SCHOOL

Children not of the faith of the school are welcomed and integrated into school life and their experience is one of total acceptance by other pupils and teachers. On enrolment the parents of these children are told that they are very welcome but that the period 12 to 12.30 is set aside for religious instruction. The parent is given the option to remove the child from the school during this period but this is generally not done. They are not expected to participate in religious lessons, services or celebrations. Teachers either assign work to these children for the duration of the lesson or allow them to participate in class, as determined by the child and his/her parents. Non-Catholic parents are encouraged to read the Teachers’ Manual accompanying the Alive O programme to appreciate the morals and values that underpin the programme, many of which are common to the great religions of the world.
THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION IN THE SCHOOL

Religion is an important part of the school and the practice of religion permeates school life. However, as in society generally, emphasis and practice has declined perceptibly. Fewer people teach religion on a daily basis or at the designated time, we haven't stopped to say the Angelus for years, and most teachers, like others in society, are less concerned nowadays with sacramental practice and formal prayer. Religion is seen as something we live rather than something we observe a few times a week.

Catering for Multi Faiths in a Catholic Primary School

A Catholic denominational school in the suburbs of Dublin, where 30% of the pupils are non-nationals with a variety of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. The school is designated disadvantaged.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This Catholic primary school, established in a Dublin suburb in 1985, reflects the cultural, ethnic and, in particular, religious diversity in the community it serves. The school was established in response to a new public housing development, where families had been relocated from the city centre and various flat complexes around the city. The school was designated disadvantaged a short time after it opened.

Since then significant demographic changes have taken place in the area, arising in the main from the building of almost one thousand private purchase houses and the arrival of several families from countries other than Ireland. Almost a hundred of the three hundred and thirty pupils in the school in September 2002 were born outside of Ireland. Most of these belong to faiths other than the Catholic religion (for example, Jewish, Hindu, Presbyterian, Jehovah Witnesses), and a large proportion of them are Muslims.

The school was built at a time of financial constraint and, despite numerous campaigns in the interim, there is still no hall and therefore no facility for school assemblies. When school assemblies do take place they are usually held in the church. However, the school is aware that the children of some faiths are not permitted to enter places of worship other than their own.

Along with the demographic changes described above legislative changes have occurred which have also impacted on the school. These include the Education Act (1998) which lists as one of its objectives “to promote equality of access to and participation in education and to promote the means whereby students may benefit from education.” The Deed of Variation (1997) provides “that the school will be managed in accordance with the Rules for National Schools and in accordance with the Roman Catholic ethos” (Solas 1997). There is also the Equal Status Act 2000 which states that primary schools that “have the objective of providing education in an environment
Religion in Primary Schools - Purposes and Practice

which promotes certain religious value, may admit persons of a particular religious
denomination in preference to others and may refuse to admit a student who is not of
that denomination if it is proved that the refusal is essential to maintain the ethos of
the school" (Solas, January 2001). The significance of this is commented on in very
recent research by Devine et al (2002)\(^2\) when they say that there is mounting pressure
on denominational schools “to address religious diversity... particularly in relation to
religions outside the Christian frame” (p.37).

The school has grown from a three-teacher school in 1985 to twenty two teachers in
2002. Faced with these changes and challenges, the school has been determined to
address, deal with and manage change. It has sought to achieve a balance that allows it
to celebrate differences within the school community while maintaining the Catholic
ethos of the school. It has been resolute in continuing its aim of enriching the people
it serves, in responding to the needs of its time while recognising its own limitations.

REFLECTIVE RESPONSE TO CHANGES

As a means of managing and responding to change the school established a Planning
Team in 1999-2000. The team, comprising of six teachers, including the principal
teacher, conducted an audit to determine what issues or procedures the whole staff
felt needed examination and, where appropriate, to give guidelines and develop school
policy. This time-consuming work is ongoing. It is evolving according to the needs of
the school and the community or educational changes that impinge upon it. It entails
collaboration and consultation with staff, parents, board of management and, where
appropriate, pupils.

Addressing the needs of children of other denominations and nationalities emerged
as a priority from the audit and the following is a short description of policies, agreed
by all the constituents within the school community on this matter. These policies or
guiding principles are presented to prospective parents before they enroll their
children in the school.

SCHOOL ETHOS

The planning team, with the assistance of two external facilitators, and in consultation
with the staff and representatives from the whole school community developed a
mission statement, which is as follows:

“______ NS is a Catholic school. Recognising and embracing the diversity within
our community, we are committed to developing the individual pupil in a secure and
challenging learning environment.”

\(^2\) Devine, D, Kenny, M & McNeela, E (2002) Ethnicity and Schooling, A study of ethnic diversity in selected
Irish primary and post-primary schools, Draft Report, UCD
This mission statement makes clear the school's position as a Catholic school while accepting religious diversity.

**SCHOOL BOOKLET**

The Planning Team produced a school booklet which was distributed to parents. The opening paragraph below describes its objectives:

*This booklet outlines policies and procedures. They were drawn up and agreed upon by staff and management in consultation with parents. They reflect the ethos, vision and daily procedures within the school. They are subject to constant review in the light of changing circumstances. Our School Plan contains more detailed versions of these policies.*

The booklet also explains the school's policy on enrolment and the teaching of religion.

**Enrolment**

All children have an equal right to education. In order to fulfil this right, differences are respected and valued in our school. The school welcomes all children in its catchment area. However, in the event of there being more applicants than places, the criteria in the Enrolment Policy, as outlined in the School Plan and approved by the Board of Management applies. Children must be four years of age before 1 September and a baptismal/birth certificate must accompany each application.

**Religious Education**

This is a Catholic school and we recognise and respect the religious diversity within the school. Where possible we will accommodate this diversity. Catholic religion lessons are taught daily and short prayers may be said during the school day. Children of other faiths may be engaged in another activity during religious instruction, within the classroom. Until the school hall is built the church may be used occasionally for non-religious activities.

In practice the school has facilitated the Islamic community by providing a room for an external teacher for religious instruction during the school day. This occurs twice a week; otherwise Muslim pupils remain in the classroom as described above. The pupils in the school also attend Mass on the first Friday of each month. Arrangements are made for any child who may not wish to attend to be supervised in a classroom.

**RELIGIOUS CELEBRATIONS THROUGHOUT THE YEAR**

Two members of staff teach English to children from non-English speaking backgrounds. This has the added benefit of providing a useful mechanism for informing all staff and pupils of religious celebrations of the minority faiths. In an incidental way attention is drawn to these celebrations within the classroom or school.
A lot of effort is spent each December explaining and making clear to non-Catholic parents the difference between the commercial and the religious aspect of Christmas. Several parents from minority faiths are genuinely concerned that Christmas is so pervasive that their children might become confused or even indoctrinated. This issue arises to various extents at other times of the year.

PREPARATION OF CHILDREN FOR SACRAMENTS

The preparation of children for First Communion, even more so than Confirmation, provides the greatest challenge for teachers in our school, especially where they have pupils in their classroom of faiths other than Roman Catholic. Because the preparation has become so detailed and painstaking, (perhaps, because some of the Catholic pupils have themselves little or no knowledge of church etiquette, procedures or prayers) this programme pervades and, at times, subsumes the core curriculum. As many teachers will know, the period allocated in the time-table for religious teaching is not sufficient for the level of practical instruction required for this sacrament. Practically this means that children who are not being prepared for First Communion are losing out.

CONCLUSION

This school can be described as having evolved into a multi-cultural, multi-denominational, Roman Catholic, disadvantaged school that includes a broad spectrum of pupils from various socio-economic backgrounds. In this evolution there has been excellent support from the board of management and parents. The developments have been exciting, stimulating and challenging. For the teacher in the classroom dealing with children from various cultural backgrounds, the teaching of religion is one of the biggest challenges they face daily. Staff members in the school have endeavoured to reflect and develop best practice. It is a constantly evolving situation that requires a thoughtful response not just at school level but beyond. The school has shown sensitivity to the needs, aspirations and values of all elements of the community. It has responded by incorporating into its overall philosophy and practices certain ideas and mechanisms that show an awareness of the diversification that exists in the community it serves.
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN PROTESTANT SCHOOLS

The Religious Education Programme – Follow Me

The programme for religious education in schools under the patronage of the Church of Ireland and the Methodist and Presbyterian churches is the Follow Me series. There is a strong biblical emphasis in the programme, with a particular focus on the person of Jesus Christ. It was devised by developing and adapting materials from the Alive-O series and from the previous Primary RE programme and with reference to Scottish and Northern Ireland guidelines for religious and moral education.

THE PLACE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM

Religious education has a particular role to play in the 'celebration' proposed for the education of children in primary school. The primary curriculum acknowledges this role for religious education and notes that it can enable the child to develop spiritual and moral values and to come to a knowledge of God (p 59). In Ireland, the provision of a curriculum in religious education is the responsibility of religious authorities; and the Follow Me programme has been prepared by the Church of Ireland who has the responsibility for children and schools of that tradition. The programme is constructed using the same framework of strand units found throughout the rest of the curriculum. This structure can facilitate the integration of religious education with the rest of the curriculum – connections can be made with other curriculum areas which can give religious education a place in the life of the school beyond the time allocated to it each day.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND THE CHILD AS LEARNER

The primary curriculum places great emphasis on the child as learner; learning is associated with the process of growth and development. A number of principles underpin the approaches to learning which lie at the heart of the curriculum. These principles are of particular significance for religious education, a process which seeks to enable the child to grow in faith, in knowledge of God and in love of God's word. Religious education, if it is to be consonant with the wider educational experiences of children in primary schools, must be informed by these principles. A number of these are particularly relevant for religious education and informed the development of the programme presented here.

3 Based on the Introduction to the Follow Me series for first and second class. The Follow Me series is currently available to all classes up to second class. The remainder of the series will be available in due course.
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND THE PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING

The child's sense of wonder and natural curiosity
This first principle of learning suggests that the impulse to learn is born out of a child's sense of wonder and awe. Such wonder and awe is foundational for religious education. It offers not just the basis of the impulse to learn, but the foundation of faith, belief and the sense of the divine. A child who wonders is taking the first step on the road of faith.

The child as an active agent in his or her learning
This principle gives rise to opportunities for children to engage in a wide variety of learning activities and to develop skills for self-directed and independent learning. This engagement is important for religious education. Firstly, active participation in the life of a parish, or in the religious activities of the school can be both a component and an outcome of religious education. Secondly, the spirit of enquiry fostered by such active engagement can support the development of critical and mature faith in adolescence and later in adult life. Without such a spirit of enquiry, the desire for engagement and for dialogue is lost.

The developmental nature of learning
Returning to knowledge, ideas and skills at intervals in the school career of the child allows for deeper learning to take place and for the raising of new questions and posing of new and more challenging and complex problems. This spiral approach to learning offers opportunities for reflection on experience. Such reflection is an important resource for religious education; it enables children to create, tell and re-tell their own story and to grow in understanding of the stories of the Bible.

The child's knowledge and experience as a base for learning
Religious education seeks to reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary; the amazing in the mundane and the special in the routine. The starting point for such a process must be everyday experiences of the children. The programme presented here draws extensively on these experiences as a resource for classroom and home activities.

Environment-based learning
This principle underlines the importance of the home and the wider community as a context for learning. For religious education this is of special significance. The partnership between home and school allows for coherence and consistency and for the reinforcement of learning in out-of-classroom activities. The parish is an important environmental feature for religious education.
The aesthetic dimension

This principle emphasises the value of the child’s creative response and creative expression of perception and insights in the learning process. Such responses and expressions are important for religious education. Of its nature, it draws on and facilitates experiences which are beyond the realm of everyday language. In this regard, religious education both draws on and contributes to the development of the aesthetic sense in the child. This programme makes extensive use of art and music throughout.

Collaborative learning

This is an important principle for religious education. It emphasises that children need opportunities to hear and engage with the ideas of others, that they need to see how others can approach situations and problems from different perspectives. While the religious education programme presented here is focused on the needs of children from the three Churches, the programme is sensitive to children participating in the programme who may be of a different or of no particular religious tradition. While it is a specific aim of the primary curriculum in its entirety to develop a respect for difference, the religious education curriculum has a particular responsibility in this regard. This responsibility is keenly felt in the Ireland of the twenty-first century.

Religious education in primary schools, well planned, with the support of the parish, the parents and families can ensure that the celebration of the child which is at the heart of the primary curriculum can become part of the Christian celebration of life which the Churches would seek for all their members.

The aims of religious education are to enable children:

- to develop a knowledge and understanding of beliefs, worship and witness of the Christian faith, and in particular of the Church of Ireland and other principal reformed traditions;
- to explore the biblical witness to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit;
- to develop their own religious beliefs, values and practices through a process of personal search and discovery;
- to develop an awareness of and a sensitivity towards those of other faiths and none.

STRANDS OF THE CURRICULUM

The six strands of the Religious Education curriculum are:

- celebrations, festivals, ceremonies and customs;
- sacred writings, stories and key figures;
- beliefs;
- sacred places, worship and symbols;
- moral values and attitudes;
- personal search.
The curriculum is presented in six strands as above. These are consistent throughout the primary school and provide a basis for the religious education curriculum at post-primary level. The strands are presented at four levels, outlining the content that could be covered at each stage of the child's time at school. The programme designed for each level will be flexible so as it can be implemented according to the needs of each school and each individual child. The curriculum is drawn up in a spiral manner where similar content is revisited at each level. The methodologies employed and the quantity and type of information given at each level will reflect the development of the child and will match his or her needs at that time.

Practice in a Denominational Church of Ireland School

A Church of Ireland primary school in a growing town near Dublin.

SCHOOL ETHOS

Our national school is under the patronage of the Church of Ireland and its characteristic spirit is a reflection of the ethos of the Church, incorporating a balance of faith and culture. Our mission statement states:

"An understanding and appreciation of the moral, spiritual, religious, social and cultural values that shape our society is promoted and respect for such values is fostered. Children from other cultural backgrounds are welcomed, and cultural and linguistic differences are respected and celebrated."

ASSEMBLIES

The school and parish maintain close links in a number of ways and the staff (teaching and ancillary) work closely with the rector and curate who visit the school on a regular basis. Weekly assembly at school is held each Wednesday morning in the school's general purpose room, and is led by the rector and/or the curate. Each month, a special school assembly is held in the church. On this occasion, two classes plan and lead the service that follows a chosen theme (e.g. Harvest, peace, cultural celebration, friends, etc). Families and friends are invited to attend the service, and there is usually quite a large congregation.

The rector and curate each have a regular teaching role within the school. The rector teaches RE to sixth class each Wednesday morning, while the curate works with junior classes.
RECOMMENDED PRACTICE FOR JUNIOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS

RELIGIOUS CELEBRATIONS THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

As well as monthly assemblies held in the parish church (adjacent to the school), there is a tradition of direct involvement in a small number of special parish services throughout the year, and these are considered to be highlights within the school calendar. They include:

- Christmas play (Sixth Class) – two performances in the church, (i) a morning performance for the pupils of our ‘twin’ school (Rutland St NS), and (ii) an evening performance for the families and friends of the school.
- Good Friday Passion dramatisation (Fifth Class) – presented in the parish church.
- End-of-year service – led by Sixth Class, and including representatives of all classes throughout the school. The service has a different theme each year, and also reflects on the past school year – thanking all who are involved in the busy life of the school, and asking God’s blessing on the year ahead and especially on those pupils who are leaving primary school.
- The school is also involved in annual services (e.g. the Carol Service) and at occasional services (e.g. radio and television broadcasts). Involvement in special joint school/parish services has included the National Day of Mourning (September 2001).

Many pupils of the school take an active part in church services on a weekly basis, and especially during monthly Family Services. The school rarely has a direct role in these services. Sunday School classes are held in the school each Sunday morning and, again, the school has no direct role therein. Pupils from the senior classes join teachers and parents in representing the school at the annual service for the Diocese of Dublin and Glendalough. This service is held in Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin each September to mark the beginning of the new academic year. The school is regularly involved in diocesan projects, such as the Breaking the Link project that focused on world poverty, and a joint service for all schools in the Glendalough diocese (hosted in St Patrick’s Church).

DISPLAY OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

The school displays no religious symbols. However, there may be art work and posters reflective of RE curricular work on display in classrooms.

PREPARATION OF CHILDREN FOR SACRAMENTS

The school is not directly involved in the preparation of any children for sacraments. Many pupils who are members of the Church of Ireland receive Confirmation during sixth class. The rector and/or curate lead all preparation classes, and these are held outside school hours. The annual confirmation service is usually shared by a number of parishes, and is hosted on a rotating basis. The rector and/or curate of the school’s parish are directly involved in the service. It is also attended by the principal teacher.
Pupils who are Roman Catholic receive their preparation classes for First Communion and Confirmation outside school time. The school has a close relationship with the local Roman Catholic parish, and names of those who may wish to prepare for the sacraments are given to the curate who arranges preparation classes. A special First Communion service is held for those who are in our school, attended by the principal teacher and Church of Ireland rector or curate.

TEACHER ALLOCATION FOR TEACHING OF RELIGION
During interview, teachers are asked if they are willing to teach the Church of Ireland Religious Education programme. It has always been the practice that all teachers in the school teach religion, and there has never been any objection to this policy. This policy applies to teachers who are members of the Church of Ireland, as well as members of other churches. Should a teacher have a particular difficulty with the teaching of a particular element of the curriculum, help and support are available from within the school, as well as from the rector and/or curate.

PARENTAL SUPPORT / INVOLVEMENT IN THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF THE SCHOOL
Parents play a lively and active role in many aspects of the school's life, including the religious dimension. From the time of application, parents are aware of the characteristic spirit of the school, and its strong commitment as a parish school. Parents support this aspect of the school through:
- their attendance at our many services throughout the year;
- helping with assemblies (especially with the infant classes);
- ensuring attendance at rehearsals for major annual services, as well as readings at regular services;
- representative involvement at special services (e.g. end-of-year).

PRACTICE DURING RELIGIOUS CLASSES AND SERVICES, FOR CHILDREN NOT OF THE FAITH OF THE SCHOOL
Most parents whose children do not share the faith of the school are eager that their children play a full role in school life. This includes participation in religious education classes and involvement in school assemblies. Every effort is made to accommodate a very small minority of parents who request that their child be excused from such involvement. Parents accept that it may not always be practicable to exclude one child from certain class-based activities, and parents are consulted in situations where a potential difficulty may arise. Many children who are not Church of Ireland play an active part in our school's religious education programme.
THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION IN THE SCHOOL
As reflected in the preceding points, ours is a parish school. This is at the very essence of our ethos/characteristic spirit, and is reflected in our approach to many issues that arise throughout the year. For example, we take an active part in the parish response on exceptional occasions such as national and international tragedy (e.g. Dunblane, September 11).

DEMANDS MADE ON TEACHERS IN REGARD TO UPHOLDING THE RELIGIOUS ETHOS AND THE TEACHING OF RELIGION
Teachers are expected to display respect for the religious ethos of the school (as well as that of all other faiths). It is understood that all teachers will teach the curriculum of the Church of Ireland and, while respecting and celebrating other faiths, will not promote any other faith within the school.

OTHER DENOMINATIONAL SCHOOLS
Details of the religious programme in the Jewish or Muslim schools are not available. However, descriptions of practice in both the Jewish school and a Muslim school, contributed by practising teachers, are presented below.

Practice in the Denominational Jewish School

A national school in Dublin under the patronage of the Dublin Talmud Torah, a religious and secular educational council democratically appointed from within the Jewish Community.

ETHOS
Our national school commits itself to its constitutional responsibility of providing a thriving Jewish school, where children of all denominations and none, can together develop spiritually, intellectually, physically, creatively and socially. Our national school, furthermore, commits itself to promoting an atmosphere of tolerance and celebration of difference, mutual respect and understanding, thus providing our pupils with a positive model for life in a pluralist society. The school aims to always provide an atmosphere of warmth and understanding where pupils will be happy and enjoy learning in pleasant, supportive surroundings.
We welcome and encourage constructive communication between parents and teachers, in our shared commitment to our children's welfare.

REligious and secular timetables

Jewish pupils

8.40 am – 09.00 am Hebrew Prayer
9.00 am – 10.05 am Hebrew Language and Jewish Religious Studies
10.05 am Secular Studies Begin

The above classes are compulsory for all Jewish pupils and are taught by four Hebrew teachers who are paid from both Jewish Community and national school funds. The Chief Rabbi is one of the teachers and the others are members of the Jewish Community who receive training and support from a central Jewish Educational Support Unit based in London. There is no State funding assistance for Jewish religious education or for teacher training. The curriculum combines prayer and Jewish doctrine with a study of Modern Hebrew.

Catholic pupils

9.00 - 09.30 am Infants, 1st and 2nd Religion Classes
9.30 - 10.00 am 3rd, 4th 5th and 6th Religion Classes
10.05 am Secular Studies Begin

Each Catholic pupil attends three half-hour sessions per week. Classes are taught by two members of our national school teaching staff, who volunteer to do so and who receive payment from the school.

Secular only pupils

Non-Jewish pupils are given the option of doing a secular only programme or of taking the Catholic Primary School Programme. Pupils who do not attend any of the above religion classes must report for secular studies classes before 10.05 am.

Assemblies

Assemblies are normally for secular matters, as separate religious education takes place for both Jewish and for Catholic pupils, before the secular day begins. Joint religious assemblies for all our pupils, Jewish, non-Jewish and secular pupils all together are not, therefore, a normal feature of the school. In the past, where there was a special Jewish Festive event, or to mark the visit of an important Jewish dignitary, we have had an assembly for all our pupils, with the non-Jewish pupils getting a little background information in advance, to put the event in context. Though not the norm, shared religious assemblies have occasionally gone ahead, therefore, with no adverse comment from anybody, as the non-Jewish parents know when coming to the school that it is the only Jewish school on the island of Ireland and that the Jewish ethos will operate.
RELIGIOUS CELEBRATIONS

Jewish Festivals

Our school closings facilitate all Jewish holy days. We have to operate for 183 days, as per all schools, but we have always been able to find sufficient days to have a Christmas and Easter closing, though occasionally these may be a few days shorter than what Christian schools get. Fortunately Easter and Passover usual coincide. On the rare occasions where Easter doesn’t coincide with Passover, we have to take the full religious closings of Passover (about a week and a half) and then take just the public holidays around Easter, i.e. Good Friday and Easter Monday.

There is open celebration of all Jewish festivals among the Jewish pupils within their Jewish studies periods in school and in Synagogue. Some of these are celebrations of a fun and non-doctrinal nature where non-Jewish pupils are invited to join in, if they so wish. Visual representations of Jewish Festivals are evident throughout the whole school building. In the senior classes Jewish pupils are encouraged to explain the meaning of Jewish Festivals to their non-Jewish classmates. Orthodox Judaism, however, doesn’t promote the study of non-Jewish religious beliefs among orthodox Jewish pupils, so the detailed study of world religions is not possible.

For special events of state at the Synagogue, for example: the inauguration of a new Taoiseach, a new President, a new Chief Rabbi, or other state occasions, pupils of our national school perform music and readings and play the National Anthems of Ireland and Israel. The school choir for all such occasions is made up of Jewish and Non-Jewish pupils and the secular national school principal prepares the children’s programme, in consultation with the Chief Rabbi.

Catholic Festivals

Christmas is celebrated with a Nativity Play in the school hall, which a very large crowd, made up of all the Christian parents and their friends, attend. This is held in the morning, while the Jewish pupils are at Hebrew Studies, so Jewish pupils cannot attend. Other Christian festivals e.g. Easter, are celebrated within Catholic religious classes and are not featured outside of the Catholic Religion Room.

DISPLAY OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

Jewish religious symbols are widely displayed in the school. Christian symbols are not displayed outside of the Christian Religion Room.

PREPARATION OF CHRISTIAN CHILDREN FOR SACRAMENTS

Communion and Confirmation are organised within the local parish and the Monsignor is a great friend of the school. The Monsignor is ‘School Chaplain’ to our national school and is also held in high regard by the Chief Rabbi and Jewish community.
Catholic children receive three half hour morning classes a week, as well as extra tuition coming up to the Nativity Play and the Sacraments. All classes are held on the school premises. First Communion is held on a Saturday in May, using a local small private convent, which has kindly been made available to us by the Sisters of St Peter Clavier. The local parish priest, the Monsignor usually officiates at our First Communion days, as he does for the First Confessions also. We are very fortunate to have had such a supportive and attentive parish priest as the Monsignor and he has ensured the best of relationships exists locally between the Jewish and Catholic communities. Practice sessions for Confirmation are held in the Parish Church and are co-ordinated with the local primary schools. Confirmation is held at the Parish Church in conjunction with other local schools. The day our sixth class Christian pupils are being confirmed is a normal school day for the rest of our national school.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Jewish parents are involved in the religious education of their children. Some parents can help their children with the Hebrew language, whilst others do not have the language. Jewish parents assist with the organisation of the Religious Breakfasts that are held every month and with other events that are organised from time to time. Catholic parents assist with the organisation of First Communion Day, helping with the catering after the event.

Practice in a Denominational Muslim School

A national school in Dublin catering for the Muslim community and under the patronage of the Islamic Foundation of Ireland.

SCHOOL ETHOS

The ethos of the Muslim NS is distinctly Islamic. It is probably the most multi-cultural, multi-lingual school in Ireland. There are over 20 countries represented and about 65% of the pupils do not speak English as their main language at home. Despite this multiculturalism, Islam is the binding force. Many children have to travel long distances because their parents want to receive an education based on Islamic principles.

TEACHING OF RELIGION AND PRAYER

There are five part time religious studies teachers (some of whom are parents) in the school. They teach the Islamic religion (Deen), Qur’an and Arabic. They also bring the children from third class – sixth class to the Mosque each day for the mid-day (Dhuhr) prayer. Muslims pray five times a day, although only one of these prayers (Dhuhr) occurs during the school day. The children perform wudu (ablution) before prayer in
the Wudu area of the Mosque. Here they are supervised by class and religion teachers. Wudu is part of the worshipping process. Approximately one hour per day is spent at religious studies/prayer, except on Friday, which is the Islamic Holy Day. Each Friday, the children from third – sixth class attend the Jumuah prayer in the Mosque. Here, they hear the Imam’s sermon – the Khutbah. The Jumuah prayer lasts one hour approximately, so children from third class up spend 1 hour 45 minutes approximately at religious studies/prayer each Friday. The children in junior infants – second class, who are considered too young to attend the prayer, spend 1 hour approximately each day at religious studies – including Friday. Class teachers are not involved in the teaching of religious studies and are free to go to the staff room during Religion/Arabic time. Religious studies teachers’ salaries are funded by the Islamic community.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION IN THE SCHOOL**

Religious studies is considered by parents in general and the Board of Management as the most important part of the curriculum. The Islamic ethos is considered most important. Class teachers have to take care to omit anything which conflicts with Islamic values. Parents in general (apart from those teaching Religion/Arabic) are not actively involved in the religious dimension of the school. Many families are transient and live a long distance from the school as the catchment area takes in the whole of Dublin. This discourages active involvement.

**THE SACRAMENTS**

In Islam, there are no sacraments or anything of a similar nature. There are 250 children in the school and they are all Muslim, so the problem regarding children not of the faith of the school does not arise.

**PRACTICE REGARDING RELIGIOUS CELEBRATIONS**

There are two main Islamic Festivals each year.

*Ramadan/Eid Al-Fitr*

Ramadan is the month of fasting (29-30 days). Muslims do not eat or drink anything (including water) between sunrise and sunset. At sunset, the fast is broken. Primary school children are not bound to fast during Ramadan, but many do. Some fast for part of the time only. To accommodate children who are fasting, children who are not fasting eat their lunch out of sight of those who are fasting (e.g. in hall or back of class). The Muslim year is 354 days and is based on the lunar calendar. Hence Ramadan is 11 days earlier each year. It takes 33 years for Ramadan to move from one part of the year to that time again.
Eid Al-Fitr

Eid Al-Fitr is the celebration of the breaking of the fast. It occurs immediately after Ramadan. The school closes for eight school days each year during Ramadan/Eid Al-Fitr as follows:

- the last week of Ramadan;
- the following three days to celebrate Eid.

The school is decorated for Eid with Eid cards and decorations.

Eid Al-Adha

This is the most important Islamic festival and it occurs about two months after Eid Al-Fitr. It celebrates the time when Abraham was about to sacrifice his son Ismael who was later ransomed by a lamb. The school closes for five school days to celebrate Eid Al-Adha. The school is also decorated for Eid Al-Adha. Special events are often organised in the school to celebrate both Eids.

ASSEMBLIES

Assembly is held once a week – every Thursday morning in the school hall. Each week, one class or a combination of classes, takes responsibility for the assembly. There are recitations from the Qur'an, Arabic/religious songs and readings. One of the religion teachers and the class teacher(s) prepare the children for the assembly, which normally lasts 10-15 minutes.

DISPLAY OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

Posters/pictures about Islam and also some writing in Arabic are displayed in the school hall and in some classrooms. There are no statues. The children's work from Religion/Arabic is displayed, as indeed is their work in other areas of the curriculum.

DEMANDS MADE ON TEACHERS IN REGARD TO UPHOLDING THE RELIGIOUS ETHOS AND THE TEACHING OF RELIGION

As already stated, there are five part time Islamic religious studies teachers in the school. There are 15 Department of Education teachers. Fourteen are non-Muslim and one is a Muslim. The class teachers are expected to uphold the Islamic ethos in the school. They are expected to dress modestly and omit anything in the curriculum which conflicts with Islamic values. They also integrate Islam with some of the normal curriculum – Islamic songs, Islamic stories, Islamic art, the history of Islam and the geography of Islamic countries. Some parents, however, are not happy with aspects of the ordinary curriculum and want some of the books replaced with Islamic books.
THE MULTI AND INTER DENOMINATIONAL SECTORS

This section gives a brief overview of three different sectors, each of which have a different approach to religious education and religious ethos in schools. They include: Educate Together (multi-denominational) schools, Inter-denominational schools and Integrated Schools (Northern Ireland).

The Ethos of Multi-Denominational (Educate Together) Schools

The Educate Together Charter affirms that, “Children of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds have a right to an education that respects their individual identity whilst exploring the different values and traditions of the world in which they live.”

The Educate Together Charter is the fundamental unifying document of the movement and is widely available to all in the school. The charter commits Educate Together to support the establishment of schools that are multi-denominational – “all children having equal rights of access to the school and children of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds being equally respected” – co-educational, child-centred and democratically run. The co-educational principle obligates all Educate Together schools to promote programmes to counter all forms of gender stereotyping and to embrace the equality agenda in society. The child-centred principle places a legal obligation on the board and patron to ensure that all the decisions of the school are made from the point of view of the developmental needs of the children and that this consideration takes primacy over all other personal, political or religious agendas. The democratic principle compels the patron and board to work in such a way to embrace the input of parents, teachers, supporters and children enabling greater participation and partnership.

The ethos of Educate Together schools is derived from a set of legal commitments which are set out in the Memo and Articles of the limited companies that perform the role of patron in this sector. These can either be a company limited by guarantee set up in the locality or the national representative body – Educate Together itself. In both cases, the patrons are registered charities whose decision-making processes, selection of officers and accounts must be carried out under the transparent, legal strictures of company law.

Each multi-denominational school is free to draw up its own religious education programme; indeed one of the requirements for recognition by the Department of Education and Science is the submission of a statement on religious education. There are similarities between schools' programmes since they are based on the Educate

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4 Based on information submitted by Educate Together
Together Charter. Multi-denominational schools deliver a religious education programme that informs children about a wide range of religious and cultural beliefs and promotes respect for and appreciation of difference. The programme regards diversity of thought, culture and belief as a vast educational and social resource and promotes positive attitudes towards self, community, society and the environment.

The aims of the religious education programmes in multi-denominational schools can be summarised as follows:

- To develop in children those aspects of personal, social, moral and spiritual development which facilitate the growth of self-understanding and knowledge and understanding of life within the pluralist society in which they live.
- To acquaint the child with the religious and other thought systems that she will encounter in school and in the wider community.
- To develop in the child an understanding of and concern for others.

While teachers teach the religious education programme of their school, no denominational faith has precedence over others. Celebrations and symbols from a variety of religious beliefs and non-religious beliefs form part of the religious education programme and can be expressed through drama, artwork and project work. This work can be performed, displayed or shared through other means. Teachers do not prepare children for any sacrament or religious ceremony and no religious assemblies are held in the schools. No icons are displayed as a form of religious expression. In keeping with schools' inclusive policy, nothing is done that would make any child feel an outsider (e.g. display of religious icons, prayers in any one particular faith, assemblies with a particular faith theme etc). Children are encouraged to explore their own religious identities in a safe supportive environment. From their earliest experience of school, children are aware that many people think differently from them. This, in itself, has wide educational advantages.

There is an acknowledgement that the primary responsibility for the religious formation of children lies with the parents and policies on religious education take account of parents’ wishes with regard to the religious education of their children. Parents who wish to have denominational instruction for their children are facilitated by boards of management who may make the school premises available for such instruction. This facility is usually available outside of schools hours. Parents appoint an instructor approved by the board of management.

In terms of the delivery of a state education system, Educate Together hold the view that their particular model – which has now been in existence in Ireland for 27 years – addresses the rights of all parents, teachers and children in a society that is genuinely global in scope and is rapidly diversifying.
Practice in a Multi-Denominational School

A multi-denominational school in a town in the West of Ireland.

The fundamental principles of a multi-denomination school determine that the ethos of the school reflects a society in which there are many social, cultural and religious strands. The multi-denominational school offers a religious education core curriculum which covers a wide range of religious, social, moral and ethical issues. The aims of this programme are set out in the school’s religious education core curriculum booklet. The curriculum is concerned with helping children to understand the religious and non-religious traditions of life and those that they will meet in their environment. One of the aims of the religious education core curriculum is to develop the children’s awareness of the pluralist nature of our society. With this in mind, children of different backgrounds are encouraged to talk about their beliefs and practices. In the process, children are helped to articulate these beliefs and values, enabling them to communicate to others the meaning and significance of these beliefs.

THE PROGRAMME IN PRACTICE

In practice, the religious core curriculum is taught for half an hour per day. Themes for each age group are suggested in the curriculum documents which are relevant to the stages of the children’s development. Some themes may be suggested at more than one level. As children grow older and develop morally, intellectually and emotionally the same theme might be addressed in greater depth and breadth. Many major religious festivals are explored and some may be celebrated within the school. Themes are planned on a termly basis.

Term 1

In the first term the curriculum deals with:
- Harvest festivals;
- Remembrance festivals (e.g. Christian, Jewish, Hindu and Sikh);
- Winter festivals (e.g. Christmas, Hanuka, Divali);
- The exploration of the Christianisation of pagan festivals.

Term 2

In the January term the curriculum includes New Year festivals (e.g. Chinese, Christian). In this term we also deal with preparation for Commemorative festivals and do some comparative work on the importance of prayer, fasting, penance and celebration in Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist religions.

Term 3

In the last term the children learn about ancient Celtic traditions, Christian festivals of
Ascension and Pentecost and Chinese festivals of Life and Living. In addition, each segment of the core curriculum deals with the themes of Myself, Family, Environment, Feelings, Religious Signs and Symbols, Primitive Religions, Peace Studies, Places of Worship and Spiritual Development. In order to facilitate spiritual development children are given every opportunity to discuss the development of values and the search for meaning and truth in an informed, balanced and non-judgmental setting. No part of the curriculum is designed to convert pupils to a particular religion or religious belief system.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT
Parents are encouraged to participate and occasionally a parent may make a presentation to the class on a specific aspect of their own faith. The core curriculum is integrated with many subject areas through the use of project work and art work.

DENOMINATIONAL INSTRUCTION
Denominational instruction is specific in its aim of teaching children the doctrines and beliefs of a particular religion with a view to inculcating belief in and commitment to the tenets of that faith. The board of management facilitates any group of parents who wish to provide denominational instruction for their children in addition to the core curriculum programme. In practice, parents are given the option each September of having their children attend denominational instruction. These classes take place both inside and outside of school hours. The teacher of Catholic instruction is supported by the parish priest in the preparation of children for the sacraments of Penance, Eucharist and Confirmation. All children in the class are invited to the celebration for each religion and many participate (with parental consent) by singing in the choir for these events.

Inter-Denominational Schools
A number of inter-denominational Irish-medium primary schools have been established in recent years. These schools function under a joint Catholic / Protestant religious ethos. The first such school was established in Wicklow town in 1996. Members of both church communities were involved in setting up the school. The founding members requested the patron body, Foras Pátrúnachta na Scoileanna lánGhaeilge, to recognise the school as an inter-denominational school. A further eight such schools have since been established. All are Irish-medium schools. Both religious programmes – Alive-O and Follow Me – are taught to all children. Children are also prepared for the appropriate sacraments. It is expected that the children will develop an understanding and acceptance of Catholic and Protestant modes of worship. It is seen, by the patron, as a responsibility of the inter-denominational
schools to make full provision for the two major Christian traditions and to teach the religious syllabi laid down by the two main churches.

Given that these schools are recently established, practice in relation to the teaching of religion and upholding the religious ethos varies between schools and is continuously evolving. The practical implementation of the principle of inter-denominational education creates a challenge for teachers at school and class level as many of them strive to devise policies to meet their own particular circumstances. The Centre for Education Services, Marino, made a number of recommendations in relation to assisting the development of policy in its interim report pertaining to difficulties which arose in one particular inter-denominational school concerning the teaching of religion. The report recommended:

- that the commitment of the Churches to the ideal and the implementation of an inter-denominational ethos be sought;
- that the patron establish an Education Office, the purpose of which would be to support in a visible and practical manner the implementation of the characteristic spirit in the schools under its patronage;
- that a convention on interdenominational education be convened by the patron.

In the interim, teachers continue to develop policy and models of good practice in relation to meeting the needs within their own school community.

Practice in an Inter-denominational School

An Inter-denominational Irish-medium national school established in a town outside Dublin under the patronage of An Foras Pátrúnachta.

ETHOS

Our inter-denominational school opened in 1996. The school operates under a joint Catholic/Protestant ethos. We give equal status to both faiths in our religion programme. It is based on the Religious Education Programme as laid down by the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin and the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin and Glendalough. Protestantism embraces Protestant; Church of Ireland; Presbyterian; Methodist; Lutheran and Baptist faiths. We strive to highlight the similarities between the two faiths. However, special care is taken to explain differences in belief and worship patterns.

PRACTICALITIES

- At Morning Prayer Catholic children make the sign of the cross, where Protestant don't.
- All children attend Mass during the year. When our children visit the Catholic
Church only the Catholics genuflect, as Protestant churches have no tabernacle. (They do not retain communion bread in the church after service.)

• All our children celebrate the Harvest Thanksgiving in the local Church of Ireland.

• We all celebrate Christian Unity Day with children from the local Church of Ireland school in the Church of Ireland church.

• Our Christmas Nativity/Carol service is celebrated on alternate years in the Church of Ireland and Catholic church.

• A visiting teacher gives weekly Bible study classes to all children in respect of the fact that Protestant faiths place great emphasis on bible stories and psalms.

• As a symbol of Christian unity, a cross is displayed in the school. It is our policy not to display religious symbols or statues. However, some are used as teaching aids as necessary.

• Local Catholic and Protestant clergy are welcomed in the school.

• Since September 2001, four classes have been accommodated in the local Methodist Hall. We involve ourselves in fund-raising and charity events, which contribute to the needs of all communities. This is made possible because of a very good relationship between our school staff members and the Catholic, Protestant and Methodist clergy.

SACRAMENTS

• The sacraments of First Confession and First Communion do not apply to our Protestant children. While Catholics are being prepared for these sacraments we seek to have the Protestants taught within a Protestant framework as necessary. To date, Protestant children participate in a very real way in the preparation for the sacraments and in the actual services:
  - they welcome the congregation;
  - they read from the Bible or a prayer of the faithful;
  - they carry a gift in the offertory procession;
  - they sing/play in choir.

• The theology with regard to the Holy Spirit is basically the same so with regard to Confirmation we prepare all children together and point out that Catholic children are confirmed in sixth class while Protestants are confirmed at second level. Prior to Confirmation, Church of Ireland students may receive Communion for the first time.

• For First Communion and Confirmation all our children wear albs in the church as a sign of religious unity and equality. Afterwards all children, together with their parents, attend a celebration back at the school.
TEACHING STAFF

* When advertising teaching posts and at interviews, it is made clear that ours is an Inter-denominational Catholic/Protestant Gaelscoil, under the patronage of Foras na Patrúnachta Scoileanna Lán-Ghaeilge. Our school ethos and religious education practices are explained. To date, staff members have been happy to operate within this framework.

* Similarly, when parents seek to enrol a child in our school, our inter-denominationalism is explained.

* Also our Board of Management consists of Catholic and Protestant members. Our religious programme is an on-going developing one. We are currently reviewing and updating *Beo go Deo* and *Follow Me* in line with our ethos. We are lucky to have the commitment of teachers, pupils, parents, board of management, local clergy and local community in general.

**Integrated Education in Northern Ireland**

Integrated Education, in Northern Ireland, is the education together in schools of pupils from the Protestant and Catholic traditions in approximately equal numbers together with young people from other cultures. The first integrated school, Lagan College, was established in Castlereagh, Belfast in 1981. The number of integrated schools has continued to grow steadily through the planning of new schools and the transformation of existing ones.

**NICIE**

The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) is a voluntary body which was established in 1987 to act as a central forum and umbrella organization for integrated schools and groups who are interested in integrated education. Its aim is to: "Assist the development of integrated education and schools in Northern Ireland for the public benefit”. According to NICIE’s *Statement of Principles* the aim of integrated education is to educate Protestant and Catholic children together with children from other traditions to improve their understanding of one another and of their own cultures, beliefs and values. The integrated school is essentially Christian in character and promotes the worth and self-esteem of all individuals in the community. The school as an institution seeks to develop mutual respect and consideration of other institutions within the educational community. Children are being educated to enable them to live as adults in a pluralist society where they can recognise and appreciate what they hold in common as well as what distinguishes them.
STATEMENT ON THE TEACHING OF RELIGION

In integrated education it is stated that within a Christian context children, "shall learn together all that we can reasonably expect them to learn together," where the school population includes significant numbers of children of a particular religion community separate provision should be made to prepare such children for sacramental and liturgical participation in that specific religious community if their parents so wish. Where parents do not wish their children to be included in specific sacramental or liturgical preparation their wishes shall be respected and proper alternative provision shall be made for their children.

Ministers of religious communities are encouraged to visit the school, take a pastoral interest in the children and get to know parents and children.

The selection of prayers, readings and music for school assemblies and gatherings should reflect equally the two major traditions and also give fair representation to other groups of significant size within the school community. Where there are significant differences in liturgical practice between the two major communities (e.g. in the making of the sign of the cross) children should be encouraged to continue with their normal practice. All parents should be encouraged to allow their children to follow the common elements in the religious curriculum where children are introduced to the ideas, beliefs and practices of the major world religious and humanist philosophies.

Practice in an Integrated School

An Integrated School in Northern Ireland

SCHOOL ETHOS

Our integrated primary school was established according to the principles of the Integrated Movement in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the ethos of the school is one which should uphold several main aims. These include child-centred education whereby every child is an individual and has the right to be treated as such. There is an anti-bias curriculum and we aim to include all children regardless of religion, class, race or disability. We also encourage all children to attain regardless of their academic ability.

PRACTICE RE-ASSEMBLIES

Assemblies take place every Friday morning. The practice has somewhat changed over the years and the assemblies now tend to be an opportunity for classes to put on a minor display for the audience. The display may not necessarily have a religious link but may have a theme about friends, caring, spring or other such neutral themes. There will very rarely be any formal religious worship such as hymn singing, prayers or bible related work. A visit from the local clergy is extremely uncommon. The Church of Ireland representative would visit two or three times a year. Parents are
invited to attend assemblies during which they are given an account of recent successes and events.

PRACTICE REGARDING RELIGIOUS CELEBRATIONS THROUGHOUT THE YEAR
Practice regarding religious celebrations throughout the year has also changed in recent years. The only religious celebrations now recognised are Christmas and Easter. At these times a much larger assembly will take place, with participation from several classes and an invited audience. Previously the school would have recognised such festivals as Harvest, Divali, St Patrick’s Day or St Brigid’s Day. There may be a few teachers who will mark these days in their own classes but there are certainly no school guidelines on the teaching of these celebrations and rarely will a whole school mark the occasion.

PRACTICE REGARDING DISPLAY OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS
Due to the integrated nature of our school it has never been acceptable for religious symbols of any type to be displayed. There is very much a feeling that, if none are displayed, then offence cannot be caused. However, there are plenty of opportunities in Key Stage 2 for pupils to look at and discuss the various symbols that arise. It is written into the schemes of work to look at the churches in the area and to discuss the symbols that pertain to the various churches. We also encourage, through our study of world religions, the discussion of symbols in other faiths.

PRACTICE REGARDING PREPARATION OF CHILDREN FOR SACRAMENTS
Our approach to the teaching of sacraments has been in operation for over ten years and we believe it works well. As the classes are integrated it is not feasible to teach the sacraments on a daily basis. Therefore, pupils are removed from their class for an hour a week and are accordingly prepared for their particular sacrament. The classes would generally start from the October half term and the work carried through to the sacrament date. Where necessary, the children may have some extra classes in the lead up to their sacrament. When it is necessary for the children to see the priest we have to take our children to the parochial house as the local priests – with the exception of one – will not come up to the school. Services are then carried out as normal in the local churches. It is unfortunate, also, that we have limited contact with our local Catholic schools.

PRACTICE REGARDING TEACHER ALLOCATION FOR TEACHING OF RELIGION
The approach taken in relation to the allocation of teachers to sacrament classes is rather loose. Due to what may be perceived as a slight imbalance within the teaching staff there are insufficient qualified Catholic teachers to teach the sacraments. For example, during the last academic year one teacher was required to teach two of the
three sacraments. It is generally felt that this is quite an undertaking and would need to be addressed. The rest of the staff in the school teach their required time-tabling hours for religion with no extra classes.

PARENTAL SUPPORT IN RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF THE SCHOOL

There is more apathy in the school today regarding the issue of religion. In the early days of the school, there would have been substantial support and attendance at all of the church services. The pupils would have attended and taken part in Harvest services in the local Methodist or Church of Ireland churches. There would also have been a strong school choir for all the sacraments. However, the school does not participate in Harvest services today and it is extremely difficult to get children and parents to attend sacrament services unless their child is taking the sacrament. It is also quite clear that the parents of some of the children taking sacraments are disinterested, as they often do not attend meetings with either the teacher or the priest.

PRACTICE REGARDING CHILDREN NOT OF THE FAITH OF THE SCHOOL DURING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

All children have their general religious education lessons together and are taught as a class. Within our school the only other main faith we have are the Jehovah Witnesses. Most of the parents are happy for their children to attend the assemblies due to the ‘pluralist’ approach in the assemblies. We have not had children from other faiths in recent years.

IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION IN THE SCHOOL

There is a view that, in recent years, the interest in religion has waned. This is apparent amongst Governors, Management and parents. This is an area that needs to be addressed through school development. There is very little emphasis on the school’s ethos which is, in itself, contradictory to the school’s principles. This, therefore, impacts on various areas including the teaching of religious education, assemblies and parental participation. It is undoubtedly an area that needs to be revisited by Governors and Management alike if it is to become a focus once again for the school.

DEMANDS MADE ON TEACHERS IN REGARD TO UPHOLDING THE RELIGIOUS ETHOS AND TEACHING OF RELIGION

There are essentially very few demands made on teachers in the school with regard to the teaching of religion. The main pressure is on the teachers of the sacraments, as they have to work individually on schemes for the sacraments with little support. The school as a whole must address the issue of the ethos and there is also a need to uphold and revisit its main principles.
CONCLUDING COMMENT

It is quite evident from the descriptions provided by practising teachers in relation to the teaching of religion in their schools and regarding the upholding of the school's ethos that the issue of religion in primary schools is quite complex. Teachers endeavour to teach the religious programme appropriate to their school, and to uphold their school's religious ethos. Denominational schools demonstrate a sensitivity to those pupils who are not of the faith of the school, and accommodate such pupils in a variety of ways. The teachers concerned show a commitment to the ethos of their particular schools, and take both a professional and a pragmatic approach to providing for all their pupils in accordance with the particular circumstances of their own school.
This chapter seeks to shed light on current practices, attitudes and aspirations of teachers regarding teaching religion and teachers’ views of others’ levels of involvement. It also seeks to describe their perspectives on the factors relating to school ethos in various types of schools.

The research, which forms the basis for this chapter, comprised a nationwide survey, and the carrying-out of a series of Focus Groups with practising teachers. The 2002 INTO Survey on Teaching Religion in National Schools was distributed to 677 teachers (3% of the total number) in Autumn 2002. A total of 312 surveys were returned, giving a response rate of 46%. While this figure is quite low, it is consistent with recent INTO surveys, the response rate to which has been declining since the early 1990s.

Three focus groups were held in September 2002 to amplify the survey data. Material from these sessions will be used in this section and the full reports of the group meetings are included in Appendix 3.

A number of issues pertaining to current practices, attitudes and aspirations of teachers regarding the teaching of religion were addressed in the questionnaires and the focus groups. The findings are outlined in this chapter under the following headings:

- Profile of sample respondents
- Teaching religion
- School issues
- Sacraments
- School, home and parish
- Future school religious ethos
- Teacher education
PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

The respondent group fairly reflected the main characteristics of the primary teaching force in regard to gender, age and school positions, and school locations and management. These factors were considered important variables in identifying patterns and trends and potentially, signposts for the future. The following tables briefly set out the respondent sample group:

Table 1: Patronage of School - INTO Survey and Nationwide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patronage</th>
<th>National %</th>
<th>Respondents to INTO %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholic Bishop</td>
<td>92.7</td>
<td>91.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of Ireland Bishop</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian Church</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educate Together</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foras Patrunachta</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Gender of Respondents compared with Gender of Teachers Nationwide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>National %</th>
<th>Respondents to INTO %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female Teachers</td>
<td>77.2</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Teachers</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Age of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aged between 21 and 30</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged between 31 and 40</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged between 41 and 50</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 and older</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teaching Position

Of the respondents to the survey, 80.4% were class teachers and the remaining 19.6% were comprised of administrative principals, learning support teachers, etc.

School Size

Just under half of respondents came from small schools – schools with one to seven teachers. A third were from medium size schools – eight to sixteen teachers; and the remaining 19% came from large schools, with more than seventeen teachers on the staff.

Location

Over 40% of respondents taught in rural schools. A quarter taught in towns. Just under 14% taught in the city, and 18.5% in suburbs.

The profile of respondents and their schools very closely matched national figures. Accordingly, the results discussed in this survey may be taken as accurately reflecting national teachers’ opinions.

TEACHING RELIGION

The Department of Education and Science defines the purpose of religious education as follows:

*In seeking to develop the full potential of the individual, the curriculum takes into account the child’s affective, aesthetic, spiritual, moral and religious needs. The spiritual dimension is a fundamental aspect of individual experience, and its religious and cultural expression is an inextricable part of Irish culture and history. Religious education specifically enables the child to develop spiritual and moral values and to come to a knowledge of God.* [Primary School Curriculum: Introduction, p 59]

The purpose of this section is to ascertain the features of respondents’ opinion about teaching religion and the degree to which this accords with the vision of the Department of Education and Science.

The programmes and texts in use in schools mirror the patronage of the schools.
Table 4: The Religious Programme(s) used in Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alive-O / Children of God</td>
<td>88.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beo go Deo</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of Ireland / Follow Me</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Devised Programme</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Purposes of Religious Education

Teachers bring their own professionally informed views to their use of a specific programme and an open-ended question in the survey sought respondents' views on the purposes of religious education. A wide variety of comment was received. The responses were coded and grouped and a majority can be divided into three general groups: teachers who see the purpose of teaching religion as:

- passing on the teacher’s religious convictions to children of the same religious background;
- passing on moral values which are based in, but not dependent on, religion;
- informing children of a set of facts, in a manner no different to the teaching of any other subject.

The first group saw the purpose of religious education as the fostering of faith in children. As one teacher put it, “In the Christian context, religious education attempts to develop in the child an awareness of the presence of God in all creation.” This is not simply a matter of teaching religion, according to the respondent, but also of teaching by example, “responding on a personal level, by trying to live according to the teaching of Jesus Christ in the gospel”.

The second group of respondents saw the purpose of religious education as the inculcation in children of moral values. “Children ought to be taught about love, respect for others, forgiveness and similar values,” said one teacher. “These can be taught without having to worry about the religious convictions of the child’s family – or of the teacher,” the respondent added.

The third main view was that religion was a “collection of facts”, which ought to be taught to children in the same manner as any other subject in the curriculum.

Accordingly, none of these perspectives was held by a majority of teachers. This shows that teachers have widely differing attitudes to the purpose of teaching religion. Under these circumstances, determining the ‘success’ of religious education may be difficult – since teachers will have widely varying attitudes to what the outcome of religious education ought to be.
Religious Belief and Teaching Religion

Respondents were asked whether they believe that it is necessary for a teacher to be a believer of the faith they are required to teach. A majority of respondents thought that it is necessary for teachers to be believers of the faith they are required to teach. Furthermore, 42.1% thought that it is not possible to teach religion if one is not of the faith one is teaching. A variety of explanations for these choices were given.

A respondent’s attitude was likely to be determined by their attitude to the purpose of religious instruction. As discussed above, a significant proportion of teachers view the teaching of religion as being related to the fostering of faith in their pupils. Almost every teacher who expressed this view believed that it is necessary to be of the faith one is required to teach.

Those who believe that religious education involves the teaching of facts were much more likely to state that it may be taught without religious conviction. One respondent explained this opinion by pointing out that, “I teach Irish but am not a fully committed Gaeilgeoir”. Many respondents stated that it is impossible to teach any subject unless one is fully committed to it.

The comments received show that teachers feel very strongly about this particular issue. Many of them expressed concern that teachers are open to the accusation of hypocrisy by teaching a subject that they do not believe in. Many respondents expressed concern about this, but a number feel that they have no option but to teach religious education, despite their lack of personal faith. The comments of one teacher in the Focus Groups offer a good example of this attitude:

Nobody believes it anymore. The problem is the children question it, the parents have no interest in it and very few of us believe half of what we are teaching. But if you turned around in the morning and said, “I'm not teaching religion any more,” there would be holy murder.

Respondents’ Willingness to give Religious Instruction/Education

Respondents were presented with a list of eight statements and asked to say which most closely resembled their willingness to giving religious instruction/education.

The majority of respondents – 61.2% – said that they teach religion willingly. A further 18% were relatively positive in their attitude to teaching religion. Just over 10% either do not wish to teach religion, or have opted out of teaching it.
Table 5  **Respondents' Attitude to Teaching Religion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I teach religion willingly</td>
<td>61.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would teach religious education willingly but would prefer not to</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teach religious instruction in a particular faith</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not opposed to giving religious instruction/education</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I just see religious instruction as another subject I have to teach</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer if I didn't have to give religious instruction/education</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to have the option of opting out of teaching religion</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to opt out of teaching religion</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have opted out of teaching religion</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (of whom one third were learning support/resource teachers)</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Teaching Religion During Primary School Hours**

When asked whether religion should be taught during primary school hours, 80.1% said that they thought it should be. However, 67% thought that the class teacher should teach it. This figure implies that, while most teachers believe that it is appropriate that religion be taught in the primary school, it is not necessary that the class teacher teach the subject.

**Teaching Children About Other Religions**

Most respondents – 86.1% – thought that children in primary schools should be taught about other religions. However, two-thirds of these teachers thought that children should learn about other religions as part of their religious education. The remainder of teachers suggested that children should instead learn about other religions as part of SPHE, geography, or history.
SCHOOL ISSUES

Respondents were asked to describe their school’s religious ethos by providing information on selected features and other information as appropriate. The choices were under the following headings:

- Religious pictures and icons
- Daily prayer, assemblies and liturgies/services.
- Visits by clergy/church representatives.

The following chart sets out the full responses.

Respondents gave information on the relative frequency of Assemblies and services:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>% of teachers reporting</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Service</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer Service / Assembly</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These reported indicators of a school’s ethos can be matched with the distribution of denominational schools in Table 1 earlier in this section.
Children in School Not of the School's Faith

Respondents in denominational schools were asked whether there were children in their school who were not of the same faith as the school. Three-quarters of respondents said that there were. These respondents were then asked to estimate the percentage of children in their school who were not of the school's faith. These results are set out in the Chart below.

Table 7: Percentage of Children in School Not of the School's Faith

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Children not of the School's Faith</th>
<th>% of Schools Reporting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1%</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2%</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3%</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-9%</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20%</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30%</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-51%</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52%+</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows that the vast majority of schools have at least a small number of children who do not subscribe to the faith of that school. In one case, children not of the school's faith account for a small majority - 51% - of students. This illustrates the importance of schools having a clear policy on how to accommodate the spiritual needs of all of the children in their care.

Many respondents commented that they found having children of different religious backgrounds to that of the majority of pupils very beneficial: “The children learn from each other, enriching the educational experience for all,” said one teacher. Another teacher commented that his or her school had pragmatic reasons for welcoming children of different faiths: “due to falling numbers, we are going to lose a teacher next year - so we welcome anyone at all who can help to reverse this trend.”

Opting out of Teaching Religion

There was general acceptance amongst teachers that children of religions other than that of the school ought to be accommodated. However, there was less acceptance of the notion that teachers who do not share the religious values of the school ought to
be accommodated. "You sign a contract when you are hired by a school," said one teacher, "If you don't want to teach the religion of that school, you should find work elsewhere." Similar views were widely held.

Accordingly, it was not surprising that in only a very small number of schools – 1.3% in the survey – had a teacher opted out of teaching religion. Many teachers stated that they felt that opting out of religion would damage their employment and/or promotional prospects.

It should be noted that this figure does not include resource and learning support teachers, whose decision to take up their post may have been influenced by a desire not to teach religion.

Respondents were also asked whether they would be willing to facilitate a colleague who had opted out of teaching religion. A total of 60.1% said that they would be willing to do so. A variety of reasons were offered by those who wouldn't. In some cases, respondents stated they came from very small schools, in which the practicalities of arranging appropriate substitution would be excessively complicated. Others simply felt that a teacher is paid to do a job and ought to do it.

Sacraments

Children in Catholic schools are prepared for the sacraments of Confession, Communion and Confirmation by their teachers. Teachers in Church of Ireland and multi-denominational schools do not undertake such preparation.

PREPARATION OF CHILDREN FOR SACRAMENTS – THE SCHOOL’S ROLE

Respondents were asked whether they believed that children ought to be prepared for sacraments in school. Significant differences emerged in the responses to the survey: although two-thirds of respondents agreed that children ought to be prepared for sacraments in school, 30% disagreed with this statement. This shows the extent to which opinions about the role of religious education in school may differ. These details are illustrated in the table on next page.
Table 8: Agreement with the Statement that Children Ought to be Prepared for Sacraments in School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children ought to be prepared for Sacraments in School</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>46.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Opinion</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RESPONSIBILITY FOR PREPARATION

Respondents were divided when asked whether the parish, the family, or the primary school ought to be most responsible for the preparation of children for sacraments. No clear majority emerged. A total of 42.4% of respondents believe that the family should be most responsible while 34.5% believe that the parish ought to be responsible. Significantly, only 23% thought that the primary school ought to be most responsible for preparing children for the sacraments.

TIME ALLOCATED TO PREPARATION FOR SACRAMENTS

Respondents were asked whether preparation for the sacraments took up time additional to that available in religion class. While this question clearly does not apply to teachers in schools that are multi-denominational, it is pertinent to teachers in some denominational schools.

Only 18.4% of respondents in denominational schools stated that preparation for sacraments used additional time. However, of that number, many reported that sacraments take up a surprisingly large amount of time, and large variations occurred. Some participants said that religion took up an extra 'ten minutes'; others that it took up an extra month.

School, Home and Parish

The denominational school represents the geographic convergence of home, community as expressed through parish and the school situated within that space. The survey and focus groups sought to ascertain how respondents viewed the various groups, their responsibility and the levels of support.
THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL

Respondents were asked in the questionnaire to select one of five statements to describe the most desirable role for a denominational school in a child's religious education and formation. The following results were received:

Table 9: The denominational school's role in a child's religious education and formation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The school should support the family and the Church in the religious formation of the child</td>
<td>51.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The family should support the school and the Church in the religious formation of the child</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The family and school have an equal role in the religious formation of the child</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school should have no role in the religious formation of the child</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The church should support the school and family in the religious formation of the child</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results show clearly that most participants believe that the school should support the family and the church in the religious formation of the child. Clergy represent the main parochial support to the school in its religious education, liturgical or sacramental preparation. Its role was significant as shown in the table above. The following sections discuss this issue in more detail.

RESPONDENTS' ATTITUDE TO CLERICAL INVOLVEMENT

Respondents were asked to estimate the frequency with which clergy/church representatives visited classes. Responses varied widely. While nearly 40% said that clergy frequently visited all classes, or classes preparing for sacraments, nearly 60% stated that clerical visits occurred only occasionally. It would appear, therefore, that the level of clerical involvement varies widely.
Table 10: Frequency of Clerical Visits to Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of visits</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequent visits by clergy / Church representatives to all classes</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent visits by clergy / Church representatives to classes preparing for sacraments</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional visits by clergy / Church representatives to all classes</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional visits by clergy / Church representatives to classes preparing for sacraments</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

COMMENTS

A variety of comments were received about clerical involvement and support both in this section of the survey and in the focus groups. Many comments were quite negative, with some teachers feeling that they do not receive sufficient support from the clergy in teaching religion and preparing children for sacraments. Some teachers felt that the clergy 'have no interest in schools' and that teachers are now entirely responsible for the religious and moral education of children. Understandably, many were unhappy with this situation, with responses varying between resentment and concern.

On the other hand examples of good practice were included. In some parishes priests and teachers are working together to address preparation for the sacraments: "our parish priest changed the format of communion. The parents go up with their children and present the children for communion – and then the parents can come up themselves later, if they wish. It was very thoughtful."

Among the problems raised were that some members of the clergy were not aware of the programmes being studied by children. The nature of the comments made about clerical and parish involvement in the religious education of children suggests that there is a need for the respective roles of teachers and clergy to be given attention.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The issue of parental involvement in religious education was also found to be significant, both in the focus groups and through the comments made by respondents to the questionnaire in response to an open-ended question.

The issue of parental involvement raised a great deal of concern amongst respondents. On the one hand few respondents reported objections to religious education programmes being taught or to the values or ethos of the schools. As outlined in the Focus Group reports schools took care to outline the schools' positions on religious education and formation to parents and implicit and explicit support for the schools'
work was generally accepted.

However, the lack of active support in religious education and formation was typical of respondents' comments. As one respondent put it, "We feel that we are doing a service for both families and the church, a service that is barely acknowledged and that neither are willing to do themselves." Many other participants in the survey stated that they felt unsupported by parents and that this undermined religious education and preparation of the sacraments.

The most frequently mentioned issue was respondents' perception that most parents want their children to take the sacraments, but are not prepared to carry out any other form of religious practice. This can be demoralising for teachers. As one respondent put it:

*When preparing my class for Confirmation recently I was shocked to find that one third of the pupils had not been to Confession since they received their First Confession at school. We are fighting a losing battle!!*

Another respondent also had strong views on this matter:

*Preparing children for the sacraments when parents are not practising is a sham. The onus should be on parents to present their children in church to receive the sacraments. Teachers should have a minor supporting role but not be the person who does all the work.*

This dilemma led one respondent to say that, "I feel that the teaching of religion should be taken out of school altogether."

It is clear from these comments that many teachers are deeply unhappy with the level of parental involvement in religious education and support in preparation for the sacraments.

**Future School Religious Ethos**

Given that there have been significant changes in recent decades regarding school choice, respondents were asked for their views on the issue of school choice in light of the changes in religious practice and demography. Two developments are widely based: that of gaeilgeoireanna and the multi-denominational schools under their respective patron bodies: An Foras Patrúnachta and Educate Together. The call for non-denominational schools is occasionally raised and new ideas in providing school accommodation point to greater diversification in the future. Teachers are one group in these developments and their perceptions regarding the future are of importance.
DECLINE IN RELIGIOUS PRACTICE
Respondents were asked to state whether, in their view, religious practice among families attending their school had increased or declined. The results are set out below:

Table 11: **Perceived Increase/Decline in Religious Practice Among Families Attending School**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significantly declined</td>
<td>52.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remained the same</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significantly increased</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PRIMARY EDUCATION – CONTINUING TO BE DENOMINATIONAL?
In light of this perception what is the broad pattern in relation to future school choice? Respondents were asked whether they believed that the primary education system should continue to be mainly a denominational system. A small majority believe that it should continue to be so – however, over a third of respondents believe that it should not continue to be denominational.

Table 12: **Should the Primary Education System remain mainly Denominational?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents' Opinions</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary education should continue to be mainly denominational</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary education should not continue to be mainly denominational</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Opinion</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PARENTS’ RIGHT TO CHOOSE VARIOUS KINDS OF SCHOOL
Given this choice how might these preferences be realised? Respondents were asked whether they believed that parents ought to have the right to send their children to the specific school types as indicated in Table 13. The results show that the vast majority of teachers support the right of parents to choose a school that will have a religious ethos appropriate to their requirement.
Table 13: **Should Parents Have the Option of Sending their Children to Certain Kinds of School?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>% Yes</th>
<th>% No</th>
<th>% No Opinion</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-denominational</td>
<td>88.5</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-denominational</td>
<td>89.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denominational</td>
<td>89.2</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-denominational</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MULTI-DENOMINATIONAL OR NON-DENOMINATIONAL?**

Another means of measuring choice options was to restrict respondents' choices to whether they thought that all schools should be either multi-denominational (where children are taught about different religions) or non-denominational (where religion is not taught at all).

Table 14: **Should Schools be Multi-Denominational or Non-Denominational?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>% Yes</th>
<th>% No</th>
<th>% No Opinion</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multi-denominational</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-denominational</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>74.8</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only 11.2% believe that all schools should be non-denominational. This suggests that the majority of respondents to the survey believe that religious education should remain part of the primary school educational system, even though it may not be exclusively of one religion.

**Teacher Education**

The majority of teachers in Irish national schools have been trained in one of the colleges of education, all of which are under denominational management. The survey set out to ascertain respondents' views as they pertain to religious education.

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN TEACHER EDUCATION**

Respondents were asked to state their views about the role of religion in teacher education. More than half of respondents (57.4%) thought that it should be a separate, optional qualification – though 38.8% felt that it ought to be a compulsory part of the teaching qualification.
Respondents were also asked whether religious education qualifications ought to be:

- denominational – that is, specific only to one religion; or
- general.

The majority of respondents believed that, while a religious education qualification ought to be predominantly denominational, it also should include a range of general elements. This is shown in the table below:

### Table 15: Should Religious Qualifications be Predominantly Denominational or General?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Education Qualification</th>
<th>% Yes</th>
<th>% No</th>
<th>% No Opinion</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denominational base</td>
<td>65.4</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General base</td>
<td>86.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DENOMINATIONAL COLLEGES OF EDUCATION

Respondents were also asked whether they believed that colleges of education ought to continue to be denominational. Results were quite evenly spread, as shown in the table below:

### Table 16: Respondents’ opinion on whether Colleges of Education should continue to be denominational

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colleges should remain denominational</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleges should not remain denominational</td>
<td>46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No opinion</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions

A satisfactory questionnaire return, similar to INTO surveys in recent years, was received. The respondent profile matched the teaching body from which the sample was drawn with some deviation in the proportions from small towards larger schools than that in the national distribution of schools. It thus provides a strong basis for the data described and the conclusions drawn.

A wide range of views exists in relation to the teaching of religion. The purpose of religious education, as understood by respondents, varies widely, and there is no
consensus on it. Three dominant views represented the vast majority of teachers: passing on the teacher's religious convictions to children of the same religious background; passing on moral values which are based in, but not dependent on, religion; and, informing children of a set of facts, in a manner no different to the teaching of any other subject. A variety of opinions exist also about whether it is necessary to believe the religion one teaches.

These findings reflect the wider societal changes and changing religious culture. Almost nine in ten respondents perceived a decline in religious practice among families attending schools. This influences the levels of active support available to schools in religious education and formation as reported by teachers. The level of perceived active support was of concern to many respondents.

The vast majority of teachers teach religion willingly. Just over 10% have, would or would like the option of opting out of or prefer not to have to take religious education or instruction. The percentage that has actually opted out among respondents is just over one per cent. Comments were submitted by some of the respondents that highlight practical and pragmatic reasons for such a low number: the practicalities of teacher allocation or substitutes being arranged. A majority (60%) of respondents would support the right of colleagues to opt out of teaching religion.

A significant majority agreed that religious education should take place within school hours though a smaller majority thought it was necessary for the class teacher to take the classes. A similarly high percentage agreed with the [denominational] school's involvement in preparation for the sacraments. A minority reported that such preparation took up additional time.

The respective roles of family, school and parish emerged in various aspects of the survey. Various pressures and constraints characterise this relationship in the area of religious education and formation. The relationship differs in the denominational and multi-denominational sectors. In the latter there is no structural relationship with parishes. In the former several findings are of note. While schools agree to high levels of school involvement in preparation for the sacraments many respondents felt that families and parish should share this responsibility differently than that which pertains currently. This issue was evident in the school's responsibility for religious education and formation.

The ethos of the schools was reported in the forms of prayer, religious icons and pictures, following the respective religious education programme, clerical visits, religious services and assemblies and integration with other curricular areas. Most of these apply in the main to the denominational schools. The visits of clergy were a concern to many: their regularity and focus in particular. There are several pressures and constraints. Local clergy may play different roles in visits to school - as chair or board member, as chaplain or as support religious educator. These links may be constrained also by their other demands.
Teaching pupils about other religions was a development supported by a large majority of respondents with many identifying religious education as an appropriate time to do so while a minority pointed to the opportunities presented by the revised curriculum. Up to three-quarters of the denominational schools have at least a small number of non-subscribers to the faith of the school enrolled and a minority of them report such pupils representing over 10% of enrolment.

A small majority favoured retaining the current denominational system. Respondents' preference was for a multi-denominational choice over a non-denominational choice. A non-denominational choice was that of a small minority. Respondents also recognised the rights of parents regarding choice of school and ethos.

There was no clear consensus on the issue of whether colleges of education ought to remain denominational. Religious education should continue to be part of teacher education – though respondents differed on the basis: a separate, optional or a compulsory basis. A majority felt that the religious education programme available should, while remaining denominational, include a range of general religious education elements.

The absence of consensus of the findings and the variety of opinion and practice highlight the complexity of the current position. The results highlight the difficulty of the task of developing policy on religious education.
Chapter 3: Religion in Education and the Integrity of Teaching as a Practice: The Experience of Irish National Schools in Changing Times.
Dr Pádraig Hogan,
Education Department, NUI Maynooth.

Chapter 4: Rapporteur Reports

Chapter 5: Open Forum
Religion endeavours to address the deepest yearnings of the human heart. It seeks to bear witness to a fathomless abundance of all that is beyond the impressive scope of the sciences to explain. That nothing can be said with certainty in this field, or demonstrated beyond rational doubt, provides sufficient reason for many to rule out religion from the worthwhile concerns of human experience. For others, however, this very uncertainty has itself a pressing force; it is seen as a defining feature of what it means to be human. For the latter such people, the difference between matters of fact and matters of faith is an essential and inescapable one — not just a difference between things that have been proven and things that haven’t. But history is replete with instances of the beclouding of this very distinction, often indeed byinstitutionalised religion. The churches have more than occasionally identified faith with what has been decreed as indisputable by church authority, and haven’t lacked for formidable means of enforcement of what was thus decreed. They have also made available remarkable inheritances of learning which challenge, engage and even transform human experience in its responses to life’s most perennial questions.

So consciousness of the difference between what the sciences can explain about the ‘how’ of things, and what remains inexplicable and mysterious about the ‘why’, has endured. And what is significant in this difference has been treasured not only by people in religious ministry, but also by those in all walks of life — not least teachers — in whom the poetic and the spiritual evoke a deep response. Our own country provides a wealth of examples. Bryan MacMahon for instance, in his autobiographical
Teaching Religion in the Primary School

account of four-and-a-half decades as a primary teacher, draws attention to what is most mysterious in what is already capably explained by the natural sciences:

Naive as I am, it has always appeared to me that every religious text in use in every school class should obliquely — and poetically, if at all possible — stress or convey, even by implication, the knowledge of God as shown in his creation...

...The camera of the human eye; the everyday phenomena of conception and parturition; the cunning and delectable fashion in which man and woman mortise and tenon to form new human beings; the swing of the seasons; the layers of rock upreared into mountains — the mind falters and surrenders on the contemplation of space and its innumerable planets, each allotted its duty and station. Did all of these emerge from Nothing to be cherished and governed by No-One?6

These few opening remarks about the distinctiveness of the religious in human experience are all too brief. Yet they suggest something of a context for the questions I’d like to explore with you this morning. The issue of religion in our own primary school system has had more than a few vexed moments, including some in recent history, and it is with a brief historical review that I’d like to begin. The review should help us to appreciate the questionable nature and also enduring significance of some things that we might otherwise take for granted.

The Beginnings: “To unite in one system, children of different creeds”

When we think of the place of religion in the Irish primary school, two prominent features can be readily identified: firstly, the teaching of religion in the national schools and secondly, the influence of religious authorities in the control and management of schools. As the first is very much affected by the second, any exploration of the teaching of religion must be pursued in the context of the historical patterns of control and management of the schools.

The national school system was designed in 1831 as a mixed system, for reasons that still retain importance more than 170 year later. The instrument that established the system was a letter from the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Lord Stanley, to the Duke of Leinster, inviting the Duke to become Chairman of a Board of Commissioners for National Education. And Lord Stanley’s letter made it clear that the principle of mixed education was intended “to unite in one system children of different creeds”. In practice, this was to mean: (a) combined instruction for secular subjects; (b) separate religious instruction for each denomination. It was a system, moreover, from which was

to be banished, in the words of Lord Stanley, "even the suspicion of proselytism".7

By 1850 however, the system had become, de facto, a denominational one, though still remaining officially a mixed one. How did this come about? Well, it happened largely by default. The Presbyterian Church, most of whose members were resident in the northern counties, boycotted the system for some years. By 1840 however, the Presbyterians had secured sufficient concessions from the Board of Commissioners that they were prepared to join the system. The Church of Ireland, after some procrastination, and some largely unsuccessful efforts to influence the tenor of the curriculum and the contents of textbooks, eventually set up its own system in 1839, called The Church Education Society. This left just Catholics, for the most part, to draw upon the public funds, which were now available for setting up schools. The Catholic Church took an essentially pragmatic attitude to the new system up to 1850.8

During the second half of the 19th century the national school system became, step by step, a state-supported denominational system officially as well as in fact. The main reason for this was the success of the sustained campaigns engaged in by the different denominations – and especially by the Catholic Church after the Synod of Thurles in 1850. Dr Paul Cullen, Later Cardinal Cullen, was appointed Archbishop of Armagh in 1849 and of Dublin in 1852. He took control of events at the Synod of Thurles of 1850. He refused to accept his predecessor’s seat on the Board of Commissioners for National Education, and was an uncompromising opponent of mixed education. As the Catholic campaign for state-funded denominational schooling gathered momentum, its demands became more assertive. For instance, the following stance was developed by the Catholic hierarchy during the latter half of the 19th century and remained the hallmark of the Catholic Church’s outlook in the half-century after independence: “The only acceptable system of education for Catholics is one in which Catholic children are taught in Catholic schools, by Catholic teachers, under Catholic control.”9

The First Half-Century of Independence

After the transfer of power from a British to a native government in the early 1920s there followed many decades of pervasive ecclesiastical control of schooling; the high tide of the so-called ‘the managerial system’. This ecclesiastical control was paralleled

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9 This is an extract from a declaration by the Clerical Managers’ Association which was issued in 1921, at a key moment in modern Irish history. It was carried in The Times Educational Supplement of 29 October of that year.
Teaching Religion in the Primary School

by a largely authoritarian system of inspection. The teaching of religion during these decades was informed by a Tridentine theology that was resolutely exact in its doctrinal details and scarcely less exacting in its demands on teachers and pupils. In short, in the eyes of the official powers of church and state, the national school was seen primarily as an arm of ecclesiastical rule and as an instrument of state policy. Unfortunately, its integrity as an educational institution was honoured more often in the breach than in the observance. The twin authorities of clerical manager and departmental inspector cast long shadows over the lives of many teachers. Books such as Francis McManus’ Flow on Lovely River and John McGahern’s The Leavetaking remind us, with a chill, of how pervasive and severe the regime of control could actually be. They disclose how teachers who had to endure its more insistent strictures became crushed or defeated, or how teachers who did not found themselves teachers no longer. The portrayal of the school master in Brian Friel’s play Philadelphia Here I Come, and Tj O’Connell’s account of the Fanore (Co Clare) dismissal in his history of the INTO, A Hundred Years of Progress, furnish similar reminders. To the best of my knowledge we have no accounts written by or about the lives of female teachers. I have often wondered about this. I am sure that among Ireland’s female primary teachers during the period I’m talking about, there are countless remarkable stories that have never been told. Looking back from the 21st century, it is amazing, and somewhat disquieting, that this whole experience still remains shrouded in silence. I’d be happy to be found wrong in this; to hear of anything that has been written about Ireland’s female teachers in the first half-century of independence. Of course Bryan MacMahon’s book The Master, from which I’ve quoted earlier, provides some telling insights into experiences that were not confined to male teachers. MacMahon writes memorably of the rigidity of the faith that teachers were required to pass on, and about the patronising attitudes sometimes shown towards primary teachers by those whose ecclesiastical standing happened to give them powers that were greatly disproportionate to their functions as managers of schools. I’m glad to say however that The Master also recalls that not all such clergy were authoritarian, and that many inspiring things were still achieved by teachers, despite being more than occasionally bualte faoi chois.

The Gathering Pace of Change

The main reason the managerial system was modified in the 1970s was to allow representation to voices other than an ecclesiastical one. This reflected something of a democratisation of outlook in political and official quarters, and, from the Catholic Church’s standpoint, there was a necessity for some practical manifestation of the Second Vatican Council’s understanding of the Church as “all the people of God”. The further changes — this time of an enabling character — brought by the 1998 Education Act, were designed to reflect the fact that Ireland has become a pluralist society, if not
Religious education is quite a multi-cultural one. The Education Act is based on five principles: partnership, pluralism, equality, accountability, quality. With the possible exception of the last one, each of these principles has a special significance for our theme today, especially the contrast between these principles and some prominent features of the inherited system. It is also significant that, in contrast to the Educational Reform Act of 1988 in the UK, which made protest, ritual paper work, and ultimately compliance the lot of the teacher, Ireland’s Education Act a decade later was broadly welcomed by virtually all of the participating bodies in education. It was condemned outright by none.

Recent decades have also witnessed the rise of new forms of management. The most significant of these are the Patron companies of the Educate Together schools, where provision for religious education bears similarities to that envisaged by Lord Stanley at the inception of the national school system. A second important development is the more recent establishment in 1993 of Foras Patrúnachtra na Scoileanna LánGhaeilge, the patron body for Irish-language schools. A unique feature of this latter body is that it includes denominational, multi-denominational and inter-denominational schools under its auspices.

The changes in the managerial system have been more than matched by changes in the curricula of religious education. At least five strands can be identified here, indeed more if one were to include Northern Ireland:

- the ecumenical spirit of the Second Vatican Council and the move to new forms of religious education in schools under Catholic management: *Children of God, Alive O*;
- the introduction of the *Follow Me* series in schools under Protestant management;
- the specific rationale of the multi-denominational schools;
- the contrasting picture in inter-denominational schools;
- the emergence of new forms of denominational schooling (Jewish and Muslim).

Let us look for a few moments at what is really significant about the new programmes in religion that have been introduced in Catholic and in Protestant schools. The newer programmes envisage a very different kind of educational experience from what the traditional ones did. They give more recognition to the teacher as an educational figure, as distinct from a compliant instrument of ecclesiastical authority. They acknowledge the fact that schoolchildren, even where they are baptised, are often more accurately to be described as ‘multitudes’ than as ‘disciples’. In the light of all of this they see the crucial importance of imagination, story, song, festivity, in helping young people to discover something of their own spiritual sensibilities. It is as if a key insight of Christ’s own approach to teaching has finally been recognised. That insight is revealed in two of the New Testament Scriptures, and let us look at these now.
All these things Jesus spoke in parables to the multitudes; and without parables he did not speak to them (Matthew 13:34)

And with many such parables he spoke to them (the multitudes) the word, according as they were able to hear.

And without parable he did not speak unto them; but apart, he explained all things to his disciples (Mark 4:33-34)

I have emphasised a phrase that is virtually identical in both extracts. I’m sure most of us would have heard this phrase many times in church since we were children. But in my own case, it wasn’t until I read it in recent years with the eyes of a teacher, or until I heard it with the attuned ears of a teacher, that its radical significance struck me.

The striking point is that Christ as teacher seems to have deliberately declined to use a conventional teaching approach when dealing with ‘multitudes’: namely a heterogeneous audience as distinct from an audience of well-disposed and eager hearers. What does this mean for our own schools? Well, an outlook inspired by this kind of insight could hardly have failed to recognise that the children who have been, for generations, required to occupy the primary schools of Ireland are more accurately to be described as ‘multitudes’ rather than as ‘disciples’. By contrast, an outlook informed chiefly by the evangelical weight of the fact that the children were baptised members of one or other denomination, brings a different set of considerations to the fore: considerations where proprietorial designs on the children’s spiritual sensibilities have often been more focal than foreign. I’m calling attention here to a historic shift – from a custodial conception of Christianity which has been traditional in more countries than Ireland, to one of an unforced and festive fellowship. This shift seems to me to be the most striking feature of the new programmes for religion in schools under Catholic or Protestant management. That is not to suggest of course, as we will see shortly, that the teaching of religion is now without problems in such schools. It is also worth remarking before leaving this issue that it is questionable if the teacher whose teaching approach we have just touched on would be happy to leave the heart of his teachings under the control of a bureaucratically organised schooling system, whether ecclesiastical or other in character.

In the multi-denominational schools, or Educate Together schools, there is a different rationale for religious education. That rationale has been developed over many years of reflection and review, and I’ve tried to capture its essentials in the following extracts I have taken from a 1993 article by Áine Hyland. I have chosen this article – rather than something more recent from Educate Together’s publications – as its author succinctly highlights what were central issues during a key developmental stage of the Educate Together movement.
The religious education policy of Educate Together schools, Hyland explains, is two pronged:

(a) the board of management of each school offers a Religious Education Core Curriculum, which is taught by the full-time teachers; and

(b) the board of management of each school facilitates any group of parents that may wish to provide denominational instruction for their children. Qualified instructors may be appointed by such a group by agreement between the board of management and the parents concerned.

The development and implementation of a Religious Education Core Curriculum has been a challenging and often exciting process in which parents and teachers participate. A number of schools have produced written handbooks or guidelines on their Religious Education Core Curriculum and Educate Together, through its in-service courses, has provided an opportunity for teachers to share their expertise and experiences in this area. Educate Together has also produced written guidelines for teachers which can be useful as a starting point for new schools.

While conflict is not common when the schools get underway, it would be disingenuous to suggest that there are no issues which cause conflict.

Predictably, the question of religious education can become a focus for difference which, if not sorted out at an early stage, can escalate...

In such cases, Educate Together recommends that the question be brought out into the open and discussed at a meeting to which all parents are invited.

In spite of the discomfort a general meeting produces, it has been my experience that the airing and sharing of views and attitudes has been beneficial in the long-term for the development of the school involved. In every case to date, a satisfactory compromise has been reached. However, schools must be prepared to reconsider their arrangements from time to time as the external situation or the parents’ wishes change.¹⁰

The position in inter-denominational schools, as distinct from the multi-denominational schools of Educate Together, is very interesting. But it is less than fully clear. Gaelscoil Chill Mhantáin, established in 1996, has described itself as “Ireland’s first inter-denominational school.” Where the teaching of religion is concerned, the original rationale for Gaelscoil Chill Mhantáin envisaged that children of Catholic and Protestant denominations would be together for most of the time but would be separated for preparation for the Sacraments. The following passage is taken from that original rationale. I found it on the first website I encountered (of 1997 ancestry) when searching for Gaelscoil Chill Mhantáin during my researches.

The full Catholic religious education programme will be taught to Catholic children, and the full Protestant religious education programme will be taught to Protestant children. In recognition of the major similarities between both programmes, all children will, in the main, participate in religious education together, and special care will be taken to explain differences in belief and worship patterns of the represented denominations. In light of this integrated approach, it is expected that pupils will be separated only when preparing for the sacraments. In addition, the children will celebrate several festivals during the year including First Communion (Catholic), Harvest (Protestant), and Christmas/Easter which are common to both traditions.

As things turned out, however, Gaelscoil Chill Mhantáín discovered that parents, church authorities and teachers were happy to have the pupils together for all of their time in school: that it was not necessary to separate them for any part of the religion programme. In carrying out the research for this address, I spoke to a founder member of Gaelscoil Chill Mhantáín, who stated that the school felt very fortunate that things turned out for them as they did, and added that it was never intended that this spontaneous accommodation at local level in Wicklow should be seen as a model for other schools to follow.

Recent Acrimony

We are all aware, from the controversy that came to national prominence in Scoil Thulach na nÓg in Dunboyne during 2002, that the definition of 'inter-denominational' adopted by An Foras Pátrúnachta has given rise to some serious divergences in viewpoint. It is worth looking at that definition now, and examining also what An Foras has laid down concerning its implementation. The definition has three main features:

(1) The denominations concerned in the category ‘inter-denominational’ are the Christian denominations: Roman Catholic, Orthodox Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist.

(2) Inter-denominational schools are required to attend fully to the two main Christian traditions and to follow fully the syllabuses approved by the relevant bishops.

(3) As part of the religion programme, pupils are to be prepared for the sacraments that are pertinent to them.

An Foras included the further practical requirement that the entire religious programme in inter-denominational schools is to be taught within the hours of the official school day. In the absence of a voluntary agreement between the different denominations which happens to coincide with this combination of requirements, and which involves a highly developed sense of reciprocal trust and understanding, the combination in question is likely to give rise to serious acrimony. In practice, it means that members of religion A are to remain present (unless they are to be specially removed and placed under supervision elsewhere) while members of religion B are receiving instruction that is doctrinally specific to religion B and that may conflict with some doctrines of religion A. This is a less-than-coherent position on educational grounds, regardless of whether the school patron is an ecclesiastical or a secular body. From an educational viewpoint, as from one which clearly embraces the requirements of partnership, it is difficult to understand why An Foras decided to take the Gaelscoil Chill Mhantáin local arrangement and to adopt it as a ready-made model for another of its inter-denominational schools. The faulty rationale of An Foras in this instance brings about circumstances, albeit unwittingly, from which "even the suspicion of proselytism" has not been removed. The consequences of that faulty rationale also bring into sharp relief an issue on which dissatisfaction has been growing in Catholic primary schools in recent years: namely the question of preparation for the sacraments as an integral part of the religious education programmes in the schools.

**Current Concerns and Long-Term issues**

Arising from these reflections, there are four issues that I want to address briefly before concluding with some questions for discussion: (1) managerial authority and the requirements of partnership; (2) preparation for the sacraments; (3) religious education and the requirements of pluralism; (4) the significance of a Teaching Council for these matters. In relation to the first issue, the Dunboyne case reveals that even the more participatory forms of management required by the Education Act of 1998 can yet remain divisive. It has to be stressed that partnership is not just a fine-sounding word. It also carries crucial responsibilities: responsibilities for consultation, for listening to the standpoints of others, for seeking accommodations that are honourable but also practicable. These responsibilities might, of course, often be time-consuming, tiresome, or otherwise disagreeable. Unless they are taken seriously and exercised in a self-disciplined and self-critical way, however, talk of partnership is largely idle. Indeed

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12 For this account of the three features of the definition, and the additional practical requirement, I am indebted to Eamonn Ó Murchú, whom I interviewed during my researches.
worse than that: the principle of partnership is brought into disrepute. It may be, as some have argued, that the practical obligations of partnership are not yet fully appreciated by all parties. It may be that hard lessons will have to be learned from experience and from the accumulation of precedent. It is infinitely preferable, however, if partnership is embraced because of active conviction than because of compliance or compulsion.

In relation to the second issue, preparation for the sacraments as a part of religious education in schools, the Dunboyne case also makes clear the following: that we have the basis of a serious and ongoing difficulty where the patron body’s conception of the scope and conduct of the religion programme is, in key respects, incompatible with what teachers understand as defensible educational practice. The results of the INTO survey presented here this morning show that primary teachers, by and large, are happy to teach religion. It is also evident, however, from this morning’s presentations that increasing numbers of teachers are unhappy that preparation for the sacraments is included in the religious education programme, or unhappy about the disproportionate burden the teacher has to carry in such preparation. The argument that preparation for sacraments is primarily the responsibility of the home and the parish is a convincing one. To hold, by contrast, that the primary work here should be carried on by the school, makes sense only if the school is to be regarded primarily as an instrument of the parish where religious education is concerned. Though the assumptions that underlie this latter argument are deeply rooted in the history of our primary schools, they betoken, nonetheless, a violation of the integrity of the schools and an unwarranted presumption on the work that is proper to primary teachers. To put it briefly, there is a necessity now to acknowledge that the integrity of the teacher is different from that of the preacher.

The third issue concerns the place of religion in the country’s primary schools in the context of a pluralist society, and more specifically, of the ‘pluralism’ and ‘diversity of values’ requirements of the 1998 Education Act. Some would argue that religion has no place in an education system that is almost wholly sustained by public funds. Such a view, I’d suggest, is as problematic as the traditional ones it is usually pitted against. Religious traditions and religious inheritances of learning have been such central features of Irish cultural inheritance, that to remove them from schools would be to attempt an act of cultural obliteration: the kind of action associated with some of the one-party totalitarian states of not so long ago. I think that explorations of religious traditions, and not just the main Christian ones, have something of inestimable value to offer to education. But much thoughtful work needs to be done on how religious traditions are to be experienced and engaged with in our schools in the future. And the criteria for guiding such thinking will have to be defensible educational criteria, as distinct from evangelical assumptions that have been inherited from the past and regarded as things that can somehow still be taken for granted.
I now turn to the fourth and final issue: the significance of a statutory regulatory body for the profession (i.e. a Teaching Council) for the issues we have been considering. I drew a distinction just now between traditional evangelical assumptions on the one hand and criteria that are defensible on educational grounds on the other. It is this distinction that calls our attention explicitly to the difference between the work of the preacher and that of the teacher. Failure to recognise this distinction can place individual teachers in an invidious position and can have unhappy consequences for schools. The necessary work on clarifying this distinction, including its myriad practical implications, is work that can profitably and authoritatively be carried out by a statutory regulatory body for the teaching profession.

I'm not suggesting here that all links between parish and school should be severed. Indeed there's everything to be said for active forms of co-operation, provided that it is co-operation as distinct from coercion, whether overt or subtle. Links from parish to school are things that might be sought, not assumed. In seeking co-operation, one has to be explicit about one's reasons for seeking it, while recognising that the person one is seeking it from may be entitled to withhold it, or in some respects to withhold it (e.g. call attention to overlooked tasks that parties other than teachers might be asked to face up to.) Again, the soon-to-be-established Teaching Council has a crucial part to play in identifying and elaborating the kind of educational criteria I briefly referred to just now. Its responsibilities, let us remind ourselves, include advancing the standing of teaching as a profession and drawing up a code of practice for teaching. The Council also has a considerable range of powers: powers that hitherto resided largely in other hands. It remains to be seen how the Council responds to the challenges and opportunities that lie before it. From a teacher's perspective, and from a historical perspective, I believe there are some good reasons to be hopeful.

Let me conclude now with some questions for discussion that arise from the issues we have been exploring.

1. Should the issue of religion in education be linked at all with the issue of the control of schooling? If it should, then on what kinds of grounds? If not, on what kinds of grounds?
2. Should religion be introduced in a school classroom on the same kinds of assumptions as it might be introduced in a church? If so, why? If not, why not?
3. Should Ireland's primary teachers now enjoy a conscience clause as a matter of right where the teaching of religion is concerned? If so, on what grounds would this right be based? If not, what grounds are there for declining to grant such a right?
4. What kinds of arguments are there (a) for including and (b) for excluding preparation for sacraments from the religious education that is the responsibility of primary teachers?
5. Given the history of the link between the teaching of religion in the national schools and the powers of the managerial bodies, should the Teaching Council have a role to play in how this link is defined in the future? If so, what should that role be? If not, why not?

6. If one were to produce an educational rationale for including religion in the primary school curriculum, what would the essentials of such a rationale be?

7. Looking to the decades that lie ahead, suppose a view were to arise in a school community that a change of status should be sought – e.g. from a school under religious management to a school under multi-denominational management, or vice versa. How might such a view be aired, formally presented as a proposal, and duly processed?

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Delegates at the Consultative Conference on Education were allocated to discussion groups and given questions to consider, discuss and debate. Each group was facilitated by a member of the INTO Education or Equality Committee and rapporteurs recorded the discussion. As each group commenced with a different question, not all questions were discussed in every group. The following is a collated report of the views expressed in each group in relation to each of the questions (outlined in bold) posed for discussion.

Question 1: **What is the purpose of teaching religion in the primary school?**

Only one group discussed this question. This group felt that there were several reasons for teaching religion. These included:
- to support the ethos of the school;
- to pass on the faith;
- to pass on values;
- to prepare children for the sacraments.

While there was general agreement that teachers were happy to teach religion in general and the **Alive-O Programme** in particular, teachers felt that preparation of pupils for the sacraments should be of a supportive nature, rather than a leading one. While accepting that teachers had taken on this role, they now felt that they were the only ones taking responsibility and that it was timely to open up this question. The group felt that there was a difference between spiritual development, which they saw as the school’s role in teaching religion, and teaching a particular faith.
Question 2: Should teachers enjoy a conscience clause as a matter of right where the teaching of religion is concerned?

- If so, on what grounds might it be based?
- If not, what grounds are there for declining to grant such a right?
- What would be the implications for the system?

Four groups discussed this question. The first group noted that this clause was in existence already by agreement. Teachers in non-Catholic schools in another group reported that they were much clearer in their own minds where they stood on this issue as a result of their experience in such schools. It was interesting also that three young teachers stated that they were quite happy to teach religion in compliance with the current programme. However, the general consensus was that religion should be a matter of private conscience and that the rights of teachers should be respected. In this group all were willing to teach a programme within a broad-based ethics framework that would open children's minds and would help them to understand and tolerate the beliefs of others.

The sentiment expressed in the third group was that a core religion programme, which reflected the spirit or ethos of the school, would not cause the teachers the same difficulty and that doctrine as such should be taught outside the school setting. This group reported their discussion as 'a heated debate'. There wasn't a clear consensus recorded for the fourth group.

COMMENTARY ACROSS THE FOUR GROUPS

A distinction was made between the teaching of religion and passing on the faith. It was felt that while teachers should be teaching religion, they had come to assume a duty of passing on the faith. Participants felt that this was implicit in applying for and taking up a post in a denominational school. In a society where sacraments were increasingly seen as rites of passage, the groups felt that many teachers had become disillusioned with teaching religion often as a result of being left to carry the faith aspects alone. It was mentioned that teachers often felt hypocritical by dealing with faith elements of a programme with which they did not necessarily agree. Participants regularly mentioned the need for more support for teachers from the local faith community—particularly in relation to preparation for the sacraments. It was felt that First Holy Communion had developed into a show with children, teachers and school on display. It was proposed that Confirmation might be more appropriate at second level. Some teachers reported a supportive role by the clergy, others not. Many felt that the current situation was unsustainable and that teachers who no longer believed find themselves in an invidious situation. Consequently, teachers should have a right to opt out of the teaching of religion as the programme is now structured.
There was lack of clarity on teaching of religion being part of teachers' contract and the resulting fears that exercising the right to opt out would affect the right to employment. There was also a fear that there could be discrimination against teachers who opted out. It was suggested that schools be facilitated in enabling an opt-out clause through more involvement by the clergy. It was highlighted that candidates at interview should be prepared to answer questions regarding a willingness to teach religion. Other questions raised which indicated a lack of clarity included: has the BOM or the churches/patrons ultimate responsibility for religious education? What exactly was teaching religion? Should a state system of education be a denominational one? And was this current situation what parents wanted?

The patron system was felt to be all-powerful and there was agreement that until the level of power currently vested in the patron bodies was reduced, various problems regarding teaching religious education would continue and probably become more widespread. A member of one group who had experienced difficulties with a patron body articulated the importance of change in the structures. Another delegate who was also a human rights lawyer felt that the way forward was the use of human rights law and informed the group that the issue was under review in international human rights circles.

CONCLUSION
It is evident from the strong views expressed by participants that debate on the teaching of religion, as currently experienced in schools, is about to become a major issue. Many of the participants reported no longer being practising Catholics and felt that it was hypocritical of them to teach and promote doctrines with which they no longer agreed. However, the results of the survey reported at the conference indicated that 80% of teachers agree that religion should be taught in schools and 66% agree that the sacraments should be taught in schools. Further study is needed to determine more accurately the views of all members.

Question 3: Where teachers are teaching the religious programme of a particular faith, is it necessary for the teacher to be a believer of that faith?

Two groups discussed this question. One group was split almost 50/50 between those who believed that it was necessary to be a believer and those who did not. The other reported that it was extremely difficult to teach something one didn't believe in. In the general discussion this group felt that non-believers could teach the facts of religion particularly where religious education programmes are very general. It is feasible to teach civilising beliefs without attributing them to any particular denomination. One group referred to 'empathy teaching' which doesn't endorse any one denomination.
However, the crisis arises for teachers in the preparation for the sacraments and doctrinal issues which teachers often questioned on educational grounds (e.g. whether a child of eight can understand the 'body and blood of Christ'). Both groups felt that preparation for sacraments should happen outside of school. One case reported a parish priest coming in for sacrament preparation; in another there was parental involvement. This theme, that the preparation of children for the sacraments should be taken out of schools and organised by the clergy of particular denominations, was raised in other groups as well.

**Question 4:** What kind of arguments are there for excluding preparation for sacraments from the religious education that is the responsibility of teachers?

This question was discussed by three groups. There were four themes running through all three group discussions:

(a) parent apathy;
(b) commercialisation of sacraments;
(c) increased role of clergy in teaching religion;
(d) problems with multi-cultural society.

**Parent Apathy**

There was a large problem emerging now that fewer parents taught or practiced the faith, in that sacramental preparation, therefore, fell to teachers who increasingly worked in isolation. The view was expressed that teachers were not evangelists and should not be put in this role. It was the view of some teachers that it is the responsibility of the parents to pass on the faith and that teachers have a small contribution to make when compared with parents' responsibilities.

**Commercialisation of Sacraments**

First Communion and Confirmation Days have turned into large performances. Religion is not considered like other curriculum subjects. The time factor is important in that much time is spent preparing for the sacraments. Whereas this is within teachers' own control, many might be 'hung up' on the grand drama especially in First Holy Communion where they are putting themselves under pressure stage managing this 'big show'. Materialism is considered a most unsavoury part of sacramental preparation and teachers believe the hype should be removed from First Holy Communion. One example given was that children could be prepared for sacraments in school and parents could bring their children frequently to mass. Children could then receive First Holy Communion during the month of May at any Saturday/Sunday Mass of their
parents' choice. It was also suggested that Confirmation should take place at a later age, i.e. late adolescence.

ROLE OF CLERGY

Delegates had different experiences. Where priests were present and supportive it was wonderful, however, this was not the general experience. Many delegates felt that priests were simply not doing their job in relation to sacramental preparation as they often didn't come near the schools. Delegates also stated that the bishop had no involvement in the preparation for Confirmation, and that he only arrived on the day, did his job and moved on. The question was raised whether priests should be trained to teach religion. Protestant clergy were trained for such a role and seemed much more involved. There was a view that religion might benefit, in fact, by been taken out of the school and pressure put back on parents who genuinely want their children raised in the faith.

PROBLEMS WITH MULTI-CULTURAL SOCIETY

Large numbers of both teachers and pupils may not be practising their faith. In addition, there are significant numbers of children in classes who are non-Catholic or who belong to other religions. All of these factors raised questions for delegates.

(i) If non-Catholics are in class do teachers have a duty to pass on the knowledge of their religion to them? Children of other religions or their parents have chosen to send them to a Catholic school perhaps because there was no school for their religious persuasion. A caring teacher would try to inform him/herself about the religion of the child in order to cross the religious divide. Respect for children of other religions was considered essential and knowledge of other religions would be a great help.

(ii) What is the educational rationale of teaching religion in school? In a school with a Catholic ethos there are reasons for teachers to teach doctrinal aspects of the Catholic Church, likewise in a school with a Church of Ireland ethos. Others disagreed with this view and held the view that the Catholic ethos does not preclude the teaching of other religions in their schools.

(iii) Should religion be taught as a subject only with the faith dimension left to parents and the church? Some participants felt that there would be a difficulty here with the ethos of a school particularly under recent legislation (Employment Equality Act 1998).

(iv) Schools were reflecting the dilemma of society but couldn't be left picking up all the pieces. Teaching Catholicism as the one and only faith could be deemed offensive. Schools were not set up to be divisive but because of religious segregation might, in fact, become divisive.
Question 5: What is the educational rationale for the teaching of religion in primary school?

Two groups discussed this question directly. Several other groups, in their discussions, referred to this issue also. In the first group a range of rationales were proposed. One related to the purpose of religious education being related to developing the values of respect for others and moral responsibility based on humanitarian and civic ideals. This approach would also emphasise sharing and neighbourliness. The religion programme's themes of *Myself and Others, Myself and the World* related these values to the child's life, family and community, and integrated with the values underpinning the revised curriculum. Another viewpoint expressed was based on teachers' commitment to teaching the faith - a view which saw among the purposes of teaching religion that of equipping children to make a faith journey and the children's spiritual development. This approach would also facilitate an acknowledgement of the faiths of others. For some children the school is the only point of contact with religion. The structured programme facilitated this. All voices in this debate recommended regular involvement of clergy and their familiarity with the *Alive O* programme. It was also recommended that the Church should commit itself to having a regular school chaplaincy and that in the event of there not being enough priests, to recruit or involve lay chaplains. In the context of this wide debate an opt-out clause for teachers was discussed.

In the second group the general feeling was that religious education should be part of the school curriculum. The group agreed that such a programme should be based on moral and spiritual grounds thus accommodating the holistic development of the child and providing a spiritual context for the development of all children. The group felt that denominational education was not necessary for the development of a child's morality or spirituality and felt that a religion programme should be broad enough to cater for children from various religious/cultural backgrounds. It was strongly felt that a teacher could educate children in a moral sense without teaching doctrine. Many delegates felt that the wider community and the church as a body should take responsibility for the teaching of doctrine to children and for the preparation of children for the sacraments of First Confession, First Communion and Confirmation.

Question 6: How best can the primary school cater for the increasing cultural and religious diversity within Irish society?

- Should the school system reflect diversity through offering a choice of school to parents or should each school reflect the diversity within its own community?
- What are the implications for the system?
- For each school in the system?
Three groups discussed this question. In relation to reflecting and catering for religious and cultural diversity in the primary school delegates from the first group acknowledged the principle of equality of access and provision of education for all. However, it was felt that in practical terms a teacher or a school might not be able, in all cases, to cater for the doctrinal needs of all the children in school. It was held that all the churches should take responsibility for the provision of doctrine for their own members.

In the second group, there was general agreement that schools should try to integrate all the children in a community in the school. It was felt that this would be best served by having a core religion curriculum for all and that the catechetical needs of each Church be served by the wider Church community. The example of public sector (controlled) schools in Northern Ireland was quoted as a model where there was a core Christian programme taught in schools and the sacraments, for example, were prepared for outside school. In these schools, however, some children who were not of Christian faiths had to opt out. In the third group there was support for the view that all children should be taught together.

One of the groups addressed the issue of choice of schools. They agreed that groups within a community should continue to have the right to set up their own schools, i.e. denominational or multi-denominational schools. However, there was no agreement on how this right might be catered for in terms of resources in the system. The group felt that it was impossible in rural areas to have every type of school. The question of changing the ethos of a school at the request of a community was raised. Several difficulties with this procedure were identified. The first was that school communities were not just made up of the parents whose children attend the school at any one time, but the wider community who might send children in the future. It was also pointed out that there seemed to be little will above parish level to address this kind of change and that according to advice received by Educate Together the patron, and not the democratic school community, had the final say. It was also observed that the role of the patron had been copper fastened in the Education Act. This raised, for some participants, the issue of separation of church from state in relation to the control of schooling and appointment of teachers.

Other obstacles to achieving diversity were the specific contexts of schools. In rural areas in particular the Church may impinge on many aspects of life through for example, the parish hall and the social activities of a community. In Northern Ireland also, Catholic schools appeared to have a specific responsibility to promote a Catholic ethos.
(a) Explore the separation of teaching doctrine and preparing for various sacraments from religious and moral education;
(b) Outline or define the role and responsibility of the community, parish and parents for teaching of religion and doctrine.

Question 7: **Is the position regarding children whose parents do not wish them to be present for religious instruction satisfactory? What changes would you recommend?**

This topic was discussed by three groups. The groups first concentrated on the specifics of what was present practice in their own schools and then on recommended changes. In one group the supervision of children who wanted to withdraw led to a heated debate. There was no consensus as to what teachers (or schools) should do with children of a different faith during the religion class.

Most non-Catholic children stay in the classroom whilst instruction takes place and this was seen to pose the following difficulties:
- it was very unsatisfactory for the child;
- it posed difficulties for a teacher to accommodate such a child;
- the parents may not have access to any other type of school and this causes frustration for them;
- if 'excluded' who takes on the responsibility for supervision?
- there may exist the physical problems of accommodation.

It was recommended that the enrolment policy clearly state the ethos of the school and that parents be made aware of this ethos from the start to avoid difficulties arising down the line.

Changes in the time-tabling of religious instruction, i.e. having it first thing in the morning was suggested to allow non-participating children come into school as this class finishes. The need for clear guidelines was mentioned by each of the groups. It was recommended that Confirmation should happen at secondary level where children could understand more. In Northern Ireland and in the integrated schools there is specific provision for work relating to the child's own faith.

In one group there was reference to the *Mission Alive* theme undertaken in one school. Each family made a display about their country, national dress, used words in each of the 5/6 languages represented in the classes – celebrating the differences.
Question 8: Should the issue of religion in education be linked at all with the issue of the control of schooling.

- If yes, on what grounds?
- If not, on what grounds?

Three groups discussed this question. One group teased out issues of definition and the manifestations of control of schools. It is often when a crisis occurred or when a policy difference arose that teachers appreciated control, power and responsibility. One example was discussed at length related to enrolment policy of some denominational schools.

An exploration of the contra arguments to the question posed included such issues as the outdatedness of the model of denominational schools which may have been appropriate for the more homogeneous society of the recent past but was possibly outmoded for an increasingly diverse population. The difficulty in according rights to all children, the increasingly secular outlook among parents and children attending denominational schools and teachers' own commitment to the faith of the denominational school in which they taught.

The arguments in favour of Church control were also explored. It was stated that the control of education promoted the practice of religion among children who might otherwise not experience this systematic opportunity and that many people wanted their children educated in a denominational system. This group agreed that the wider community should have the ultimate say in the control of a school, but wondered about monitoring an ethos that might, at some stage, incorporate values not generally accepted in Ireland.

In the second group there was a general feeling that with an increasing number of non-Catholic children entering the system teachers were responding to unfolding issues instead of being ahead of them. A second theme was that Catholic schools were tentative about upholding their ethos for fear of being seen as racist.

There appeared to be a divergence of views within the third group although the support of local clergy was identified as important. Teachers need the support of boards of management and the Department of Education and Science for guidance as well as extra funding if pupils of different faiths are to be accommodated outside the classroom during religious instruction. Also discussed was the function of religious formation when there were significant numbers of families and children who were nominally Catholic. The presence of various groups in a class, from nominal, to committed and in a significant number of cases children of other faiths, presented a different context for religious formation than in previous decades. This led to difficulties, given this range, in preparation for the sacraments and maintenance of a Catholic ethos in schools.
The final session of the conference was a plenary session at which delegates were given an opportunity to ask questions of the panel comprising:

John Carr, General Secretary, INTO.
Archdeacon EJ Swann, Church of Ireland Board of Education.
Fr Donal Kilduff, National Association of Primary Diocesan Advisors (NAPDA).
Paul Rowe, Educate Together.
Patricia Kieran, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.
Pádraig Hogan, NUI, Maynooth.

The following includes an edited transcript of some of the main questions and responses. At the conference a number of questions were taken together before offering the panel contributors an opportunity to respond.

QUESTION: ENDA FLYNN
It arose towards the end of our discussion group that we found it easy to handle a situation where a parent maybe of a different religion and was happy to have their child sitting in the class reading a book and coming along to the sacraments even if they weren’t actually receiving them. But it was difficult to think what systems we could put in place to cater for parents who did not want their child there during the religious instruction.

QUESTION: LUCY KEAVENY, DUBLIN NORTH WEST
I am a teacher in the multi-denominational sector. During the dispute in Dunboyne the media referred to non-denominational, denominational, inter-denominational, multi-denominational. I think the speaker this morning at one stage re Educate Together mentioned inter-denominational. There is a massive confusion even amongst teachers here on the differences between the different denominations and I think each group could explain the differences. And I want to clarify that I don’t think that there is any non-denominational school.
QUESTION: ROSENA JORDAN, DISTRICT 5
What is the INTO view on the establishment of inter-denominational schools?

QUESTION: WILLIE MORAN, DISTRICT 11
If a local community wanted to change the status of their school, what would be the position of the churches with regards to the easy change over to the wishes of the community?

ANSWER: JOHN CARR, GENERAL SECRETARY, INTO
The understanding that it would be good to have children of different religious backgrounds educated together in the same school is praiseworthy provided we have clear definitions regarding the type of school which could deliver an agreed programme. Unfortunately, in the Dunboyne situation there were a number of issues that were not clear. The patron body decided to impose its will on the school and, as a result, it has divided a school community and demoralised a dedicated and committed teaching team. The patron body ignored the aspirations of the majority of the school community, imposed their unilateral view, ignored the educational consequences of their action and in the process sacked a dedicated, concerned and top class teacher. In my view, they have shown a marked inability to listen to the views of others. This is a group that took a decision - not because it was right or just - but because it had the power to do so. But power without justice and fairness in my view, is tyranny. I want to dispute the idea that bringing children together for religious education constitutes any form of inter-denominational education. Warm and no doubt well-intentioned feelings cannot take the place of clearly defined policy and practice. In fact, without a sound rationale and agreed practices, it might be even seen as a sinister development.

May I state, however, that we are in favour of inter-denominational schools. We support any group of people/parents who wish to establish a school. The INTO does not enter into the debate on the issue of control. Our job is to teach, not to control schools. We do, however, demand a say in the running of schools through our participation on boards of management. The issue for us to determine then is how a teacher in an interdenominational school can teach as truth, doctrine which is accepted as truth by only one religious denomination. Padraig Hogan talked about the integrity of the teacher. Sound educational theory and practical implementation procedures are needed when teaching contradictory beliefs to two sets of children with similar, but not identical, religious faiths. We have always been led to believe in a Catholic context that not alone is it about religious education but it is about religious formation. How can an individual teacher be responsible for the religious formation of two different sets of truth? Some of my colleagues here may dispute this, but what we are seeking is a forum whereby people like we have on the panel today can address the questions openly and honestly. Using vague ideas like bringing children together is, in my view,
not sufficient and the only way to resolve the present conflict is to establish a convention or equivalent forum where all points of view can be reconciled. This process should have happened before the establishment of the school in Dunboyne. The churches have responsibilities in relation to religious matters. They should have produced an agreed programme that was capable of being taught. We have a programme in Roman Catholic schools. We have a programme in Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, and Methodist schools. But we don't have a programme for interdenominational schools. The integrity of the teacher is challenged by the fact that the teacher is responsible in an inter-denominational context for the religious formation of two different sets of children who have different viewpoints and we have to find a solution to the current dilemma. I will now hand that issue to the panel to see if the panel believe that there is a way around resolving this issue. Our job is to teach – give us a programme and we will teach it effectively.

**ANSWER:** PATRICIA KIERAN, MARY IMMACULATE COLLEGE, LIMERICK

I am hesitant to speak about the Dunboyne situation because it is such a complex and difficult situation and my knowledge of the situation is based largely on what I have read through the newspapers. I think that one way of solving the issue would be to negotiate a programme common to both denominations and to teach that agreed programme in the school. However, this would only partially resolve the crisis as the whole issue transcends the provision of a joint programme. At the heart of the Dunboyne situation lies the issue of the school-based sacramental preparation of one group of children from one denomination in an inter-denominational context. If sacramental preparation were removed from the school and became parish based it may well go a long way to resolving the issue.

**ANSWER:** ARCHDEACON EJ SWANN, CHURCH OF IRELAND

I would see the same problem. There would be no difficulty at all finding a shared programme. Indeed, as you know the new Church of Ireland syllabus follows very much of the *Alive-O* syllabus but the difference does lie in the teaching for sacraments and so forth. I have always been of the viewpoint that the place for the teaching of the sacraments is within the faith community. It is not for me to tell another denomination how to do it. Until this is sorted out, I cannot see a school of the type like Dunboyne operating efficiently in this sense.

**ANSWER:** PAUL ROWE, EDUCATE TOGETHER

I think we are very nervous about some of these definitions. The most important thing is to start from the rights of the children involved in the school and the obvious social advantage of inclusiveness of all the children from whatever religious/cultural background within the school. As Pádraig Hogan explained earlier, the national school
system was originally an inter-denominational school system where you had very
dear stable defined religious communities in existence. There may well be a case for
an inter-denominational model where there are stable, clearly defined religious
communities. But whether or not that model is the appropriate model for the delivery
of State education in a society which is rapidly diversifying and in which young people
are not prepared to have their identities defined in the ways in which they were before,
is very much the issue I want to question.

**ANSWER:** DONAL KILDUFF, NAPDA

I am not familiar with all the implications of the Dunboyne situation but as a Diocesan
Advisor and as a member of the National Association, I would see, and we would all
see, our roles as supporting, advising and offering any assistance we can to the teachers.

**ANSWER:** PÁDRAIG HOGAN, NUI MAYNOOTH

May I begin with an apology to Lucy Keaveney for a slip of the tongue on my part,
twice, this morning. Twice I said 'inter-denominational' when I meant 'multi-denom­
inational.' The multi-denominational/Educate Together movement have done a great
amount of work in the last few decades, not least in making explicit what is properly
involved in a multi-denominational school. I think their position is a coherent one. I
don't think that is fully the case in the inter-denominational schools. If it were, it's diffi­
cult to see how the Dunboyne controversy would have arisen. There is more work to
be done to make the inter-denominational position fully coherent. For instance, the
question of sacramental preparation has to be addressed in a way that makes the
approach that is adopted consistent with defensible educational practice. Here I'm
going to assume, for the sake of example, the standpoint of a teacher who is mindful
of the requirements of defensible educational practice. If I were asked to teach the
Alive-O programme, I can't see that I'd have any reasonable objection. If I were asked
to prepare a child for the sacraments as a normal part of my teaching work however, I
believe I would have serious reservations. I would feel compromised as a teacher.
Perhaps if there was a sympathetic understanding of my position and if I received help
and support, I might do it, but I'd still feel that the expectation that I should do it
belongs to something that has lingered with us from the past, but that needs to be crit­
ically looked at now.

That is why I see a particular significance in the advent of the Teaching Council,
which I mentioned this morning, and in John Carr's points about a Convention on
Teaching. Among the issues that need to be authoritatively clarified by such bodies is
the distinction between the work that is proper to a person in religious ministry and
the work that is proper to a primary teacher. Each kind of work has an integrity of its
own, but each is different from the other. In many of the Catholic schools there is a de
facto acceptance that teachers won't be asked to do what they don't feel right about—not in all schools, I can see from some reactions from the floor. But that just adds to my point that the issues I listed this morning need to be urgently tackled. I say this as somebody who is not at all opposed to religion in education. But the manner in which religion is experienced in school will have to be different in the future from what it has too often been in our history. A school is primarily a place of learning and enquiry. A church is primarily a place of worship by the faithful of one or other religion.

ANSWER: JOHN CARR, GENERAL SECRETARY

I think there is a dilemma here. While we have denominational schools and multi-denominational schools in certain cities and towns—the vast majority of our schools are small denominational schools located throughout the country. They can't make alternative provision for children of those parents who don't want their children taught religion in the classroom situation. The teacher finds ways and means of accommodating the children concerned—for example the child reading a book—while the teacher teaches the lesson. But in many small schools this cannot be done and I believe that the day is fast approaching when the Churches will have to have a look again at the issue of control—as Pádraig was speaking about this morning—controlling the ethos within the school. There will have to be provision whereby children who do not want to be taught a particular faith are accommodated irrespective of the size of school. That brings us then to the question of whether or not you can teach or be responsible for the religious formation of two groups of children in an inter-denominational context. It is my view that you cannot. Patricia wrote about this in a recent article in *Doctrine and Life.* The theologians are grappling with this situation and they have not yet reached convergence in relation to sacramental instruction.

ANSWER: PATRICIA KIERAN, MARY IMMACULATE COLLEGE

The Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland do not have an identical theology of the Eucharist even though there are many areas of commonality in both traditions. With regard to the Dunboyne situation I do think it is very difficult to expect one teacher to simultaneously lead two different groups of children, from two different faith traditions, to maturity of faith in both of those traditions in the one classroom. Moreover, the teacher is charged with acknowledging the different nuances and understandings of that faith within those traditions. This is a very difficult thing for any teacher to do.

13 Kieran P.(2202). Children, the Eucharist and Interdenominational Schools in *Doctrine and Life*
ANSWER: JOHN CARR, GENERAL SECRETARY

In our policy statement in the early 1990s, prepared by the Education Committee, we advocated a movement towards religious education in primary schools rather than religious instruction and formation. If we had a religious education programme we could teach children about different faiths and beliefs. I believe that day will come. I believe the Churches will have to move eventually from their reliance on a religious formation programme to a religion education programme. If that happens, then I believe we can accommodate all faiths within a school situation. As pointed out in our survey, parents are not now practising to the same extent as they did previously. Priests/clergy are not coming in to schools as often either as they used to, to support children. Here you have a situation where a church is demanding that a certain ethos be promoted within the school while the church personnel are not prepared or not capable in some cases of supporting the teachers or pupils. Neither are many parents prepared to support teachers. Why then are teachers the only group left in this society promoting a religious ethos in schools? This debate will have to develop in our society. The church must waken up to its responsibility. Parents must articulate their responsibilities. Our survey has shown that there is strong support among teachers for the teaching of religion in schools. If we are to nurture that goodwill then there will have to be support given by the Churches and by parents on this issue.

ANSWER: DONAL KILDUFF, NAPDA

I don't think anyone is disagreeing that teachers feel that they are out on their own, that they are carrying this responsibility on their own and that they are not getting enough support from parents and the clergy. It is my experience – and I can only go from my experience – that teachers are very respectful of the children and especially in a situation where children might be of a different faith from the rest of the children in the school. I think that teachers feel hamstrung by the insurance issue. What can you do? I also had that experience as a teacher. How do you supervise or provide for a child whose parents do not want them there – the teacher has not yet mastered the ability to bi-locate!

ANSWER: ARCHDEACON EJ SWANN, CHURCH OF IRELAND

I think we all face this problem in all our schools. There are more and more pupils who aren't necessarily mainstream Christian. They are from other groups in society or of other world faiths and so forth. The traditional way of dealing with this situation was that the children sat at the back of the class. We had Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons in our school. They either sat at the back of the class or else didn't turn up. They certainly didn't turn up till after the assembly in the morning and then they would sit at the back of the class and not participate. But there is the problem that some of the parents object strongly to their being in the room. The difficulty that we are all facing
at the moment – and I think INTO members will know this – we are facing a shortage of space in our schools. We have special needs assistants and others in the school and to find a spot in the school where you can actually place somebody is almost impossible. At the end of the day I am not sure that this is something that individual schools can solve. I think it needs something from higher up – if we are going to cope with these children we are going to need help from the Department of Education and Science, for supervision of them. It is a very difficult one. It happens in secondary schools as well. The same problems occur, small groups of children that have to be accommodated separately. I think it is something that schools themselves are finding it very hard to cope with. There is just not the room or the staff at the moment. The best way we can deal with it is for the children to be still within the class, at the back, unless parents deliberately withdraw them and are responsible for them.

ANSWER: PAUL ROWE, EDUCATE TOGETHER

I think it is a much bigger problem than has been perceived. As we have such a monopoly of provision in the country as a whole, the reality is that every September there are thousands of families who are faced with the dilemma as to whether they should make an issue of their religious identity or their religious views and impose them on their children. Whether they are prepared to make an issue in the school and ask for their child to be absent from religious education or religious instruction, seems to me to be an absolutely unacceptable position for us as a society in which to put families and children.

The fact is that in 99% of all national schools we are dealing with institutions which are legally obliged under the Education Act to uphold a particular religious ethos – 93% Roman Catholic, 6% Church of Ireland. And yet our society is developing. Increasing numbers of families are going to be put in that position. I would feel emphatically that it is unacceptable to separate or segregate children as a result of their family identities. In their experience in a school, children learn far more from us by what we do than what we say. If we talk about inclusion and a constitution with rights, then it must mean something to a four year old going to school. It must mean that they should not have to sit at the back of the class, isolated and left liable to exclusion, ostracised or even bullying on the way to and from school. All because the State is not prepared to provide a minimal structure of education, which it is legally obliged to – to respect all the identities of all our children. The real problem is the onus on the State to provide. I think it is quite unfair, for example, to put the onus on the religious institutions who have been providing support services in schools for many years while the State quite happily absolves itself of its responsibility. I think it is a very important point that the dilemma that is being expressed in the discussion group that I was involved in is presented back to the State as an issue and not necessarily back to the religious institutions themselves.
On the question of the possibility of change of patronage, I would like to state that it is solely with the agreement of the patrons whether the status/ethos of a school can change. Two of the Educate Together schools have managed to do this. The Ranelagh multi-denominational school was originally a Church of Ireland school called St Columba’s school and St Mary’s Church of Ireland school in Ardee transferred into an Educate Together school this September. But it was only as a result of the goodwill agreement between the patron body of the school concerned that the transformation took place. I am afraid that the Education Act is absolutely clear on this, there is no democracy involved whatsoever.

**ANSWER: PADRAIG HOGAN, NUI, MAYNOOTH**

There is one thing that could be added to that. Where there is agreement to change the status of the school among all except the patron, the patron can dissolve the board of management of the school and thus halt the initiative. But in such a case the patron has to write to the Minister for Education and Science, giving the reasons for the dissolution. From my own reading of the Education Act (1998) on this, I think Paul Rowe is right to say that it is not satisfactory. Of course those who which to have the status of the school changed could raise a question in the Dáil about the patron’s action in such a case, so they are not entirely powerless. But it is right to say that the legal situation is less than satisfactory.

**ANSWER: PAUL ROWE, EDUCATE TOGETHER**

The other issue is that of the 3,200 national schools, I think that less than 150 are actually owned by the State, so the question of direct ownership of the school seriously reinforces the legal position of the patron.

**QUESTION: ROSANNE KENNY, TALLAGHT BRANCH**

I agree with the rhetoric outlined by John Carr that the church authorities and quite a number of parents have abdicated their responsibilities in this area. My question is, if this continues to be the situation how do members of the panel feel about the possibilities of teachers refusing to teach religious doctrine until such matters are resolved?

**QUESTION: SALLY SHEILS**

First of all I would like to say that I’m glad Paul mentioned the fact that as a State we owe a huge debt to the various churches for the input that they have made to education and the way they have financed and propped the system up. I wonder if, as a society, we were starting with a clean slate – where would we now start with education. What would we want in our schools in relation to the moral and ethical values we want to give to our children? Do we want them delivered formally? Then I think we can start looking way beyond Protestant / Catholic or Christian issues to the reality of
the makeup of society as it is growing in Ireland today – where there may be many diverse views of faith within a community or parish area depending on whether it is a town, city or whether it happens to be a new community that has arisen – for example, one teacher stated there are a lot of Buddhists in their area. I wonder if it would not strengthen every religious grouping if schools focussed on the common moral and ethical values we could impart to children. Then the churches would be strengthened and regenerated as there would be more of a sense of community involvement and responsibility to impart the sacraments specific to each religion. It might regenerate the community responsibility which teachers may well, because of their commitment to that faith, become involved in and allow the community to find ways of developing a passing on of the faith and the doctrinal issues within a community. Do the panel think that would (a) assist the growth of religious faith in this country because I do believe there is a fall off in involvement, and (b) do they believe that would leave us with a far dearer inclusive education system? Do you not believe that it is untenable for a teacher to be faced with the dilemma of the child in the classroom? That they have to either exclude them because the State hasn’t arranged schooling in such a way that they can be accommodated. Or they feel that they want to include this child because they don’t want them to be an outsider and want them to participate in the religious messages they’re passing on – in which case they are in total conflict with the rights of that child and their parents. I think that is an untenable position in which to put teachers. It is fine to talk about schools changing because the majority of parents want the school to change and the patron agrees. The fact is that the teachers in that school may have signed up for the ethos of the school and may not want to change ethos – where does this leave them?

**QUESTION: TOM HANLEY, DUBLIN SOUTH CITY – PRINCIPAL OF IRELAND’S ONLY JEWISH SCHOOL**

Our school is a very small school on the landscape of what we are discussing today. I hope that you will bear with me while I formulate a question. Our school teaches the full Jewish religious and Hebrew programme. In order to do that, we have a separate teaching staff. The school pays for that separate teaching staff. It is a significant drain of resources on the school. Other schools, who have also to discharge the same constitutional obligation, to give denominational education to their communities as we are discharging, are funded but we have to fund all of the Jewish education offered. Secondly, our school – because we have a very high proportion of non-Jewish pupils – also offers a full Catholic programme to pupils who wish to take it up. This involves a further cost because the teachers who are teaching that Catholic programme are probably the only teachers in Ireland who are paid by the hour to teach the Catholic programme. They are paid by the Jewish board of management of the school. So here is a school that has two religious staffs paid by the management and it is very difficult
to continue to resource this. So, in order for us to discharge our constitutional obligation to the Jewish community, there is great expense involved. Even more so when you consider that the constitution guarantees parents education in their own denomination and the government trains teachers in the teaching of religion in the Catholic or the Church of Ireland Colleges of Education. There is no payment whatsoever for the teacher training of Jewish or Islamic teachers of religion. There are grave anomalies. Here is another cost for our school as we have to send our Hebrew religion team to London to have them trained fully in the teaching of religion whereas other schools have three years of State supported training for them to discharge the same constitutional obligation as we do. Does the panel feel that our school has a case?

ANSWER: PATRICIA KIERAN

The fact that the Jewish primary school, while providing and funding the full Jewish and Hebrew programme for its Jewish students, is also funding and providing the Catholic programme for its Catholic students, indicates the complexity of contemporary religious education in Ireland. The diversity of school systems in Ireland means that we now have, thankfully, a Muslim school and two more coming on line this year and a Jewish school and I would predict that we will have other schools from other faith traditions being established in the near future. And you are right, the needs of teachers coming from those faith communities would not be fully addressed at present in Catholic colleges of education as they exist. They couldn’t at present cater for the linguistic needs of those students be they Arabic, Hebrew or other languages – or for the dietary needs of those students. I think that it is a pity that teachers have to go to the UK for their teacher formation. I formerly worked in a Catholic College of Education in Birmingham, UK, where we had, in our Catholic College, 30-40% Muslim, Jewish and non-Christian students studying to be teachers. We made provision for them in terms of their faith, in terms of their diet and in terms of their religious needs. The principal of our Catholic college in the UK said that she felt the Catholic college had served those students if – when they were leaving – the students were better Muslims, better Jews or better Hindus as a result of being with us. Are the constitutional rights of people who want to teach in the Jewish or Muslim faith, being upheld by my college of education? When anybody applies to Mary Immaculate College or to any of the colleges on the CAO form, no-where are they asked about their religious affiliation. Nobody is barred from entering teaching because of his or her religious beliefs or affiliations. Have we got in place the facilities to nurture, to welcome, to educate an increasingly diverse religious community in Ireland? I could say, yes, we do, but I don’t think we have fully developed those facilities at present. Could we put them into place? Yes. And I think if the students that you are talking about that go to the UK – if they did apply through the CAO system and if they did come to one of the colleges, they would be put into place.
QUESTION: TOM HANLEY

They probably wouldn't have the other standards of entry i.e. the Irish requirement. And secondly, since there is only one Jewish school, we wouldn't expect your college or others to facilitate us as it is more economical to fund this elsewhere where there would be Jewish control of training and under approved standards.

ANSWER: JOHN CARR, GENERAL SECRETARY

There is a faith crisis emerging in this country. We also have people coming from abroad with different ethnic and religious backgrounds. We must, therefore, address the changing nature of our society. We are burying our heads in the sand at officialdom level in relation to issues of religion and hoping that the schools will sort them out. Only when a crisis arises, will we try to deal with it. In addition, there are simmering problems emerging in schools in relation to the question of best practice regarding the teaching of religion. Why is this crisis emerging? This crisis is looming because Churches continue to control the ethos within the schools. Their main interest is the maintenance of their ethos. They are supported in this by the Constitution.

Let's be clear, we support the rights of parents to have a denominational school, a multi-denominational school or an inter-denominational school. But how long can the state afford to continue under the Constitution to provide such schools? Maybe what is necessary is that the state itself will have to grapple with this question. I have criticised the state, particularly in relation to establishing inter-denominational schools and then throwing the teachers to the wolves, as it were, in relation to the implementation of an agreed religion education programme because they refused to get involved in the latest crisis in Dunboyne. The state refrained from calling for a national convention in relation to this crisis. It would agree, however, to support such a forum, should the churches seek to establish a forum. The state has, in my view, an obligation under the Education Act. It now has the responsibility of building schools and entrusting them to denominational, multi-denominational or gaelscoileanna bodies. The state had an opportunity in relation to the Lucan area to establish a school or school complex whereby denominational, multi-denominational or gaelscoileanna could co-exist in one building. It declined to establish such a school, content instead to sanction the establishment of a multi-denominational school. The INTO supported the concept of a community school at primary level within the ‘Commission on School Accommodation’ but this concept did not find favour. It is amazing how people/parents/groups moved to establish a school in the Griffeen Valley area of Lucan and instead of having a community type school at primary level – which I would have hoped would be the first school established under the Commission’s proposals – a multi-denominational school was established instead. I believe we may yet have to move from denominational and multi-denominational schools to state schools – the same as post-primary – where accommodation is made
for the teaching of religion to children of different faiths.

I believe the church – the majority church in particular – is failing to grasp the mettle and acknowledge the changing nature of our society. We have got to try to accommodate different viewpoints and people should not be excluded from school because they don’t go to Mass. There are hard decisions to be taken. The debate has to start within the churches. Our priority is to attempt to resolve the issue by perhaps adopting a religious education programme as opposed to a religious instruction one. Instruction might be left to the parish community instead of the school. If this happened then we could go a long way to resolving a dilemma which everybody in this room may well have to face in the not too distant future.

ANSWER: DONAL KILDUFF, NAPDA

I can’t presume to speak for official churches whether majority or minority. I speak here from a personal opinion. I would like to think that the churches always had an interest in Education.

ANSWER: PATRICIA KIERAN, MARY IMMACULATE COLLEGE

The Catholic Church recognises the right of all people to freely practice their religion. Freedom of conscience is also an important tenet in Catholic thinking and in my contact with the CPSMA, they have said that every teacher in every Catholic school has the right to opt out of teaching religious education. How that works out on the ground is very difficult to know. I think that we have to come of age and if teachers are unhappy about teaching religious education, it is up to them to say to their board of management/principal teacher, “I’m not happy about teaching religious education”.

If enough teachers who are unhappy teaching religious education say this then I think provision would be made to facilitate these teachers. But may I say from the Catholic Church’s perspective, I think it is deeply destructive to the quality of Catholic religious education if the Church is forcing teachers to teach something that they don’t believe in – going back to what Pádraig has said about the importance of integrity. I don’t think it serves the pupils in the school or the Church community or the teacher. Our difficulty has been that, within Irish primary schools, we have a confessional religious educational system, with the exception of the Educate Together schools. What I mean by confessional is that the schools presume faith on behalf of the teacher and presume that religious education is about bringing children to a maturity of faith. The INTO survey highlights that some teachers have difficulty with the confessional system. Perhaps the Catholic Church has to acknowledge that this system is causing problems to some teachers. It is important that we come of age. If teachers have difficulty teaching religious education, then they should alert their managers and ensure that alternative arrangements are made. I know this may cause logistical and professional difficulties for teachers. However, I think it is important for the children
and for the teachers and for the Catholic Church that teachers are not coerced into teaching religious education within a confessional system.

**QUESTION:** ROSANNE KENNY, TALLAGHT BRANCH

My question was set in a much wider context. It wasn’t specifically a problem with teaching the Catholic religion but to take account of the diversity of religion which we are dealing with in the classroom and to refuse to teach any doctrine until such time as the parent bodies, the churches, all of the partners in education are willing to stand up and sort it out and be prepared to have an open and honest discussion about all the issues that are involved. I am not talking about one teacher opting out in a particular school because of a difficulty with religious belief. My question, I hope, will be seen in a much wider context and I do have difficulty with being so narrowly viewed.

**ANSWER:** PÁDRAIG HOGAN, NUI, MAYNOOTH

If we were starting with a clean slate now, I would like to think that we would start with the idea of the local school, and with an acknowledgement of its diversity. This would be very different from the more patriarchal way that things took root and developed after 1831. I would like to see the kind of provision John Carr has talked about. The Education Act, whatever its shortcomings, says that there has to be respect for diversity. And nowadays, that diversity is much greater than ever in the recent past, and not just in the city, but in localities throughout the country. I think the way the INTO handles this issue is crucial for the future. If industrial action were to be part of any campaign for change, I think it would need to show ingenuity and foresight, unlike the kind of action which has brought difficulties on one of our sister unions recently. For instance, I think it would be a mistake to place a blanket ban on religious education in the schools. I was involved in a rather intricate campaign myself, over a number of years with the Irish Federation of University Teachers, to bring about a change in the legal status of St Patrick’s College, Maynooth. I’m happy to say that the fruits of that campaign bore fruit in the Universities Act of 1997, one of the features of which was to establish a second legal entity on the Maynooth campus, namely NUI Maynooth. So with perseverance, and especially ingenuity, many apparently unlikely things can be achieved.

**ANSWER:** JOHN CARR, GENERAL SECRETARY.

Let’s not go away from this conference thinking that we are anti-religion. In our recent survey, 80% of our teachers have supported the teaching of religion. Rosanne’s question enables us to open a debate. I indicated to the Episcopal Commission at the time of the Dunboyne case that the controversy would open up a major debate on the teaching of religion in this country. It has already started as evidenced by the contributors to this conference. We are not anti-Church; this is about finding an accommoda-
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tion and inclusiveness for children of different faith/religions. I wish to clarify an issue surrounding the question of opting out of teaching religion. Teachers don’t have the right to opt out - teachers are obliged by contract to teach religion. In Catholic schools the CPSMA tries to facilitate teachers who do not wish to teach religion provided the school can make alternative arrangements. I was involved in this type of situation myself in my former school. I often had to teach the children in class myself - but in a two teacher school that might not be possible. Only when provision is available within schools to accommodate teachers who wish to opt out of teaching religion, will management authorities try to facilitate a teacher who has a conscientious objection.

ANSWER: PAUL ROWE, EDUCATE TOGETHER

To clarify what John has said about teachers being obliged to teach religion - in the multi-denominational model no teacher is placed in a situation where they have to inculcate a faith which they may not hold themselves. Our schools do not inculcate any faith. We provide a comprehensive programme of religious education which in our 27 years experience has never presented a moral issue for any of the INTO members delivering it.

In relation to the question – where does the change of ethos leave the teacher? In our experience in Ranelagh, the new patron undertook to maintain the employment contracts of the existing staff and that was worked out locally. It can be done very successfully.

The other question - if we do go down the road of providing a comprehensive religious education programme rather than inculcation of faith programmes, where is this going to leave religious faith? This is a major issue for us. The fact that less people attend Mass and formal religious events may have very little to do with what values and religious ideas and spirituality are emerging within our society today and I think that is a much more interesting question. One of the most fascinating things to happen in the Educate Together movement is the increasing number of people who are passionately concerned with the religious formation of their children who are actually choosing to send their children to our schools - because they emphatically believe that the religious formation of their children is their responsibility and the responsibility of their religious institutions. They are delighted that their children grow up in a school environment where their identity is cherished and the fact that other people think differently to them is explicitly recognised and supported.

The last thing that I would like to clarify in relation to Lucan - in actual fact there are two multi-denominational schools in Lucan. The type of community school that John is describing is exactly what the Educate Together movement set about trying to create from 1977 onwards. It is precisely that model that actually exists in the Lucan Educate Together school and the Griffeen Valley Educate Together school today.
ANSWER: ARCHDEACON EJ SWANN, CHURCH OF IRELAND

Could I just make one comment particularly in supporting Father Donal. I think we must be very careful not to denigrate the Churches’ role in education because of problems at the moment. I would like to support him by saying that the Church has always had an interest in education and, in fact, were the great leaders in education in Ireland long before any of these issues arose. Therefore, we must be careful that there is an interest in education not necessarily an interest in indoctrination – I think that is important to say. Secondly I would say, as part of a minority grouping, I would very much support the rights of minorities to have teacher training. For example, I cannot see why they couldn’t be accommodated on some of our campuses. Minorities are expensive, but if we want to be an even and just society, minorities have to be catered for and I would be the first, certainly, to support the Jewish community or the Muslim community or any community who felt the need for proper teacher training. The third thing I would say is that again, as a member of the Church of Ireland, I think we may all face problems in the future. Not just in relation to the teaching of doctrine – but I think there may be an increasing number of teachers who will find the teaching of RE, in any shape or form, difficult for them. We are going to have to live with that, accommodate it and sort it out. From our point of view, as a Church, we don’t have the problem of faith formation. Our Sunday schools and parishes have a system whereby faith formation is part of the Christian community and so the schools don’t face that difficulty. But there may be teachers coming into the teaching profession who will find the many aspects of religion, for example, biblical material, difficult in the future.

ANSWER: PÁDRAIG HOGAN, NUI, MAYNOOTH

I think the study of religion has an important place in our schools. But the manner in which religion is experienced in schools has to be distinctly different from the manner in which it is experienced in a church. There is something inherently hazardous in my view, in a school being controlled by a church authority, no less than there is in being controlled by a political party, or by a commercial corporation, or by any corporate body that fails to see that education has an integrity of its own that needs to be respected. To see things thus, however, old assumptions have to be revisited in a spirit of partnership. And that means a spirit of self-criticism and self-discipline for all of us.

ANSWER: PATRICIA KIERAN, MARY IMMACULATE COLLEGE, LIMERICK

I would like to say that this conference is a tribute to the professionalism of teachers. Irish primary teachers are deeply concerned about the nature of religious education in their schools. I think they have been doing a very good job and they are operating in a changing and challenging context. Martin Kennedy’s report Islands Apart14 says, “the

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classroom is a place of positive religious discourse, the parish is a place of diminished religious discourse and the home is a place of little or no religious discourse”. So I think teachers have been carrying the can for the community and for the Church for a long time. We are at the beginning of a process of examining the role and future of religious education in a changing Irish society. I think the strength of feeling and the quality of debate in our discussion group marked how important an issue this is. It is really important to get this right. It is important for the children of this country. It is important for the future of this country. I welcome diversity of opinion in religious education. I welcome ethnic and cultural and religious diversity in Ireland. And I welcome people who are not afraid to ask the questions.

ANSWER: DONAL KILDUFF, NAPDA

I think it is fair to say that I come from a rural diocese and it is heartening to see that 60 – 70% of teachers in the survey are happy to teach religious education and that the feeling here is a reflection of the teachers’ attitudes and concerns that I meet in my visit of schools. Concerns, I want to say, that are not only the concerns of the teachers, but concerns, as Patricia already stated, which were identified in Martin Kennedy’s report, where he identified, quite rightly, that there are three educators according to the Church. The parents are the primary educators, and it is my concern that the religious burden falls on teachers and that they are not getting enough support. I am happy to see that these concerns are being addressed and aired. I wish you every success and I hope that your deliberations bear great and abundant fruit.

ANSWER: JOHN CARR, GENERAL SECRETARY

It is not regarded as ‘cool’ in today’s society to support the churches’ teachings in schools. I want to say to you that I come from a particular faith and I’m proud of that faith. I’m grateful that I still believe although it is becoming difficult at times. I’m grateful, however, that I still have sufficient belief to practice. There are lots of us in this room in a similar situation. We fully support the provision of religious education in school. Our survey didn’t show a marked regression within our organization in relation to the teaching of religion. But problems have arisen. I have quoted before Bishop Duffy and Archbishop Connell, both of whom made strong statements on the question of the teaching of religion in schools. For them, religious teaching is not so much about religious education, but is about religious formation. Difficulties have arisen as society reduces its support in terms of religious formation and where the Church – as perceived by many teachers – is not supportive enough of the school in relation to religious formation. In my view we have got to face that reality. And all we are asking today is an openness to engage in debate and dialogue. We have called for a major forum on religious education, particularly in relation to interdenominational education. We are open to broadening its remit if necessary. We have received positive
replies from the Presbyterian assembly, from the Church Board of Governors of Church of Ireland and from all the other religious institutions/groups that we have contacted. We are still awaiting a reply from the Roman Catholic Church. We have received a preliminary reply that reiterates Episcopal control of individual dioceses. Accordingly, it would be difficult in a Roman Catholic context, for representatives to participate in a convention where a bishop or a representative would be speaking on behalf of all dioceses. I believe that the Roman Catholic Church will have to grapple with the question surrounding the religious education and formation of pupils. The theologians have been discussing this dilemma for decades and they have failed to resolve their difficulties. We are not, therefore, going to resolve the teaching of religion in the context of the Dunboyne school or any other type of school. We must endeavour, however, to find acceptable solutions to the teaching of religion in all categories of schools. We must continue to engage in a process of dialogue and open debate. Resolving problems by sacking teachers is not the way forward.
Chapter 6: The Ethos of the Catholic School: Sr Eileen Randles
(This paper was first presented by Sr Eileen Randles, IBVM, out-going General Secretary, CPSMA, to primary school principal teachers in spring 2002. It is reproduced with her kind permission).

Chapter 7: Promoting Truth? Inter-faith Education in Irish Catholic Primary Schools, Patricia Kieran
(This paper was submitted by Dr Patricia Kieran, Mary Immaculate College, following her contributions to the Open Forum at the INTO Consultative Conference on Education, November 2002.)
The Ethos of the Catholic Primary School

Sr Eileen Randles, IBVM

To be entrusted with the development and well-being of our children is to be entrusted with the future itself.

In this chapter we are asked to reflect on the very essence of your school, the nature and ethos of the Catholic school which you lead.

The mission of our Church derives from the compelling mandate of Christ to bring the message of salvation to all – to announce the Good News of salvation – to liberate and build up people, realising, in the words of Irenaeus, that the glory of God is man and woman fully human, fully alive. The message has to be constantly represented, retold, in contemporary terms.

One of the principal means of achieving this objective is through the enterprise which we call ‘education’. It is, insofar as schools in our times have become major formal agencies in this enterprise, that the Church seeks involvement in the school system, here as in other countries.

Our faith is grounded in the belief that we are made in the image of God, redeemed by Christ and designated to be with God in eternity. We find our true identity in relationships with other persons, giving expression to our love and service of God by our love and service of our fellow human beings, without distinction. We have the first and greatest commandment to love God – and the second is like this – to love our neighbour.

15 This paper was first presented by Sr Eileen Randles, IBVM, out-going General Secretary, CPSMA, to primary school principal teachers in spring 2002. It is reproduced with her kind permission.
The Concept of a Catholic School

Our Church runs schools because of a wish to enshrine and promote within the educational process a particular understanding and perception of the person which extends beyond the secular to include the spiritual. To seek to exclude the religious formation of the pupil from education would be to truncate what the Church understands to be true and full education. We need to constantly recall that the goal of true education is the development of the whole person, including, the spiritual and religious dimension. We can lose sight of the goal – we can forget the ideal in the day-to-day activities and struggles of our life and work. The vision has to be continuously recalled and renewed.

The concept of a Catholic school is not some airy-fairy philosophical ideal floating free of reality. Those who are responsible for Church-linked schools assume a serious duty to ensure that the school will strive to be a centre of excellence in every sphere. If a Catholic school is not really a good school and accepted as such, it would not be deemed to give that service to society and to the Church which it is expected to give. In this sense, the Catholic school is called on to be outstanding with regard to the solid human, moral, scholastic and cultural formation of its pupils and with regards to an up-to-date preparation of young people for active and responsible participation in every area of social, economic, professional and civic life. The Church's view of education is in no way opposed to that of the State, which also has a legitimate interest in education.

The Catholic Church holds a philosophy of education which enhances the virtues of citizenship sought by the State. Both Church and State are concerned about the development of the individual as a member of his/her community. The Church will seek to expand the horizons of the individual beyond the secular and material.

In the words of Bishop Donal Murray of Limerick:

*The Catholic tradition of education involves no diminution or distortion of the aims of education. Instead it gives to the Wholeness, Truth, Respect, Justice and Freedom pursued in education a new depth, a richer possibility, a fuller understanding. These elements would find an echo in the hearts of many parents, teachers, members of our community and in schools of many different structures and religious affiliations.*

We want now to consider the implications of running Catholic schools – a topic which may have been seen as slightly peripheral as we struggled to become informed on all manner of pedagogical and management issues. And yet, the fact that we are responsible for specifically Catholic schools is really the heart of the matter.

I would want to immediately recognise and acknowledge that the tremendous work in this area is already in place in our primary schools. I would ask you to accept what I say as a basis for reflection and indeed reassurance rather than in any way a comment on what you are already about.
The Identity of the Catholic School

As I approach your school as a visitor, I want to address first the question of identity. How will I know as I drive in that I am about to enter a Catholic school? What is the name of the school—‘Inscription’, as the Rules for National Schools describe it? Does the inscription indicate that this is a Catholic school? Of course the name of the school may indicate the patronage of Our Lord, of Our Lady or of one of the Saints.

But if I am not very familiar with such titles, do I get the message? Schools of other Churches may also use such titles. What about your note paper, your enrolment policy or other school documents? How far must I search to establish that this school is a Catholic school? Is there any problem with inserting the word ‘Catholic’ on your title? Are you uneasy about this? If so, why? I invite you to confront your reservations or unease and tease them out.

As I move into your school building, I may well see what are usually called ‘Religious objects’—statues, pictures etc. Those who belittle Catholic schools seek to imply that we hang up a few ‘holy pictures’ and think that’s enough to create a Catholic school. We are not so naive. However, in a school context we know that children learn through all sorts of stimuli. We use visual aids in all learning situations. Why would we not use visual aids as background for the education in religion which forms part of the school programme? Symbols speak powerfully to the imagination and can make an impression which lasts long beyond the memory of facts. We have, of course, to be conscious of the fact that children are very literal in their interpretation of words and pictures, particularly in their earlier years. We cannot soften the reality of Calvary. However, we may have to reconsider the appropriateness of pictures of saints with swords through their hearts etc. The symbolic import of darts and anchors and lilies may well be lost on 6/7 year olds. They are more likely to be upset by certain images or else to dismiss them with whatever is the current phrase for ‘yuck’! It can be important to have age-appropriate and suitable religious art in our schools.

Identity, of course, is not the same as identification. You could indeed have the word ‘Catholic’ hanging out of everything about the school but not identify with the Church. Obviously, this moves us to another plane. Here again there is a checklist of things to do which can be ticked, and most schools will score highly on the action section.

For example, at a minimum level, the prescribed catechetical programme is followed, children are prepared and presented for the sacraments, there is probably some recognition of the major feasts of the year. Is that enough? Does this activity reflect, describe or determine the ethos of the school? I’d say, hardly.

A Catholic school is not simply a school that has a religious (RE) programme. Simply adding RE to the curriculum is not the essence of the Catholic school. Of course, the RE programme is a central part of the education provided in a Catholic school, dealing as it does explicitly and formally with the religious dimension of
human experience. The primary RE programme introduces the pupils gradually and incrementally to the Church’s message which answers the deepest questions of the human heart – questions about living and dying, about the meaning and value of human existence, about human identity and social responsibilities and about prayer, sacraments and liturgy. But the RE programme cannot stand alone and be expected to support the full edifice of a Catholic school. If an RE programme does not ensure an appropriate Catholic ethos, what does?

Perhaps we need to unpack this word ‘Ethos’ to establish what we are actually talking about. So – what is ‘ethos’ – or at least what understanding of ethos can I put before you?

The Ethos of the Catholic School

‘Ethos’ needs to be given life by persons. A place, per se, does not have an ethos. But as soon as people occupy a place, an ethos begins to be created. It is not instantaneous. Instead, it emerges gradually from the repeated forms of interaction and relationships between people until it becomes the norm for behaviour, reactions, decisions and approaches to people and events. Ethos will form the framework within which people operate and at the same time the ethos is continually being re-established and sustained by the actions and attitudes of those people and the practices which embody those values of those people and the practices which embody those values, beliefs and attitudes promoted by the school and the goals aspired to, valued and celebrated by the school community. Ethos is dynamic – a way of being and of acting which becomes embedded while at the same time remaining delicate and sensitive to change. It is not fixed – it evolves and develops and it can change, sometimes dramatically and painfully. Every new group of people has a new dynamic. Even a minor change of personnel within a group can influence the ethos of that group.

So can we move on now to look at what the ethos within a Catholic primary school might ideally be? I’ll proceed on the understanding that we are all weak – we set the ideal aimed at – we don’t reach the ideal all the time but – in the words of a Dublin City centre school’s motto – “Aim for the moon. Even if you miss, you’ll land among the stars”.

There are many worthy books and articles written about the essence of the Catholic school. Some can be quite obscure, particularly those we read in translation. However, the fundamental message in all that literature is the same. This evening I will try to convey the message in familiar language – some of you may feel I’m being bland and over simple. But as I see it, our task this evening is to apply good theory to the actual practice within our schools.

Let me remind you of a description of what a Catholic school aims to do and to be.
A Roman Catholic School (which is established in connection with the Minister) aims at promoting the full and harmonious development of all aspects of the person of the pupil: intellectual, physical, cultural, moral and spiritual, including a living relationship with God and with other people. The school models and promotes a philosophy of life inspired by belief in God and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Catholic school provides religious education for the pupils in accordance with the doctrines, practices and tradition of the Roman Catholic Church and promotes the formation of the pupils in the Catholic faith.

I suggest that the most important words for us tonight are 'models and promotes'. The school is expected not only to promote and teach a philosophy of life inspired by belief in God and in Jesus Christ but also to model such a way of living and being. This is where the challenge lies for all involved in the school of which the principal is the acknowledged leader. Possibly the most searching question is “how do people experience my school? - what do people experience in my school?”

Gospel Values

We suggest that the policies, practices and attitudes of the school should be inspired by Gospel values. Is this some ‘church’ language which is difficult to translate into the lived reality? Perhaps we should consider what we mean by ‘gospel values’ so as to establish how they can be lived out within the school context. We can start at any point since Christ is the foundation for all the values listed. "All human values find their fulfilment as a consequence of their unity in Christ." (Letter from the Congregation for Catholic Education. December 1997).

EXCELLENCE

I have already pointed out that a Catholic school worthy of its name should be a centre of learning in the broadest sense. This requires high professional standards from all the teachers, with work prepared, delivered, assessed. Teachers would be expected to be fully trained, up to date, interested in the progress of their pupils and in developing their God-given talents to their utmost potential, calling their pupils to excellence in every sphere, while recognising that the level of excellence appropriate to each child may well vary, depending on the child's abilities and gifts. The focus would be on the child rather than on a rigid demanding standard perceived as excellent by the teachers or principal. Pupils would be constantly encouraged and affirmed, promoting a wholesome self esteem and confidence consistent with their dignity and uniqueness as persons. Slipshod indifferent work should have no place in a school, above all in a school proclaiming itself a Catholic school within the Church's ministry to the person. The pursuit of excellence would also prompt teachers to continue their own professional development, supported by the board of management.
TRUTH

Truth – an attribute of Christ Himself – should be the goal of all activity. Obviously, the pursuit of Truth as an ideal extends beyond merely avoiding untruths. It refers to the profound truth of who we are and what gives meaning to our lives. It surely calls for integrity, uprightness, honesty in the fullest sense. It reminds me of the Irish descriptions of duine macánta – an almost untranslatable term but which all of you will fully understand. Can we say that all who work in our schools are daoine macánta – true people – people of Truth, of Gospel values? Is truth among pupils honoured, respected, rewarded? Do pupils know that they can expect to be treated in a positive manner if they speak the truth in all circumstances? So do we ‘model and promote’ the fullness of Truth?

JUSTICE

Justice embraces full delivery of what is due and covers regular and punctual attendance, and delivery of full programmes as well as probity in all financial affairs. It also embraces a sense of fairness and fair play between principal, teachers, pupils and parents. The Biblical meaning of justice is right relationships with other persons. How often do we hear it said that so and so was strict but fair. Think back to your own school days. What memories come to mind? You may recall the positive experience of the fair and just teacher – or, on the contrary, still nurse resentment of the teacher who was unfair, or unfair in one respect. Remember, we are creating the memories of to-day’s pupils. What will they recall in years to come?

COMMITMENT

We look for commitment from the principal and teachers – shown in the generosity which is essential in an effective teacher – dedicated unremitting service to pupils, energetic efforts to help children and espousing the importance of the central role of the teacher in the life of each child.

The authentic sincere person is a joy to work with and learn from, living out as s/he does the values of truth, and uprightness and justice.

ENDURANCE

We are called to show endurance – both in terms of sticking with the role and in being prepared to accept that others are weak also. We may have to be patient and what used to be called ‘long-suffering’, remembering that we are the adults who are expected to be mature, allowing for the fact that our pupils are still learning, still growing towards a level of self-control and appropriate behaviour. There are times when wise teachers and principals hear no evil, see no evil – we make allowances in a spirit of generosity and of caring rather than taking offence too easily in an egocentric fashion.
CONCERN AND COMPASSION

Concern for others and compassion are qualities sought in every good teacher. These qualities are called on increasingly as pupils come from backgrounds where pain and deprivation of one kind or another can be so prevalent. These are akin to the value of deep respect for the person, irrespective of background, giftedness or attitude – difference of national or ethnic backgrounds would be respected and celebrated with the pupils. Do we extend our intrinsic respect beyond the pupils to parents – including those who may be causing us difficulty? How do we communicate with officials of the Department of Education and Science? Can they presume that they will be treated with respect by the Catholic school community?

FORGIVENESS

We are a broken people. What message does our code of behaviour/discipline convey to the pupils? Is our school harsh, cold, unforgiving or punitive? Do teachers take black and white positions – either that pupil goes or I do? What level of forgiveness exists between staff and principal, between staff members? Do we model forgiveness and new beginnings to our pupils – or do they say the teachers don't speak to each other. We show forgiveness without being mushy or soft since children also have to learn right from wrong – but a Catholic school should be a place where grudges are not held, where children should be helped to learn from mistakes and misdemeanours and move on, secure in their full acceptance within the school community.

WITNESS

When we consider witness as a gospel value, we think back to authenticity, to commitment, to justice. We realise, don't we, that religious instruction can become empty words falling on deaf ears, if the authentic Christian witness that reinforces it is absent from the school climate. Perhaps, as President McAleese suggests, some of us grew up deeply confused by stories of a patient, gentle, loving God, transmitted by teachers capable of unprovoked spontaneous combustion and terrifying displays of anger. What messages are we conveying to the pupils – what memories are we creating for them? Pope Paul VI summed it up well, “People,” he says, “listen to teachers, it is because they are also good witnesses”. We can write all the mission statements we like and school brochures – and no doubt sincere words – but unless there is a convergence between the stated ethos and actual experience of pupils, teachers, parents, it becomes like a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. Is what we model a reflection of what we promote?
FAITH

Speaking of Faith in a Catholic school, God cannot be the great absent one or the unwelcome intruder. What is the place of prayer in the staff room – in the classroom? Is God a central figure in our thinking – the most important reference point in all events and decisions?

Does faith in God inform our day and inspire our thinking and speaking? Are the liturgical seasons of the year reflected in the life of the school? Is the importance of ritual recognised and honoured in our school? Do you see your school as an integral part of the parish and of the Church’s mission? Is belief in God a given to be treasured and nurtured by and within the school community? Donal Neary, in a recent publication, describes faith as “gift wrapped in the faith of others”. It has been well said that, in a Catholic school, personal faith should be like background music to all the life and activities of the school.

In addition to knowledge of the faith and church attendance, do we have and promote a feeling of belonging to the Catholic Church community, a joy in our faith – is there among us a readiness to participate in the life of the Church, to show commitment? Is being a member of the Catholic Church part of my personal identity? It is to enable teachers to feel at home and at ease within the Catholic school, to experience a sense of belonging and to contribute to the promotion of the desired ethos of the school that we look for teachers trained in Catholic colleges and holding a Diploma in Religious Education? Are our teachers aware of working in a Catholic school? Is it referred to at staff meetings? Does it influence decisions? When do pupils become aware of being in a Catholic school?

DIGNITY

To suggest that the dignity of all persons is a gospel value needs little elaboration but can become forgotten and excluded when tensions arise in the work or the classroom environment. Yet, the centrality of the person, the value and importance of the person, the inherent dignity of the person should influence how we speak to, react to, write to, act towards all others with whom we come into contact including members of ethnic minorities and people of various nationalities. This attitude and approach should be apparent in our admissions policies and practices and in our code of behaviour. And it must be lived and experienced by everyone.

The reverence we are called to goes back to our understanding of the person as a reflection of God, made by God and destined to be with God for eternity. This realisation must surely inspire the utmost reverence in our speech and behaviour and in the approach we encourage pupils to have towards each other and towards their teachers.

This reverence and respect should exclude any hint of bullying or harassment – and, of course, makes any level of abuse totally unacceptable. Reverence for the person is expressed also in our care for that person, our concern for the wellbeing and physical
safety of the person. Peace is that calm sense of wellbeing which allows for and flows from positive staff relations. Everyone shares the vision and is focussed on the work in hand; there is an absence of strife, bitterness, competition, petty jealousies and grudges. Teachers and pupils look forward to going in each day to a school where there is personal peace of mind, a calm atmosphere and an understanding that each one is doing his/her level best in all areas.

FREEDOM
The Catholic school is expected to promote a most positive sense of freedom, of intellectual independence, of the importance of an informed mind and conscience of healthy self-confidence that can resist peer pressure and media pressure. The aim is to lead young people progressively from what is described as a ‘must’ conscience, which has controlling forces imposed from without, to a ‘should’ conscience which derives from internalised convictions, freely espoused. Catholic schools promoting freedom are called on to help young people to free themselves from the constrictions of merely surviving to-day’s society.

OPENNESS
Openness – in the Spirit promoted by Vatican II – to the world, to other races and faiths, to other schools, openness to learn, to link with parents and with others, openness to admit mistakes, to put the past behind and move on, promoting and sharing a sense of wonder at God’s greatness, the joys of discovery, the beauties of creation, the joy of music and literature and indeed of technology – “My God, how great Thou art” – as we experience our personal pieces of revelation.

BEAUTY
An aim of education is sometimes presented as love of the true, the good and the beautiful. Love of beauty is noted here as a gospel value. God is the source of all beauty. We thank God for beauty – we should remind ourselves and our staff that the school, and the classroom and school grounds may be the only places of beauty in the experience of a particular child.

    The teacher’s appreciation of pupils’ art work and its display in the classroom and school – with regular changes, of course – gently leads the child to see the beauty and colour and shapes. We aim to have well maintained decorated classrooms and school environment. The minor capital works grant is of great benefit in this regard. Love of the environment and respect for nature also come into this category and is a reason – along with respect and honesty – why vandalism is so frowned on by the school community.
WONDER

Allied to love of beauty is the sense of wonder, of delight, of newness. The child’s wonder is a constant source of personal renewal for the teacher. It would be a travesty if any person within a school could be accused of ignoring, eliminating, discouraging a child’s sense of wonder and awe. To see in the eyes of children a sense of hope, trust and curiosity is one of the greatest gifts afforded to those who teach – particularly, we could say, those who teach at primary level. Recent research on choice of career shows a significant number indicating preference for primary teaching because of the joy of working with young children.

JOY

Speaking of joy – this quality derives from so much else I’ve mentioned – from a sense of personal well-being, from an atmosphere of peace where everyone is respected, from a secure sense of faith in God and hope in His presence with us at all times, from a sense of supportive community where everyone is wished well. The gift of joy – deep seated joy – which survives surface problems is indeed something to aim for and to treasure. It’s interesting that the White Paper leading to the Education Act 1998 proposed that we should provide an educational experience for pupils which would be “joyful and safe” – it is quite unusual, indeed unique internationally to have an official document referring to “joy” within the education system. Can we deliver on it? What are we modelling? What are we promoting?

COMMUNITY

All the literature about Catholic schools refers to the importance and value of the supportive sharing community. In studies in the US on the effectiveness of schools, it emerges that an identifiable ‘plus’ in the case of Catholic schools – which perform above the average – is the faith community which share the values and educational philosophy of the school. This aspect is frequently presented as the added value of the Catholic school.

As the faith community around your school disintegrates somewhat, the role of the school in the personal and religious formation of the pupil becomes more important but also more difficult. In this connection, the very numerical strength of the Catholic primary school system could be a weakness. Disaffected, indifferent or even hostile parents frequently have no choice of school. They may be reluctant to have their child in a Catholic school and resentful of what they see as the monopoly of the Catholic Church. This can produce difficulties and pain for all concerned. Situations can arise which call for all your patience, understanding, respect, forgiveness – in a word – witness to all that is most open and loving in a committed member of the Catholic Church. You may have the opportunity of surprising such parents by your gentleness and friendship. You could be the catalyst that would open them to healing and to find-
The Ethos of the Catholic Primary School

ing their way back to God. You all know the importance of close collaboration by all members of the school community, with parents as the most important and essential partners with the school. Does your school facilitate and encourage parent involvement?

TRUST

Every teacher will be called on to live in hope and trust that every child will grow in wisdom and grace as they increase in age. Trust in others – trust that they are being truthful and upright – trust that they mean well and that all will be well, is a very liberating attitude for the individual. Of course, the teacher must lead the pupils to appreciate the positive virtue of being trustworthy – not always an easy task.

Similarly, and equally important, the child places a trust in the teacher which is a most precious and fragile gift. How a teacher honours the child’s trust can mark that child’s relationships with others for life. To deprive a child of being able to have that trust, to diminish the child’s life, and growth, and to threaten his/her faith in other people and ultimately in God. We carry a most privileged responsibility in this regard – ‘to be entrusted with the development and well-being of our children is to be entrusted with the future itself’. The cover of your Board Members’ Handbook reminds you that “The future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping”. (Church in Modern World). Are you, as the leader of a Catholic school, strong enough to do this?

LOVE

I have left love to the end. If I have all the information about rules and regulations – if I have all the most wonderful policies, the most up to date technology and facilities, but have no love – I am inadequate as the principal of a Catholic school. We’re all familiar with the piece in 1 Corinthians which says:

*Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited, it is never rude or selfish, it does not take offence and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people’s sins or failings but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes.*

This extract, as you see, sums up the Gospel values we have mentioned this evening. Couldn’t this be the basis for the mission statement for the principal of the Catholic school? But to make it really come home, I invite you to substitute your own name for ‘love’ in the following extract. Can I say with sincerity that Eileen is…
Mission Statement

We aim at the ideal – we don’t always reach it, but we keep trying. Now the major
question remains – how can I engage my staff in a consideration of the expected ethos
of the Catholic school? Recognise straight away that you may never succeed in getting
every staff member to engage. But there is currently a golden opportunity to have a
discussion around all these issues and gospel values as you work on your Mission
Statement as part of the school development planning process.

And, of course, the most important part of working towards a Mission Statement
is indeed the process. The process should facilitate a review of the reality of the school,
a sharing of understanding about the school, a reflective conversation about what you
aim to do within the school and hopefully a renewed commitment by all the school
community to the education to be provided in the particular school. Of course, the
essential thing about the Mission Statement is that it be REAL, that the staff and the
board of management and parents and pupils feel part of it and feel that it reflects the
actual accepted aim and manner of proceeding in their school. Outsiders who read
your Mission Statement should be able to say, ‘yes, that reflects my perception of the
school, it describes what I experience and observe in and from that school’.

It is good for us to note that the legal framework has been laid down and it is
favourable to our denominational schools. The characteristic spirit of the school is
recognised and honoured in various pieces of legislation and will be included again in
the evaluation of the school management and the school’s performance. We have
secured the legal framework. However, that of itself is not sufficient.

Key to the mission (of denominational schools) is the fostering of an ethos or char­
acteristic spirit based primarily on religious belief. The legal right to do this is
secure. But the preservation of the ethos of schools does not depend on law alone.
Increasingly, it must involve the support and commitment of those, other than the
owners, who participate in schools. This can only be secured in an environment
where the (education) partners are involved in a meaningful way in the affairs of
the school and believe that their contribution is valued.

These are the words – not of a bishop – but of our former Minister for Education
and Science, Micheal Martin. You are the leaders of specifically Catholic schools. The
State allows it – the Church expects it – the pupils deserve it.

Let me finish with a metaphor for your role. My religious congregation has a
number of schools in Kenya and I have met Kenyan Sisters in various gatherings.
Kenyan culture, as you know, is rich with tribal symbols. One such symbol spoke
powerfully to me about education and the principal’s role. In Kenyan tribal culture, in
the compound of the extended family, it is always one person’s duty to be the keeper
of the fire, so that the fire will never go out and the food is always kept hot ready for
serving. For me, the fire represents the vision and values which must be kept
constantly alight in the hearts of teachers, students and parents. If the fire goes out then as the Book of Proverbs tells us, “the people without a vision get out of hand”. (Proverbs 29:18)

Just as a crowd always gathers around a good fire, when the vision and values of a school are clearly named, often articulated and made concrete in the day-to-day life of the school, students, parents, and the local community will gather around the teachers. As my colleague, Sr Pat Murray, IBVM, pointed out, research has shown that such a school will be a vibrant community, with committed students, teachers and parents, which will achieve good academic results together with excellent personal, social, religious and spiritual development. And isn’t that what it’s all about?

I’d like to suggest that you are the keepers of the fire within the community which is your Catholic school. The keeper of the vision and values – continuing faithful to a great tradition but constantly renewing the sources so as to keep the light of education glowing and vibrant. Go, and keep that fire. Go and complete your “delicate and exhilarating mission” as Pope John Paul described it in April 2001 and may God and Mary go with you.
We must seek religious harmony among people not through crusades and inquisitions, but through mutual respect and joint research and, especially, through dialogue. 16

The potency of popular and stereotypical images and ideologies concerning Catholic education should never be underestimated. In a recent study of Catholic schools and schooling Gerald Grace attempts to deconstruct and critique popular images of Catholic education:

"Pervasive historical myths and images of Catholic schooling, such as the well-known statement attributed to the Jesuits, “Give me the child until he is seven, and I will give you the man,” make many external observers believe that Catholic schooling is, in practice, a strong and effective form of indoctrination. 17"

One enduring myth associated with Catholic education is that indoctrinatory teaching methods are used in an attempt to produce children who view everything Catholic as acceptable and good and everything non-Catholic as alien and evil. Literary texts such as James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man18 and Frank McCourt’s Angela’s Ashes19 testify to a narrow interpretation of what it means to be Catholic as well as the use of indoctrinatory methods of religious education (RE). The

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17 Gerald Grace, Catholic Schools: Mission, Markets and Morality Routledge, London, 2002, p.15. Of course this statement has also been attributed to other groups – most notably communists.
19 Frank McCourt, Angela’s Ashes, Flamingo, London, 1997, p.84.
novel is not the only literary genre which highlights the limitations of Catholic religious education. Brendan Kennelly’s poem *Catechism* illustrates the impotence of reducing complex religious concepts to rote learning as well as the brutal violence meted out to those who failed to provide the correct answers in religion class.

Religion class. Mulcahy taught us God... “Explain the Immaculate Conception, Maguire, and tell us then about the Mystical Blood.” Maguire failed. Mulcahy covered the boy’s head with his satchel, shoved him stumbling among the desks, lashed his bare legs until they bled.

In her play *Once a Catholic* Mary O’Malley reflects on the impact which her pre-Vatican II Catholic education had on her vision of the world and, in particular, upon those who were not Catholic.

*I was an expert in bigotry. That was what they taught us although at the time I didn’t even know the word. The Catholic Church was all that mattered; anybody else could go to hell – or limbo – literally.*

This raw, unapologetic face of bigotry is totally out of place with the orientation of the contemporary primary curriculum which identifies ‘pluralism, a respect for diversity and the importance of tolerance’ as a key issue in primary education. However, the stereotype that, in essence, Catholic education is bigoted still prevails. According to this reading Catholic education is disinterested in, or actively hostile towards, the religiously plural world. It is vital to stress that Mary O’Malley’s experience of a restrictive Catholic education came in the decades prior to Vatican II. This is not to particularise or reduce the significance of her own or indeed other fictional or actual testimonies to the limitations of some forms of Catholic education but merely to state that Vatican II began a new phase in Catholic thinking about education and about the relationship of the Catholic church to diverse cultures, peoples and religious groups. At Vatican II, John XXIII, in his opening message to ‘all men and nations’, as opposed solely to all Catholics, envisaged a vigorous spiritual renewal, an *aggiornamento* or updating, designed to permeate the Catholic church and the world. The Roman Pontiff and the Church wanted to engage in reconciling dialogue with the modern world:

*We shall take pains so to present to the men of this age God’s truth in its integrity and purity that they may understand it and gladly assent to it...*
Forty years later Vatican II still stands as a mammoth achievement in reconfiguring the theology and topography of the Catholic Church. The results were painful, powerful and liberating but in some senses aspects of the domestic Irish church seem to have been largely untouched or only slightly grazed by certain conciliar teachings. The latter had huge implications for religious education and gave rise to a dramatic shift in emphasis in its content, method and nature. To witness what a huge impact the council’s teachings had on Catholic primary religious education one has only to compare the standard Catechism text books that were used as a basis for religious instruction through rote learning in the primary schools in the first half of the twentieth century with the more child-centred, experiential, biblically based texts of the nineteen seventies. The Catechism described those who had not been baptised and who did not believe in God or Jesus Christ as infidels and in many instances provided horrific and lurid details of their eternal punishment in the “fire of hell”. Fortunately, since Vatican II Catholic theology has undergone a radical renewal and “the ideas proposed by the Second Vatican Council... influence profoundly the shape of religious education in Catholic schools”. However, there are areas where the teachings of Vatican II have made surprisingly little direct impact on the life of the primary teacher in Ireland. One such area is in the Church’s failure to translate and embody the teachings of Nostra Aetate, the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, into the religious education programme in Irish Catholic primary schools.

To date many children, in many Catholic primary schools, are given little or no formal knowledge or understanding of the Church’s relationship to non-Christian religions. Furthermore, they are not afforded an opportunity to explore the beliefs and practices of those religions as part of their Catholic religious education programme. In the absence of such knowledge one may suppose that children fill in the blanks by assuming that, at best, the Catholic church has an attitude of tolerant indifference or, at worst, of hostile contempt for different world faiths. Primary teachers in Catholic schools generally avoid teaching children anything about world faiths in religion class because they, in turn, fear confusing the children or compromising the schools Catholicity. It is, therefore, important to consult the Church’s teaching in order to prevent Catholic education from becoming hostage to a partial and incomplete, sectarian, stereotypical interpretation of what it means to be Catholic. For, if Catholic religious education stems from “a theology which emerges from Catholic liturgical

25 A particularly horrific and lurid account of the fate of the damned is to be found in Catechism: Doctrinal, Moral, Historical and Liturgical, Vol III, Richardson & Son, Dublin, 1864, p603ff.
practice and spirituality,” it should open up “positive perspectives on other Christian traditions, not to mention those of other persons of faith”. Vatican II stresses, “All should take pains, then, lest in catechetical instruction and in the preaching of God’s Word they teach anything out of harmony with the truth of the gospel and the spirit of Christ”. All Catholics, and particularly those involved in religious education, should be reminded that “the Church rejects, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men (sic) or harassment of them because of their race, colour, condition of life, or religion.” Indeed, far from discriminating against or marginalising people of different world faiths, church teaching encourages its members to work collaboratively with them.

What does the Catholic Church Teach about World Faiths?

The document *Nostra Aetate* is one of the shortest and most exciting documents of Vatican II. Of course, it has to be viewed in the context of all of the other documents as it literally originated as chapter four of the Decree on Ecumenism. As it was felt that a discussion of interfaith relations, initially focusing on Christian-Jewish relations, was outside the remit of the Decree on Ecumenism it was decided that a separate document dealing with the Church’s relationship to non-Christian religions was necessary. What began as a chapter on Jewish-Catholic relations grew into a much larger position statement on the church’s relationship to Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and to ‘followers of other religions’. The basic starting point of the document is that all human beings, in their various religious and social groupings “comprise a single community, and have a single origin, since God made the whole race of men (sic) dwell over the entire face of the earth”. This emphasis on the common origin and interconnectedness of all humans as creatures made by God, is at once a foundational premise and the methodological orientation of this document. *Nostra Aetate* consistently emphasises what positively unites all human beings, what they share in common, as opposed to emphasising or indicating irreconcilable differences that disunite humans. This is not a naïve refusal to acknowledge the cultural and doctrinal differences between the world faiths but a recognition that it is only by acknowledging and building upon what we have in common that we can engage in productive dialogue on that which separates us. While *Nostra Aetate* tended to minimise differences in the religiously plural world it must be stated that more recent trends in inter-religious dialogue have tended to emphasise the importance of voicing

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29 *Nostra Aetate* (NA), par 4. This phrase is used in the context of Christian anti-semitism but is equally applicable to teaching about any world faith.
30 NA par 5
31 NA par 2
32 NA par 1
distinctive differences between the world’s religio-cultures as a prelude to genuine understanding and acceptance. *Nostra Aetate* articulates the view that within the communal human context different religious traditions provide answers to the perennial human search for ultimate meaning in life and illustrate a “profound religious sense” in “diverse peoples”. The document provides a very brief account of some very basic characteristics of Hinduism and Buddhism. It does so by allocating two sentences to each of these religions. *Nostra Aetate* deals briefly, in two paragraphs of unequal length, with the two monotheistic prophetic faiths, Islam and Judaism. Of all of the religious traditions mentioned it is not surprising, given the origins of Christianity, that Judaism is given most coverage. However, it would be a total misrepresentation of *Nostra Aetate* to suggest that it attempts to give any kind of comprehensive treatment of the great religious traditions of the world. While it does state that diverse religious traditions “strive variously to answer the restless searchings of the human heart by proposing ‘ways’, which consist of teachings, rules of life, and sacred ceremonies” nowhere does it attempt to identify or analyse the philosophical, spiritual, ethical or doctrinal aspects of various world faiths or to give a comprehensive analysis of the religiously plural world. *Nostra Aetate* is far more pastoral and is concerned with emphasising what these religions hold in common with the Catholic faith and with repudiating religious persecution and discrimination. The document paints a general picture by using broad brush strokes which help to orientate Catholics in their relationships to members of non-Christian faiths so that they will relate lovingly and peaceably to their fellow human beings. It emphasises that, “We cannot in truthfulness call upon that God who is the Father of all if we refuse to act in a brotherly way towards certain men.”

By far the most radical and important aspect of the document is the exhortation to Catholics to engage in dialogue and collaboration with the followers of world faiths. The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, *acknowledge, preserve, and promote* (italics mine) the spiritual and moral goods found among these men (sic), as well as the values in their society and culture.
This is a remarkable statement in that it formally marks a moment when the Church relinquishes any claim of having a monopoly over spiritual and moral good. Once it acknowledges that non-Christian faiths contain spiritual and moral worth it urges Catholics to enter into dialogue and collaboration with the members of these faiths. The boundaries separating Christian from non-Christian are to be traversed precisely in order to give witness to the Christian faith and life. An isolationist policy of religious segregation is not viable for the Catholic. For within the religiously plural world, as Dermot Lane states, "When one religion is diminished all religions are diminished". 39 Equally, a policy of bland and indifferent tolerance of world faiths is rejected. Nostra Aetate instead actively urges Catholics to work collaboratively with members of diverse faiths, to acknowledge, preserve and promote, the truths found in those faiths. 40 The uses of the passionate and dynamic term ‘exhortation’ along with the trinity of verbs highlighted above bears witness to a remarkable shift in understanding. The Catholic is not in competition with the Hindu or Buddhist, or Muslim or Jew. Indeed, the Catholic is called to be actively engaged in advancing, and maintaining and recognising the truths found within those religions. Now, of course, the whole question arises as to what the truth of these faiths is and indeed who is interpreting that truth. Nostra Aetate fails to address this issue but subsequent Catholic theology has engaged in a more detailed exploration and analysis of interfaith dialogue. Indeed Redemptoris Missio returns to this issue and consistently seeks to emphasise the link between inter-religious dialogue and the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Although the Church gladly acknowledges whatever is true and holy in the religious traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam as a reflection of that truth which enlightens all people, this does not lessen her duty and resolve to proclaim without fail Jesus Christ who is “the way, and the truth and the life’… The fact that the followers of other religions can receive God’s grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people”. 41

What Nostra Aetate does stress is that passive indifference should give way to active, collaborative promotion of the positive aspects of world faiths. As a point of departure for this, the Vatican Council “deplores the hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and from any source”. 42 In relation to Muslims “this most sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for

40 Of course, a major question which arises is "what are the truths of these faiths?"
42 NA par 4.
mutual understanding. On behalf of all mankind, let them (Christians and Moslems sic,) make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom". The relevance of these teachings for contemporary Irish society and indeed their global significance needs to be brought to the attention of all Catholics.

The Catholic Church’s teaching was powerfully enunciated in 1986 and again in January 2002 when the Pope and representatives of the religions of the world prayed together in Assisi for an end to hostilities and the advent of peace in the world. On a recent visit to India John Paul II stressed that the:

*Catholic Church wants to enter ever more deeply into dialogue with the religions of the world. She sees dialogue as an act of love which has its roots in God himself. “God is love”, proclaims the New Testament, “and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him... Let us love, then, because he has loved us first... no one who fails to love the brother whom he sees can love God whom he has not seen” (First Letter of St John, 4:16, 19-20).*

Now the call for Catholics to actively respect and acknowledge the truths found in diverse world faiths is not numerically conditioned. As John Courtney Murray stresses:

*The Church does not deal with the secular order in terms of a double standard – freedom for the Church when Catholics are a minority, privilege for the Church and intolerance for others when Catholics are a majority.*

Ireland has a long history of religious diversity and has been multi-ethnic for many years. If Catholics move from a mindset of competitive conflict between the Catholic faith and other world faiths to a respectful acknowledgement of their differences and an appreciation of how much they share in common and of the mutual advantages of collaborative inter-religious dialogue, then there is considerable benefit for all involved. In one sense the more one engages in inter-religious dialogue the greater the opportunity one has to appreciate one’s own faith as well as the faith of others. A Catholic who witnesses Muslims journey through the holy month of Ramadan can be led to a rejuvenated appreciation of fasting and penance. This is not

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43 NA par 3.
44 In 1964, Pope Paul VI established the Secretariat for Non Christians, a department of the Roman Curia with responsibility for relations with people of other religions. In 1988 its name was changed to the title of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID).
46 John Courtney Murray in an introductory essay to *Dignitatis Humanae*.
to blur the boundaries between religions or to engage in religious relativism which homogenises the distinct aspects of different religions and views them all as being interchangeable or of equal validity. This is simply to state that the experience of participating in inter-religious dialogue and prayer can awaken the religious imagination of all participants.

No religious community can live in isolation and it is in the interest of all to promote dialogue and good neighbourly relations. Dialogue begins with a single act – the decision taken by one person to take the first step to be open to another person of a different religious tradition. In many places small beginnings have resulted in the growth of communities that have built strong ties across religious barriers.48

Research carried out in the United Kingdom illustrates the benefits which students, staff, and indeed the whole school community, can reap in a Catholic educational context which has a dynamic interfaith programme.49 However, inter-religious dialogue can often be difficult. Recent research carried out in the Netherlands explores the difficulties associated with inter-religious dialogue in primary education.50

Contemporary Practice in Catholic Primary Schools

The 2002 INTO survey Religion in Primary Schools shows that 86.1% of teachers support teaching children in primary schools about other religions. While little research has been carried out into the teaching of world faiths in Ireland teachers implicitly believe that this is a worthwhile area, as one member of a focus group commented: "I would think that you have to teach children about other religions, because if you didn't then it would create ignorance, racism and discrimination."

These sentiments are not inconsistent with the Catholic Church's official teachings on the importance of religious dialogue in Redemptoris Missio.

Those engaged in this dialogue must be consistent with their own religious traditions and convictions, and be open to understanding those of the other party without pretence or close-mindedness, but with truth, humility and frankness, knowing that dialogue can enrich each side. There must be no abandonment of principles nor false irenicism, but instead a witness given and received for mutual advancement on the road of religious inquiry and experience, and at the same time for the elimination of prejudice, intolerance and misunderstandings.51

51 Redemptoris Missio, par 56
Unfortunately it appears that, in many Irish Catholic primary schools, that first single act necessary to build up interfaith dialogue has not been taken in the subject area of religious education. That is not to say that it does not occur in Catholic schools in a variety of curricular areas, rather it is to say that it is not an integral part of the religious education programme in primary schools. Indeed it is ironic that in many Catholic primary schools it is in the area of SESE, of history or geography, that the issue of the rituals and cultures of diverse human communities are explored. For instance in the history SESE curriculum, the strand unit for third and fourth classes on ‘Feasts and festivals in the past’ attempts to familiarise the child with the origins and traditions associated with some common festivals in Ireland and in other countries. It explicitly mentions “feasts and festivals celebrated by various members of the school and local community, including Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and other celebrations...”52 Numerous examples abound where the revised curriculum provides children with the opportunity to explore the culture and beliefs of diverse religious communities. The history strand on ‘Story’ enables the third and fourth class child to “become aware of the lives of women, men and children from different social, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds...”53 In the geography strand ‘Human Environments’ the third and fourth class child is enabled to “learn about and come to appreciate and respect the people and communities who live and work in the locality...” This includes “links with people in other parts of Ireland and the world”.54 The strand unit ‘People and Other Lands’ explores the basic ingredients of religious belief in the form of the “myths, stories, art, culture, clothes”55 of people in another part of the world. These are constituent elements of religious education and are integral to the religious beliefs and practices of faith communities. The opportunities for integration with religious education are enormous and yet, in many Catholic primary schools, this does not occur because the vast majority of religious education teaching occurs from within a mono-faith perspective.

This is not the case for the Educate Together schools which have developed a culturally inclusive and democratic ethos which is committed to multi-denominational education where:

The schools typically use a variety of faith festivals in the school year to promote understanding of different religious views. At the same time, the school is committed to making facilities available to any group of parents who so wish, to organise religious instruction or doctrinal classes outside school hours.56

52 Primary School Curriculum History, p 44.
53 Primary School Curriculum History, p 47.
54 Primary School Curriculum Geography, p 54.
55 Primary School Curriculum Geography, p 56.
Clearly this option of not endorsing any one faith is not viable in the Catholic school but, nonetheless, Catholic schools should develop a culturally inclusive and democratic ethos. In Catholic schools religious education is by definition confessional and it attempts to lead children to maturity of faith in the Catholic tradition. So what options are available to teachers in Catholic schools? If we look at contemporary practice in Catholic schools the question arises as to the efficacy of the Alive-O programme in teaching children about world faiths. To suggest that there is no awareness of the diversity of world faiths in the Alive-O programme is incorrect. There is indeed an acute awareness of the Judeo-Christian rootedness of the Catholic tradition. However, this awareness does not always translate into an appreciation of the importance of Judaism as a religion in its own right. In the programme there are occasions where world faiths make an appearance. For instance in the Alive-O 5 video there are two five-minute sequences of video footage documenting the beliefs and practices of Jewish and Muslim school children in Ireland. These are very good in themselves but exist solely in visual form, in isolation from any directives or input in the teacher’s book or in the children’s textbook and workbook. If the teacher does not feel secure in her/his knowledge of these faith traditions the temptation to fast forward the video and avoid the children’s questions about these faiths may be acute.

Michael Barnes notes that the temptation “to retreat to somewhere more safe, to a place which – we feel – is ours to command, a place which is at all costs to be defended against the darkness of an unknown threat”, is always a part of inter-faith dialogue and indeed education about different faiths. But it is unfair to judge the whole Alive-O programme on the basis of perceived deficiencies in one area. The Alive-O programme has many positive attributes. However, it could not be said that the Alive-O programme exhibits a keen awareness of the principles of inter-religious dialogue or of the necessity of teaching children about world faiths within the Catholic sector. If the national catechetical programme does not integrate an interfaith awareness into the programme, linking it to other subjects within the revised curriculum, then it becomes very difficult for teachers to respond to Nostra Aetate’s exhortation to “acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men (sic), as well as the values in their society and culture”. How can a teacher or a pupil acknowledge, preserve and promote something about which they know very little? And if the primary programme remains silent on this issue what informa-

57 For instance Alive O 5, Unit 7 ‘We include others’ explores the topic of cultural and religious inclusion for 3rd class primary children.
58 Alive O 5, Video Unit 6: ‘We relate to God’ sequence 1 & 2. The leaflet which accompanies the video does include a series of questions which the teacher might ask about the video segments but they are by no means comprehensive. The wisdom of simultaneously introducing children to two world faiths without giving teachers any detailed guidelines has to be questioned.
59 Michael Barnes Walking the City ISPCK 1999, p.xvii.
tion is being communicated by its silence? Perhaps in the absence of direct guidance it could be surmised that it is appropriate for Catholics to be unconcerned with or embarrassed by religiously diverse communities. The suggestion that Catholic schools should acknowledge, promote and respect the truths found within different world faiths is not equivalent to saying that Catholics should deny the distinctiveness of their own tradition or cease believing in it. It is not to suggest that a type of religious relativism permeate the school where all religious traditions are accorded equivalent status to the Catholic tradition. Catholic teaching makes this abundantly clear. *Dominus Iesus* sees that the Church's missionary proclamation is "endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism".\(^{60}\) The Church also rejects "the theory of the limited, incomplete, or imperfect character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, which would be complementary to that found in other religions".\(^{61}\) It is vital to note that the Catholic Church holds a sincere respect for the religions of the world but it simultaneously rules out "that mentality of indifferentism characterised by a religious relativism which leads to the belief that 'one religion is as good as another'."\(^{62}\)

However, refuting the notion that all religious traditions are equally valid is not the same as saying that Catholic children should only learn about that one faith and ignore all others. Catholic schools, in order to be true to Catholic teaching and to operate on the principles of respect for cultural and religious diversity, should build into all areas of their curriculum, and in the area of religious education in particular, an appreciation of world faiths. The 1999 primary curriculum has identified "pluralism, a respect for diversity and the importance of tolerance,"\(^{63}\) as a key issue in primary education. Here the primary curriculum does not conflict with the Catholic religious education programme but rather provides Catholic schools with an opportunity to bear witness to their Catholic faith.

In Catholic schools children should be taught about world faiths in a sensitive and intelligent manner. Teaching about world faiths should not be based on the number of pupils who come from a variety of faith traditions in a class or school. All children in a Catholic school have a right to learn about the faith of different religious traditions in the world precisely because they are in a Catholic school which respectfully acknowledges, promotes and preserves the truths of those traditions. Each faith should be taught in its own right. The positive aspects of the faith should be explored and the teacher should always attempt to shatter crude stereotypes and superficial understandings of the faith. Ireland is a multi-faith society and teachers in Catholic schools have an opportunity to show children that there are many living faiths practiced by

\(^{60}\) *Dominus Iesus*, 6 August, 2000, par 4.

\(^{61}\) ibid. par 6.

\(^{62}\) *Dominus Iesus*, 22.

\(^{63}\) *Primary School Curriculum Introduction*, p 9.
ordinary people in contemporary Ireland. The school should take the opportunity to ensure in its whole school planning that the major faith traditions (e.g. Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam) are given a basic respectful coverage in the primary school. This might mean that every academic year, each class, from second class onwards, (in many countries it occurs prior to this)\textsuperscript{64} could be allocated a specific world faith to learn about in religious education class. This would provide Catholic primary schools with an opportunity to teach children respect and tolerance for the society in which they live, as well as a deeper realisation of what it means to be Catholic. It would also serve to integrate the primary religious education programme with the newly established, state examined, post-primary religion programme which provides modules in the area of world faiths. Inevitably there are resource and in-service implications if world faiths is to become an important aspect of the Catholic primary religious education programme. However, a greater range of inter-cultural and inter-religious resources are being designed for Irish schools.\textsuperscript{65} Indeed many Irish primary schools use the internet\textsuperscript{66} as an excellent resource for researching world faith and indeed for displaying primary children's work on world faiths.\textsuperscript{67}

One thing is certain. Catholic schools face a challenge if they are to implement Catholic teaching in their religious education programme. With the recent statement that a new Catholic syllabus may be designed for primary religious education\textsuperscript{68} the Church will be given an opportunity to turn good Catholic teaching into better educational practice.

\textsuperscript{64} E.g. in the UK children learn thematically and experientially about Christianity and one of the following religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism at Reception and Key Stage 1. cf. Living Faiths: Today’s Model Syllabuses for Religious Education, Key Stages 1 – 4, School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, London, 1994.

\textsuperscript{65} For instance, the Intercultural Calendar 2003 which is provided by Access Ireland, The Refugee Social Integration project, or Rafiki, the Interactive CD-Rom for Irish children.

\textsuperscript{66} One must always be mindful of taking extreme care when using the internet with children (see the FBI guidelines http://www.familyfriendliesites.com/Familyfriendy/viewcat_ws.asp?ID=241. Also use a children's search engine such as Yahooligans.

\textsuperscript{67} To see an example of children's work on Sikhism in a Dublin (Educate Together) primary school visit the website http://www.iol.ie/~ndhsp/reliefs/sieh2.htm.

\textsuperscript{68} The Irish Catholic, November 2002.
Chapter 8: Current Issues
A number of issues pertaining to the teaching of religion in primary schools has emerged in this report. In general, there is a perceived decline in religious practice among families attending schools. This development was recorded in the INTO survey, focus groups and is acknowledged in several other sections in this report. This feature of recent Irish society is not new. Various social commentators and surveys have been tracking this shift in religious culture in greater detail and in a more systematic way since the 1970s. It is a more complex concept than a decline in religious practice which is often interpreted as church attendance. The phenomenon as examined by sociologists covers values, beliefs and behaviour as well as various religious practices including prayer, church services and spirituality. The commentaries point up different paces of change in regard to values and beliefs (slower) and those of behaviour – church participation (faster). What is important for this document is that this change is the backdrop to many of the experiences that teachers report regarding religious education and, where appropriate, religious formation and preparation of the sacraments. The changing attitudes and practice help us to understand the nature and level of support that families may provide in religious education, their knowledge and familiarity with liturgical services, their involvement with the parish and their support in sacramental preparation. An awareness of these cultural changes also enables us to appreciate the position and roles of teachers and appreciate the pressures and constraints on clergy. The reported change and decline throws the schools’ role and function in religious education and formation in particular into sharp focus, particularly in the case of denominational schools.

Pluralism

A general appreciation of more pluralist opinions and preferences exists in society today. Pluralism is required by the Education Act (1998) and is addressed in various

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provisions since then. In their responses to the INTO survey teachers also acknowledged and identified with pluralism in a number of ways. Respondents strongly endorsed the right of families to choose schools for their children with only a small percentage of respondents disagreeing with the option of school choice. A majority of schools had children of other faiths enrolled though, in most cases, the number was small. However, a further dimension of pluralism is described by Sr Eileen Randles in her article where “disaffected, indifferent or even hostile parents have frequently no choice of school” – creating a different kind of challenge for denominational schools.

The multi-denominational school sector specifically incorporates a pluralist perspective. There was an aspiration among survey respondents to include teaching about other religions but an absence of agreement on how to achieve it. As highlighted by Dr Patricia Kieran, there is little formal guidance for denominational Catholic schools regarding this issue. The case studies reported by various schools indicate the steps taken to accommodate family beliefs and create for them a sense of being fully included. However, the usual experience of most schools is that a very small minority of pupils are of other faiths or traditions or of no faith, therefore, schools as institutions will only slowly perceive a need for an evaluation of how they organise and at a deeper level truly accommodate differences. An alternative procedure is to level differences in the name of pluralist harmony and sensitivity in preference to the more challenging process of mutual recognition, respect and celebration of difference. As identified by Dr Pádraig Hogan the multi-denominational sector has made extensive efforts to achieve agreement on these matters.

**Parental Support**

The level of reported, active parental support for religious education and formation was considered low, particularly by survey respondents in denominational schools. What is of note is the general acceptance of the values and beliefs promoted by the schools and the small number of pupils reported to be opting out of religious education. What emerged as significant for survey respondents was the level of active family support particularly in the area of sacrament preparation. The decline in family involvement with formal religion has resulted in lower church attendance and less familiarity with the liturgical year, church beliefs and doctrine. Most parents of school going children were themselves pupils at a time of significant transition in Catholic religious education in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result many families feel less competent and confident in fulfilling supportive duties that earlier generations fulfilled. The focus group participant who likened the teaching of religious education to teaching Irish may have been quite prescient. Addressing these concerns of teachers raises many questions regarding the role of the school – denominational schools in particular – and of teachers in relation to religious education. To what extent does a school define its
responsibility in home as well as school terms in religious education? And what is the school's position within its 'community' in relation to core school values?

**Clerical Involvement**

Clerical visits to schools and classrooms have often been seen as a general benchmark of parish support for denominational schools. As fewer denominational schools have members of religious orders as staff members such visits may have taken on a greater significance. The current level of visits was of concern to a significant number of survey respondents, who feel almost totally responsible for religious and moral education and sacramental preparation. Clerical visits to schools have traditionally covered a number of often overlapping purposes: as chairperson or board of management member, as chaplain, as parish representative and to support the teaching of religion. The reduced number of clergy may place pressures on them that result in constraints on the time allocated to their diverse responsibilities, including schools. Lay parishioners have begun to take on some responsibilities and ministries. School support may soon become a role for a lay minister rather than a priest or the parish. Whatever the future, a response from the clergy to the criticisms of teachers as outlined in this report would be welcome.

**Denominational Schools**

The opinions expressed in the survey indicate that teachers in many denominational schools are experiencing a change in the balance of responsibility for religious education and formation. Dr Hogan set these in a wider framework. Such schools are embedded within a parish structure. This situated the school within a family and parish network of relationships. However, elements of this network are experiencing significant changes already. The pressures were perceived by survey respondents and focus group participants as bringing about a redistribution of responsibility and raising questions for teachers as to where the onus currently is and where it ought to be. It may also be the case that schools' share has remained much the same while others' contribution to the responsibilities envisaged has changed over time. Whichever, this is occurring at a time when teachers' own religious beliefs and attitudes may be changing as well. In denominational schools just over half of the survey respondents saw their role in religious education and formation as one of supporting the family and parish. While two-thirds believed that the school ought to prepare the children for the sacraments, the respondents were divided as to who was most responsible for this. Resolving the issues identified here will mean examining the role of and the relationships the school has with its community's increasingly divergent constituent parts.
Ethos

Ethos or characteristic spirit of schools is manifested in a number of different ways. Both Sr Eileen Randles and Educate Together see ethos as an outcome of school participants' purposeful behaviour and their everyday interactions within an agreed framework. Both emphasised the processes and the ideal outcomes striven for. According to the INTO survey and the focus group reports teachers also emphasised the symbolic and behavioural manifestations. The emphases are complementary. One discussion group rapporteur noted that "participants found the [school ethos] question difficult to answer". However, a careful reading of the school case studies and the focus group reports indicates that many aspects of both dimensions of ethos are present in schools: in the climate of care for all pupils, the policies adopted and the levels of contact and consultation undertaken. The different emphases may also highlight the different understandings of ethos that are commonly held. One view has been identified as the custodial or ownership view - one traditionally held in Ireland - while the other view sees it as created and constituted by the interactions and collaboration of the school's various components. An examination of ethos or characteristic spirit may provide a school community with an opportunity to reflect on the issues raised in this report.

Teachers' Views

What are the current views of teachers in relation to their roles, purposes and responsibilities? These need to be seen in light of the foregoing findings: changes in religious practice, the increasing multi-denominational intake in a majority of schools and the definition of and level of support for religious education. A wide variety of views exist in relation to teaching of religion. Its purpose as understood by the respondents to the INTO survey varied widely and there was no consensus. Three dominant views represented the vast majority of teachers: a faith development perspective; one emphasising development of moral values based in, but not totally dependent upon, a specific religion; and, informing children of a set of facts. Each perspective assumes a concept of community: a community of believers, a community based on respect and responsibility and one that respects an appreciation of the unique heritage of its community. It is in this context that the vast majority of respondents reported teaching religion willingly. These perspectives are mirrored by respondents' differing views on the necessity to believe the religious faith one taught.

Given the age profile of respondents these attitudes may not fully reflect inter-cohort change. An older cohort of teachers may hold views and beliefs nurtured and

70 A recent discussion on these issues is available in James Norman (2000), Ethos and the Catholic School, Ideas 47, pp 66-79
developed earlier in a more religiously and institutionally supportive environment. Whether they practice or not at present, they will have been reared, educated, trained and socialised professionally in a different milieu and so benefit from that cultural and religious heritage. Later cohorts may represent shifts in attitude that merit consideration.

**Religious Education Programmes**

The religious education programmes taught in school are very much in keeping with modern pedagogy and their child-centred principles facilitate teachers through their usability and versatility. They contain material and approaches that may be used in ways appropriate to teachers' personal perspectives: at a faith formation level, at a moral development level as well as an information level that facilitate discretion as regards the emphasis a teacher chooses to exercise. It could be argued that the reported willingness to teach religious education is the result of a combination of a teachers' purposes and choice of emphasis (faith, moral and values education) that reflects the resolution of individual teachers' preferred personal positions. It appears that, in areas dealing with religious education per se, teachers accept greater responsibility and see a strong role for the school whereas in the preparation for the sacraments, when separately investigated, greater co-operation and support is expected from parents and the clergy. The vast majority of teachers indicated that there was an approved religious education programme in their schools. What is of note is the number indicating a preference for teaching children about other religions. This is current practice in multi-denominational schools already. For the remainder it may be a response to the presence of pupils of other religions in their schools and may also indicate a response, or at least an awareness of the increasing multi-cultural profile of Irish society. It may also point towards the possible growth and development of a multi-denominational or pluralist orientation in religious education within denominational schools. This position reflects that of the State as outlined in the revised primary curriculum which acknowledges the spiritual dimension and sees religious education enabling the child to develop spiritual and moral values and come to a knowledge of God. It echoes also Dr Hogan's consideration of the educative role of teachers.

**Education in Religion**

There appears to be a general consensus among primary teachers that the education system should retain its denominational characteristics and that religious education

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should take place in schools. There is also a great deal of support for the inclusion of
schools with a multi-denominational ethos. The multi-denominational sector has
agreed guidelines and procedures in place, where religious education is seen as sepa­
rate from religious instruction – a separation that does not occur in the denomina­
tional sectors. There are various dilemmas that result from the integration of the two
purposes in religion teaching: “education in religion and nurture in religion”. It is,
perhaps, timely to consider the introduction of a religious education programme in all
schools which would help children to achieve a knowledge and understanding of reli­
gious insights, beliefs and practices. As stated by the INTO in its earlier report on The
Place of Religious Education in the National School System (1991), education in religion –
which is the responsibility of all schools – should aim at helping pupils to understand
what religion is and what it means to take religion seriously. On the other hand,
nurture in religion – which is the responsibility of the home and church community –
is seen as the initiation of a child into the faith and religious tradition of the family. The
particular role of denominational schools warrants further consideration, as such
schools are usually located in a parish, and are considered as part of the parish’s contrib­
tion to the religious formation of its community. However, as evident in this report
school communities are no longer synonymous with parish communities. They are no
longer homogeneous, and cater for a wider range of pupils than those of a particular
parish. The INTO, through the publication of it earlier report in 1991, initiated a discus­
sion not only on the teaching of religious education and the primary education system
but also raised questions on the place of religion and its relationship with education in
a rapidly changing and increasingly pluralistic society. The present survey, school and
focus group reports and the invited presentations show that some progress has taken
place.

Conclusion

The INTO survey results and the additional contributions to this report indicate that
the complex issue of religion in primary education requires careful consideration and
analysis. Among the issues involved are an understanding of the community that the
school serves and the role of the denominational school within that community. The
respective roles and expectations of families and parish personnel and the comple­
mentary role of teachers are other dimensions requiring further discussion. The
dilemma facing many denominational schools in relation to school ethos – the poten­
tial tension between the ethos of a traditional denominational school, a climate of
care, and the need for openness and sensitivity in a more pluralist manner. How
should the openness to other religions be manifested? Partnership, as highlighted by

Dr Hogan carries crucial responsibilities. Consultation, listening and accommodation demand an ability, a language and a willingness to present and understand various positions. Dialogue at all levels is essential in order to develop a framework where the necessary structures and processes to be used to address the issues identified in this report can be put in place. There is a role for the State, the churches and school communities. It is time also to acknowledge that teachers bring their own personal and professional perspectives to these issues which are changing as the general cultural milieu changes.
APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Denominational Breakdown of Primary Schools

Appendix 2: The Constitution Pertaining to Religion and The Rules for National Schools

Appendix 3: Reports from INTO Focus Groups

APPENDIX ONE

Denominational breakdown of primary schools in Ireland for the year 2002-2003

* these figures do not include special schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>2,919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of Ireland</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-Denominational</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Denominational</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,155</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX TWO

THE CONSTITUTION PERTAINING TO RELIGION AND THE RULES FOR NATIONAL SCHOOLS

The Constitution (Bunreacht na hÉireann)

The constitutional position with regard to education in Ireland is set out in Articles 42 and 44 of the Constitution of Ireland, 1937.

Article 42 of the Constitution refers to the obligation of the State and the rights and duty of parents in education.

ARTICLE 42

1. The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.

2. Parents shall be free to provide this education in their homes or in private schools or in schools recognised or established by the State.

3.1 The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State.

3.2 The State shall, however, as guardian of the common good, require in view of actual conditions that the children receive a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual and social.

4. The State shall provide for free primary education and shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative, and, when the public good requires it, provide other educational facilities or institutions with due regard, however, for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation.

5. In exceptional cases, where the parents for physical or moral reasons fail in their duty towards their children, the State as guardian of the common good, by appropriate means shall endeavour to supply the place of the parents, but always with due regard for the natural and imprescriptible rights of the child.
Article 44 of the Constitution acknowledges and provides for freedom of religious practice.

ARTICLE 44

1.1 The State acknowledges that the homage of public worship is due to Almighty God. It shall hold His Name in reverence, and shall respect and honour religion.

2.2 The State guarantees not to endow any religion.

2.3 The State shall not impose any disabilities or make any discrimination on the grounds of religious profession, belief or status.

2.4 Legislation providing State aid for schools shall not discriminate between schools under the management of different religious denominations, nor be such as to affect prejudicially the right of any child to attend a school receiving public money without attending religious instruction at that school.

2.5 The property of any religious denomination or any educational institution shall not be diverted save for necessary works of public utility and on payment of compensation.

Article 42 establishes clearly that parents have the primary rights and responsibilities for the education of their children. The role of the State is subsidiary and supportive and is to protect and promote these parental rights with a limited right to prescribe that 'a certain minimum education' be attained.

It should be noted that there is a distinction between the duty of parents in Section 1 of Article 42 which includes religious education, and the rights of the State in Section 3.2 of Article 42 to require children to receive "a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual and social", omitting, presumably by design, the word "religious". The reference to "religious" in Section 4 of Article 42 is expressed to be related to "formation".

A number of court judgements have clarified the meaning of sections of the articles on education. A judgement in 1965 in relation to Article 42.1 declared that the term "education" was not broad enough to include the general process of nurturing and rearing but must be of "a scholastic nature". An effort by the School Attendance Bill of 1942 to confer on the Minister for Education the express power to prescribe the content and the manner of imparting the education which children might receive other than by attending a national school, a suitable school or a recognised school, was adjudged to be unconstitutional when referred by the President of Ireland to the Supreme Court in 1943. This underlined the limited power of the Minister to define "a certain minimum education" as set out in Article 42.3.2.

A 1974 judgement pointed out that the Constitution recognises and reflects a firm conviction that the people of this State are a religious people and that, as it then stood, the Constitution referred specifically to a number of religious denominations which
coexisted within the State, thereby acknowledging the fact that while we are a religious people we also live in a pluralist society from the religious point of view.

Articles 42.2.4 and 44.2.6 relate to the State's acceptance and protection of denominational interests in education and make explicit the State's role in providing state aid for denominational schooling. This was further emphasised in the Rules for National Schools which, following a setting forth of the constitutional provisions, added the following note:

*In pursuance of these Articles, the State provides for free primary education for children in national schools, and gives explicit recognition to the denominational character of these schools.*

The Constitution does not rule out recognition by the state of non-denominational or multi-denominational schools.

**The Rules for National Schools**

The place of religious instruction within the school is clearly enunciated in the official Rules for National Schools in the Chapter headed Religious Instruction.

Rule 68 emphasises the importance of religion and morality in the curriculum and in the work of the school.

**RULE 68**

Of all parts of the school curriculum religious instruction is by far the most important, as its subject matter. God's honour and service, includes the proper use of all man's faculties, and affords the most powerful inducements to their proper use. Religious instruction is, therefore, a fundamental part of the school course, and a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school.

The teacher should constantly inculcate the practice of charity, justice, truth, purity, patience, temperance, obedience to lawful authority, and all the moral virtues. In this way he will fulfil the primary duty of an educator, the moulding to perfect form of his pupils' character, habituating them to observe, in their relations with God and with their neighbours, the law which God, both directly through the dictates of natural reason and through Revelation, and indirectly through the ordinance of lawful authority, imposes on mankind.
Rule 69 outlines procedures for arranging formal religious instruction and for facilitating the withdrawal of pupils if required.

RULE 69
The religious denomination of each pupil must be entered in the school register and roll-book. This information should be ascertained from the parent (the father, if possible) or the guardian of the pupil, where necessary.

(2) (a) No pupil shall receive, or be present at, any religious instruction of which his parents or guardian disapprove.

(b) The periods for formal religious instruction shall be fixed so as to facilitate the withdrawal of pupils to whom paragraph (a) of this section applies.

(3) Where such religious instruction as their parents or guardians approve is not provided in the school for any section of the pupils, such pupils must, should their parents or guardians so desire, be allowed to absent themselves from school, at reasonable times, for the purpose of receiving that instruction elsewhere.

(4) Visitors may not be present during formal religious instruction unless with the express approval of the manager.

(5) The periods of formal religious instruction shall be indicated on the timetable.

Possible alternative arrangements for children unable to avail of religious instruction in their own denomination locally are provided for in Rule 35 under certain conditions.

RULE 35
(1) Where appropriate religious instruction is not available to the children of a particular denomination in a national school within reasonable distance of their homes, the Minister is prepared to consider the question of recognising a school in accordance with the Rules on condition that the average daily enrolment of pupils is not less than 12.

(2) As an alternative to the payment of grants to a school, the Minister may contribute towards the cost of conveying the children to a suitable neighbouring school, provided that the average number of children conveyed will not be less than that required for the recognition and continuance of grants to a school and that the cost will not be greater than the total grants payable in respect of such a school.
Appendix Two

The time tabling of religious instruction in accordance with Rule 69 (2)(b) is set out in Rule 54.

RULE 54.1
The timetable must be displayed in a conspicuous place in the school.

RULE 54.2
The timetable must show: - (a) the times for religious instruction and secular instruction.

Attendance at religious exercises is allowed for within Rule 56 pertaining to attendance at secular instruction.

RULE 56.7
In order to enable pupils of any standard to attend each month religious exercises under arrangements sanctioned by the Manager.

(a) the time required for an “attendance” under section (2) of this rule, in schools where there is only one meeting daily, may be reduced by one hour on one day in the month or by half-hour on each of two days in the month, and

(b) the time required for a “half attendance” under section (2)(b) of this rule in schools where there are two meetings daily, may be reduced by one hour for one meeting in the month, or by one half-hour at each of two meetings in the month.

RULE 56.8
The minimum time constituting an “attendance” or “half-attendance” as defined in section (2) of this rule may include (a) the time spent by a child during schools hours at the annual Diocesan examination in religious knowledge.

The Rules for National Schools draw a clear distinction between religious instruction and secular instruction and provide for freedom in the matter of attendance at the denominational instruction for pupils. The Rules also emphasise the importance of a religious spirit within the school and impose upon the teacher responsibilities in relation to the moral education of the pupils.
FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

The focus groups on religion took place in September and October 2002 in both Dublin and Cork. Three separate focus group were organised: (i) for teachers in schools under Catholic patronage, (ii) teachers in schools under Church of Ireland or other Protestant patronage and (iii) teachers from multi-denominational (Educate Together) schools. Each focus group comprised between seven and eight practising teachers, from a variety of primary schools according to size and location. Questions asked were similar to those that were included in the questionnaire, the results of which are outlined in Chapter 2.

Catholic Schools

This Focus Group involved seven teachers – six females and one male. The teachers were from a variety of backgrounds, and included:
- A class teacher in a large urban school.
- The principal of a two-teacher country school, who also teaches Confirmation classes.
- A communion class teacher in a six-teacher rural school.
- A class teacher in a rural three-teacher school.
- A class teacher in a small urban school.
- The administrative principal of an urban school.
- A learning support teacher shared between four schools.

The Group discussed the teaching of religion from a number of perspectives:
- The school’s religious ethos.
- The teacher’s religious convictions.
- The role of religion in the school’s community.
- Sacraments.
- Opting out of teaching religion.
- Parental choice.

SCHOOL RELIGIOUS ETHOS

The Group began the discussion by considering whether the ethos of their schools is influenced by the fact that their schools are Catholic. Participants found the question difficult to answer, but pointed out that a visitor to the school would know that the
school was Catholic because of the statues and religious symbols in the building, and because the children engage in religious activities, such as prayer and assemblies. However, some members of the group also pointed out that they would like to think that their schools would show the existence of Christian values: "If we were truly Catholic," said one, "there would be a caring atmosphere, and everyone would feel welcome and it would be obvious that we cared for and respected each other. You can have all the statues in the world and be at each other's throats, so there is more to a Catholic ethos than just symbolism."

The Group believed firmly in the value of assemblies to the school: "It is a nice idea", said one, "the whole school gathering together." Various forms of seasonal religious activities took place. "In October and May, we say a decade of the rosary," explained one teacher, "and you know, one day a man came in - not an inspector or anything, just an ordinary member of the community - and he just got his rosary out of his pocket and joined in with us!" "We have a May procession," another participant stated. "It's been a tradition in our school for years and years. We crown Our Lady queen of our school and say a rosary. The Communion children get dressed up. It's a nice occasion. They scatter petals."

Other members of the Group described similar events. One described how: "In November we pray for the dead - with no reference to Hell or anything. We just pray for our loved ones who have died." At another school, the teacher explained, they "have a mass at the end of the year. There's a big turnout for that, including parents. So, yes, it's very much a community event. Even people who have no children at tending the school come along."

These events are, in one participant's words "big in the kids' lives. The younger they are the more it means to them. Even the fact that the Communion children are dressed up makes it special. They are very well behaved and reverent."

THE TEACHER'S RELIGIOUS CONVICTIONS
The Group then considered whether a teacher should practice the religion that s/he teaches.

Most members of the Group believed that, while it is better if a teacher believes the religion being practiced in the school, it is by no means necessary that this be the case. As one teacher explained, "I don't consider myself in any way a practising Catholic anymore. Not that I was ever seriously practising it in the first place. However, I prepare First Communion class and my parish priest knows well that I don't attend church. So I said to him, 'I shouldn't be doing this job at all'. But he said that I was the ideal person for the job."

Some members of the Group felt that not being a believer of the religion taught in the school might negatively affect a teacher's employment and promotion prospects, and all agreed that, as one participant put it, "I don't think it is necessary to believe, but
it would probably make your life easier if you did.”

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE SCHOOL’S COMMUNITY

The Group felt very strongly about the decline of religious practice in their local communities.

This decline has been quite shocking for some of the Group. “I remember,” said one, “In junior infants years ago, when the children arrived in school on the first day they would all be able to say the Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father, and of course, to bless themselves. Not so today…”

One participant asked, with obvious frustration, “Are we the only ones that are still fulfilling this idea that the school is supposed to be passing on religion? Because the priests don’t visit anymore, and don’t know the children anymore — and the parents don’t take the children to Mass anymore.”

In some parishes, priests and teachers were working together to face these new developments. “Our parish priest changed the format of communion,” said one teacher. “The parents go up with their children and present their children for Communion — and then the parents can come up themselves later, if they wish. It was very thoughtful.”

“Without backing at home, what we are doing is an absolute joke,” said one teacher. “It’s like the teaching of knitting. There was a time when you could teach a child in sixth class to knit an Aran jumper, because someone at home could help. Now we don’t teach knitting. It’s the same with religion. If the backup isn’t there at home, you are wasting your time.”

In response to this, another member of the Group stated that this made sense: “The children’s parents just don’t believe it any more.” “But nobody believes it anymore,” another member of the Group stated. “The children question it; the parents have no interest in it; and very few of us believe half of what we are teaching. But if you turned around in the morning and said ‘I’m not teaching religion any more,’ there would be holy murder.”

SACRAMENTS

The Group all believed that preparing children for sacraments takes up a lot of time.

The learning support teacher, who had a different perspective, confirmed this, saying that, “My times with classes are greatly affected around the time of communion, because there is so much up and down to the church for practice. Not all the schools are going to the same church, so there is disruption for a few weeks, which does affect the children who attend learning support.”

Many of the participants believe that the sacraments should no longer be the responsibility of the school. Participants pointed out that future teachers were less likely to be enthusiastic about the teaching of religion. “I have a daughter in Mary
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Immaculate,” one teacher said. “An awful lot of her contemporaries haven’t been inside a church for years. How are they going to go out and prepare children for sacraments? We do it — we were reared to it. Even if we don’t practice now we were immersed in it as children. But they won’t have the same background at all.”

The group’s members discussed the fact that they all had varying religious beliefs. Some remain practising Catholics; others no longer practice. However, there was a consensus that the important issue for many of them was not “Whether we teach religion in school. The children need something.” However, said the teacher, “I don’t think we should prepare children for the sacraments.” That view seemed to be shared by most members of the group.

OPTING OUT OF TEACHING RELIGION

The Group was asked whether their boards of management would support them if they decided not to teach religion. One teacher believed that her board of management would “accommodate someone who did have a conscientious objection to teaching religion”, most other responses were negative.

One participant stated that: “Much of what we do in the religion course is really valuable. Children love quiet prayer, because they have terrible noise in their lives and they love switching off. They love the quietness. They are very reverent about it. I often say to them: “that might stand to you in later life”. So there is a lot in the programme that is valuable.” Another teacher agreed with this: “The formation of conscience is very important. Teaching children about making choices is very good.”

Furthermore, as one participant stated, “If the teacher no longer teaches religion, my fear is that it would be taken over by fanatical people. What we are doing in school is very important. But it should not be done in isolation.”

PARENTAL CHOICE

The Group next considered whether parents should have a choice about where they send their children. Responses varied.

“I think the whole thing should be completely removed from the school,” said one member of the Group. “I also think,” said another, “that it’s time that parents were given more choices in relation to the religious education of their children. We need to move with the times, and what is happening in schools now is not reflecting what is happening in society. Logistically, it is difficult to see how this could be organised, especially now that there is less money around, but it is important.”

Other participants believe that religious education is too important to be removed from the school. In response to this, one member of the Group stated that that “There’s nothing to stop us from teaching religion on a voluntary basis after school.”

Regardless of what system is brought in, there was general agreement that change is necessary. “It can’t go on as it is now,” said one member of the Group. “I think it will
change in the next few years. The parents who really want to have their children prepared for sacraments will have to show their commitment and get seriously involved in the preparation. Schools will also have to consider getting trained specialists involved in the teaching of religion. And, in general, I think the whole involvement of the churches in the management structure of the school will have to change.”

One member of the group suggested that the whole primary school system should become non-denominational—“especially since the state pays for the running of the schools. Then each denomination would have to cater for their own specific needs in religion. It would make life easier for the teacher in the classroom.” This comment was greeted with general agreement, and the discussion concluded.

**Church of Ireland / Protestant Schools**

The Focus Group was composed of eight teachers, (six women – two men) from five Church of Ireland schools in the greater Dublin area. In general, their level of teaching experience was varied, ranging from recently qualified to over 20 years’ experience.

The Group discussed the role of teaching religion in the primary school system from a number of perspectives:

- School ethos.
- Clerical involvement.
- Children not of the school’s faith.
- Preparation for the sacraments.
- Teaching religion.
- The importance of teachers’ faith and spiritual life.
- Challenges at system level.
- Interdenominational education.
- Teacher education.
- The parish.

**SCHOOL ETHOS**

Participants were asked how a visitor to their school would know that it was a Church of Ireland school. “If you came in on a Wednesday, when we have assembly, you would see the Church of Ireland rector,” said one teacher. “I think that is the only thing that would distinguish it in our school.” They added that there are few obvious differences between the ethos of Catholic and Church of Ireland schools. “I think if you compared it directly with a Catholic school, you wouldn’t have crucifixes or other similar kinds of symbols in a Church of Ireland school.”
CLERICAL INVOLVEMENT

Participants stated that the clergy play an important role in their schools. "In our school," said one, "the rector comes in and teaches sixth class once a week, and the curate then teaches the junior classes, and would have close links with the parish." Furthermore, participants said that they take part in Christmas, Easter and Good Friday services. They also have a church assembly once a month. These assemblies are open not only to the children’s parents, but to the entire parish, who are encouraged to attend.

CHILDREN NOT OF SCHOOL’S FAITH

"Ours is a Church of Ireland school in name," said one teacher, "but it has many different denominations." Results from the INTO Survey on Religion showed that this is the case for most Church of Ireland schools. Participants think there are many reasons for this. "I suppose it originally came down to numbers," said one. "We needed extra pupils to set up the schools, and now we are taking in their sisters and brothers as well."

Parents of children who are not of the school’s faith will have many reasons for sending their children to a Church of Ireland school. "I don’t think it is necessarily because of the religion," a participant stated. "Things like the smaller classes in our schools seem to be a bigger influence for the majority of parents." Another participant explained the situation succinctly: "I think that people who are Church of Ireland, like to be able to send their children to Church of Ireland schools – and I’m sure many Catholic parents feel the same way. But we have many parents who have no preference. If the school is in the area, and it’s handy – and if there’s a bus to bring the children home – then these things will take priority over the denomination of the school."

Other members of the Group agreed with this. "Our local Catholic school is huge – it’s really four schools, junior girls and boys, senior girls and boys. There’s a uniform and it is regimented. Our school is the opposite: it is much smaller, with loads of space. There is no uniform, and Catholic parents choose it simply because it is so different to the Catholic school."

"There is an Educate Together school very close to us now," one participant stated, "And there has been no drop in applications to our school. It didn’t make any difference that it had just opened, no-one pulled out and sent their children there instead – so I think that it’s not just about religion."

The families of such children accept that when they are sent to a Church of Ireland school, the children will participate in the Church of Ireland religious education programme. Some parents ask that their children be allowed to opt out of religious education, but it is not generally the case that this happens. "I have two pupils who opt out, but, given the nature of the programme, this may only happen twice a week, when the explicitly religious aspect of the programme is being discussed," one
participant said. "Other than that, they would follow the rest of the programme."

Another teacher mentioned that she'd had few pupils withdraw. "We had a Muslim pupil a couple of years ago, and it was requested that he sat out for religion. His parents requested this. However, his sister is in the school now, but she stays in the class."

When parents ask that their children be allowed to opt out of religious education, the school usually facilitates the children easily. In some senior classes, the parents will themselves undertake the supervision of the child during religion class. Assemblies and church services are somewhat more complicated, participants said, since most of the staff will be involved with these: "We are relying on special needs assistants or resource teachers to supervise children at such times."

One Church of Ireland school had a Catholic Parents' Association, which organises special religion classes for Catholic children after school. All Catholic children in the school from first class onwards, take part in Catholic denominational education after school, which is organised and funded by the parents.

There is, according to some participants, a difference between having children of other Christian faiths in the school, and children of other religions. "Christmas is part of the Christian faith, irrespective of the faith being Catholic or Protestant. It, and Easter, are fundamental to both religions, so that can help matters," said one member of the Group. However, all children are encouraged to participate to some extent in the school's spiritual life. In one school, "All the children take part in multi-faith assemblies, and go to choir practice every Friday, irrespective of their religion." Even though the schools were under Church of Ireland management, teachers stated that they were careful to respect the religions of others.

PREPARATION FOR SACRAMENTS

Preparation for sacraments in Church of Ireland schools takes place in a different manner than is the case in Catholic schools. As one teacher explained, "Preparation for sacraments is the job of the clergy. On the day of Confirmation, the school choir will sing and the rector would be there – and the principal and class teacher sometimes turn up too. But it's the clergy's job." However, one teacher stated that it "wouldn't be a problem for me" if teachers were requested to teach sacraments.

Participants were asked if they thought children in their school benefitted more from being prepared by the clergy. "If they did it in school, they would probably just see it as school work," they pointed out. "Doing it out of school hours means that children may be more positive about it. And when it is done outside of school, at least it is done regularly and by the rector, who is fully qualified." Another teacher agreed with this assessment. "It's more special for children when it is not part of their school work."

However, another participant was less certain about the value of doing things this way. "You could argue that if the sacraments are an important part of your life, they should be something that touches every part of your life – not just religion. So we
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could start to think about trying to make links between religion and other subjects – teaching it as part of life skills, as part of SPHE, etc.”

TEACHING RELIGION

Most participants agreed that children should be taught about all religions, not only for the purposes of general knowledge, but also as a means of avoiding the creation of racism and discrimination through ignorance. Religion should be taught across the curriculum, according to the Group.

Respondents were generally not in favour of non-denominational education, with one saying that “It’s a very difficult just to leave God out of it altogether.” Another stated, “For many children who aren’t familiarised with God at home, school is the only place that they may hear of Him. But if it is a non-denominational school, they mightn’t hear about it at all. Yes, parents may want to send their children to a school where religion is not taught – but why not give the child the information, and let him or her decide at a later age? At least they will have been exposed to it. At least they will know about it.”

One member of the Group described how some children have had no prior education in religion: “Once, while I was reading a bible story, a child asked me who Jesus was. The child had never heard of Jesus. So it shows the importance of having some religion in the school.”

Participants were also worried about the practicalities of teaching a non-denominational curriculum. “If you’re teaching geography, for example, what happens when you want to talk about the importance of Islam in North Africa? Learning about religion is part of general knowledge as well as religious education.”

Communities throughout Ireland are becoming more multi-cultural. The Group was asked how they thought the primary school system should be adapted to respond. “I think,” one teacher said, “that all schools must have some broad overview of each religion, and incorporate that into whatever syllabus that they are teaching. In a rural area, the children should at least be exposed to the different world religions. If the school is Church of Ireland or Catholic, they would obviously be pressing home their beliefs about Christianity, but the others should at least be acknowledged, so that you know what they’re about, and know the origins and customs of those religions.”

Teachers were of the view that a lot of what is taught in religious education is very SPHE oriented. For example, on teacher stated, “We talk about the principles by which we live, relating them to the bible – but these basic principles are shared by other religions so we tie the two together. So it’s not about the Bible, but about sharing.”

There was a consensus that informing children of other religions and accommodating children of other faiths could be done in denominational settings.
THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHERS’ FAITH AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

The Group was asked whether they thought that it was important for teachers to believe the religion that they are teaching. Most members of the Group thought that believing the religion one teaches may make the classes more enjoyable. “Up to a few years ago,” one teacher said, “I knew there was a God but it didn’t really mean anything to me, and I just did my religious education programme as part of my Irish/English/Maths.” This teacher’s views have since changed: “In the last few years, it just means so much to me to have a relationship with God and, therefore, I am dealing with teaching it in a different way. If you’re enthusiastic about something – whether it’s Irish, maths, long division – you put much more into it when you’re teaching. So because religion means so much to me, I’m more enthusiastic myself about teaching it”.

Saying that it helps one’s teaching of religion to be a believer does not mean that that it is impossible to teach religion if one is not a believer. “The new curriculum is really about inclusiveness,” pointed out one member of the Group, “it provides for the teaching of religion within primary schools so that children may come to a knowledge of God’. I thought that was very inclusive,” the teacher stated. “It doesn’t mean that Protestant schools have their own teaching, but that God is bigger than any one religion. So we can teach with a different emphasis, depending on where we’re coming from. I have a faith myself, and yet I know a lot of people who say they don’t have any faith at all – but they teach a religious programme, and are happy enough to teach it as a subject.”

Other members of the Group agreed with this. “I think it can be taught and laid out like any other lesson. You don’t have to be convinced. You just have to be a good teacher – and enthusiasm helps.”

The Group was asked whether they felt that it is important that there are Church of Ireland teachers in Church of Ireland schools. It’s not entirely necessary, participants stated. “I think if your support structures are there – if the chairperson, principal and other members of staff are supportive of you – then I don’t feel that it really would be necessary for you to be of the school’s religion.”

Most respondents commented that the common ground occupied by Christian faiths would make it easier for a Catholic teacher to teach in a Church of Ireland school, and for a Church of Ireland teacher to work in a Catholic school. “If you are a member of the Church of Ireland, you can go into a Catholic school and teach Christian values: caring and sharing, helping each other – you don’t even have to be of a religion to teach those things, but you can go into any school and teach that. They are still Christian values.”

“I did one of my teaching practices in a Catholic school,” one participant explained. “It was only a senior infants class, so it wasn’t anything too deep and meaningful. I got on okay with it, but probably would not have been as good and convincing for the
children as a Catholic teacher. So I did get by – but maybe the school would have preferred to have a Catholic teacher in a Catholic school.”

INTER-DENOMINATIONAL SCHOOLS
The Group was asked whether they believed inter-denominational schools for Catholics and Protestants could work, where both religious programmes are taught to all the children in the class, regardless of the class's religious makeup.

“Yes, I think so,” one teacher replied. “As long as parents are agreeable to it, and supportive of it. Certainly in the case of children whose parents are of both religions, it has advantages.”

This system is very similar to the one operating in practice in many Church of Ireland schools at present, another teacher said. “Even though there isn’t the Catholic religious education teaching programme taking place, we do have a good mix, and there’s always a good appreciation and tolerance of both religious backgrounds.”

“However,” another teacher said. “You are not going to have 50% Church of Ireland and 50% Catholic in inter-denominational schools. That’s where the problem is going to be – if the ratio is higher for one religion, is it worth spending 50% of the time teaching Church of Ireland if only 30% of the pupils are Church of Ireland?”

Other potential difficulties were identified. “There are a lot of overlaps between Church of Ireland and Catholic religious education, with only small differences here and there, especially at the younger end. The problem is with the sacraments. Children who are not Catholic, but go to Catholic schools, often find it very difficult to be left out of Communion and Confirmation when everyone else is doing it. The same would happen in inter-denominational schools. So sacraments should take place outside of school hours – the children would still talk about what they are going to wear, and so on, but it wouldn’t be such a strong issue.”

TEACHER TRAINING
The Group generally believed that there is no need for teacher training to be denominational. A number of reasons were given.

One teacher thought denominational education was limiting: “I think, since you have such an influence on children, you need to be broadminded. By going to a small insular college, you’re not helping yourself.”

“With all the changes in society, it should be just like going to Trinity or UCD – all colleges should be open to everyone,” the Group felt. “For example,” said one teacher, “in my class, I have the different strands of Protestants, Bahai, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Catholic, non-practising, etc. If I am to do my job properly, and serve these children properly, I should be exposed to all of their religions in my training.”

Other teachers agreed. “If you go out and teach, you could have 50% Catholic and 50% Protestant in your class. But if you had gone to a Protestant primary school, and
a Protestant secondary school, and then Protestant college — you may only have known ten Catholics in your entire life. Then, all of a sudden, you have fifteen Catholics and fifteen Protestants in your class — how are you supposed to know what to do in that situation?"

The Group favoured a core programme for all religions in colleges of education. However, additional modules should be made available that would allow teachers to specialise in religion. "I think if somebody is Catholic, they are more than likely going to teach in a Catholic school. So there should be an additional class, lecture, or module about the sacraments for that teacher. And then a Protestant could do that class as well, as it would make him or her more employable — if they wanted to go for a job in a Catholic school, they would be able to say they know about Holy Communion because they did it in college and have the certificate to show it."

However, the Group pointed out that, regardless of their own beliefs, school management are likely to have a preference about the kind of teacher education received by a candidate for a post in their school. "I suppose if you’re coming from a Church of Ireland background, and you decide that you are going to apply for a job in a Catholic school — and if there is no other reason that you shouldn’t get a job there, then it shouldn’t be relevant if you can teach what you are being asked to teach. But I don’t know how that would sit with the people who manage the schools: they are trying to maintain an ethos, which I think we have all agreed is important to some degree. So how can the two happen at the same time?"

THE PARISH

Religious practice has declined considerably in most members’ parishes. "I would say less people are going to church now," one teacher said. "So children are coming in at the age of four without any experience of church at all."

On the other hand, many teachers believe that it is actually the older children who are going to church less. "Many of the younger children are familiar with the rector and the church. I find that interesting and wonder if that is an age that people would still be going to church for the sake of the children." One participant was quite cynical about this: "Where we go to church in a particular parish, a huge amount of children are there because the parents think they will get them into the school if they are seen in church."

The lack of enthusiasm for religion can be an issue for many of the teachers. "When I taught sixth class, I found that trying to get the children to be even interested in our Christmas play, which is in church, was a nightmare — because it was church."

"In our school," one teacher said, "about half the school are Catholic — and most of those children are sent to a Church of Ireland school because their parents really have no interest in religion. Even on their application form they will write down 'non-practising', 'non-denominational', or 'does not apply'. So that accounts for some of the
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decline in religious practice. But I would say that the Church of Ireland children who
go to the parish school do go to church.”

A lot depends on the attitude of parishes to involving children. “Some parishes have
a youth club, where they do Bible studies maybe once a week – and all the children go
to that, I think regardless of religion – so it is a Sunday School kind of arrangement,
during the week. It’s organised by the Church, but linked to the school. It takes place
outside of school hours, but we might prepare maybe a Bible story with the children
for it.”

“Everybody is extremely supportive, and if we do something it is recognised in
church and also around the town. We also have strong links with the Roman Catholic
community: it might be mentioned in Mass, for example, that we won a hockey
match: the whole village would know about it, so it wouldn’t be just the news from the
Catholic schools. The same is true in our own church. Ours is a very happy school.”

Most members of the Group agreed that the links between their school and parish
are very strong, and that the schools have benefited immeasurably as a result.

Multi-Denominational Schools

The Focus Group was composed of eight teachers, (six women – two men) from four
multi-denominational schools in the Dublin area. In general, their level of teaching
experience was varied. The majority of them had over 20 years’ teaching experience,
two had less than five years’ experience.

The Group discussed the role of teaching religion in the primary school system
from a number of perspectives:

- Religion and the ethos of the school.
- The aims of multi-denominational education.
- Children opting out of religious education.
- Parental choice.
- Sacraments.
- Teacher education.
- Teachers’ decision to join the multi-denominational sector.

RELIGION AND THE ETHOS OF SCHOOL

The Group was asked to describe how a visitor to the school would know that the
school was multi-denominational. “Well that would be fairly easy,” one teacher
replied. “In denominational schools there are, generally speaking, icons or symbols of
the denomination. In multi-denominational schools, you wouldn’t necessarily see
statues or crucifixes on the wall, that kind of thing.”

A school’s multi-denominational ethos was most evident in religion class,
participants said. “You might, if you went into the classes, hear children learning about
different religious festivals, different world religions, or you might see artwork on the walls that you may not be doing in a denominational school."

The fact that many parents would have specifically chosen a multi-denominational school may also have an impact upon the ethos of the school. "You're not just looking at the multi-denominational aspect of it, but the philosophy behind that," said one teacher. "Parents are making a very conscious choice about sending their children to a multi-denominational school - one that may have consequences in terms of transportation and other issues - and, as a result of that added commitment, their involvement might be greater than if their children went to the local national school."

People feel ownership of a multi-denominational school, participants suggested. "The patron of the school is an elected body chosen by the people - parents and teachers' representatives. This creates a feeling of ownership and investment in the school by the parents."

The multi-denominational ethos of the school may also be evident in the school's method of enrolling students. "In our school, we don't have access to details about the religion of the child. It is taken for the registration book but it is not used any further than that."

THE AIMS OF MULTI-DENOMINATIONAL EDUCATION

According to participants, multi-denominational schools have "a number of aims". "But it would specifically aim to inform children about religion rather than to pass religion on to them. By the time a child leaves a multi-denominational school, s/he would have learned a great deal about major religions and maybe even minor religions; about other religious experiences, celebrations, customs, and habits. But religious education in our schools also involves the things that children themselves bring to the school - their own beliefs. So it would largely be an education about religion, about the place of religion in society and in people's lives."

The teacher, therefore, is in the role of being a facilitator, according to the Group. When discussing an issue such as life after death, the teacher will accept all of the children's views: "Children will contribute from their own faith and backgrounds, accepting all contributions equally, and learning from each other."

"A lot of it involves discussion," said one teacher. "Even from a very young age, they are thinking and talking about it all. The programmes help to facilitate discussion very much, and this would be in contrast to a denominational school, which would be teaching a set curriculum, and working through it in a methodical fashion."

One problem that needs to be addressed is the response of multi-denominational schools to the educational need of refugees. "I find it very ironic that the Educate Together system actually militates against other cultures joining the schools," said one participant. "The system is that we enrol children on a 'first come, first served' basis: children's names have to be down literally within months of their birth. So when
refugees come here from other countries, they are never going to get into our school. Travellers have the same problem, for much the same reason. That is an example of how our philosophy is not always fully expressed. But we are working to find practical solutions to these issues.”

CHILDREN OPTING OUT OF RELIGION CLASS

Given that multi-denominational schools will have enrolled a range of children of different faiths, the issue of children opting out may arise from time to time. “You can get situations where, for example, Jehovah’s witnesses may ask that their children would opt out of Halloween when they are doing Irish,” explained one teacher. “The challenge for us is to devise a core curriculum that is inclusive. It would be very difficult if you had someone who came into the school to conscientiously undermine the core curriculum, but generally things work well…”

The issue of communion excited some debate. One teacher believed it was appropriate to have a day of celebration for second class instead of their First Communion: “We did that in our school,” she explained. “The parents organised a day of celebration for the children who weren’t making their First Communion.”

However, another teacher had difficulties with this idea: “I’m not happy with the idea of compensating a child for not being a Catholic. What we do is graduate every child from the school in sixth class. It is very specifically stated that this is the core celebration for all the children, and clearly explained that the different Groupings may have celebrations along the way but this is the main one for all. It’s not compensation because it is for everyone.”

PARENTAL CHOICE

Participants then discussed the issue of parental choice in relation to religious education. Unsurprisingly, all agreed that all parents should at least have the option of sending their children to a multi-denominational school. The Group was also broadly supportive of the notion that parents should be able to send their children to other types of school – denominational, non-denominational, inter-denominational.

The issue of parental choice is complicated, however. “I would be of the view,” said one teacher, “that if the population in a school is not of all one faith, then the school should reflect that. It is all very well to say that people have choice – but they don’t. If you are in a small rural community, you are not going to have a Catholic school, a Protestant school, a multi-denominational school, a non-denominational school, and an Irish school as well.”

This situation requires change in the system, participants believed. “I think that the Church should do their own job, and not expect the State to do it for them. In our school if parents want their children instructed in a particular religion, then they form a sub-committee and employ somebody to do it for them.”
The Group believe that the need is growing for churches to take responsibility for the religious education of their children in their own community. However, churches are likely to have difficulty in doing so. "There are problems," one teacher pointed out. "The Church of Ireland in most parishes can't get people to teach Sunday school. I do believe ultimately that the system shouldn't be denominational, but there has to be a structure put in place for all religious groupings to cope with things if the schools stop teaching it. But it is a problem for the churches."

Another participant also had views on the issue of churches taking responsibility for educating children. "Regarding the problem of parents having to pay for Catholic or Protestant or any other instruction just because they go to a particular type of school: that is morally wrong. When I taught in a Church of Ireland school, the parish provided the teachers for the Catholic children in the school and that was provided free of charge."

Participants were then asked to consider why parents would want to send their children to multi-denominational schools. "We hope it's because they want an education that is inclusive and respectful of different denominations and cultures," was the reply. "And because they believe they would have more of an input in the running of the school - not just with issues like fundraising but in a more substantial sense."

However, parents usually chose the school, not because of its religious ethos but because of their perception that it is a good school. This was a concern for some Group members: "In theory, that is fair, but it's not the only reason that you want people to have for sending their children to your school." However, one participant pointed out that most parents were fully supportive of the multi-denominational ethos: "We surveyed our parents a few years ago, and 66% of the parents who responded said that they had chosen the school because it is multi-denominational."

A lot depends on the age of the school. "When you are starting out, you need pioneering people who are very committed to the core principle and the multi-denominational philosophy. To get anything up and running, you need to have that energy," one member of the Group suggested. "However, it has to change as it grows. I think we are at that stage in our school where we are very much seen as a local school: our population is very local and that is very good thing."

The Group was generally not in favour of non-denominational schools. "I think the religious ethos of a school should be based on the denomination of the population of the school," participants said. "I don't think it would be viable to set-up and run a non-denominational school. Whatever form of religious education that is offered in the schools should reflect the needs of society today, and the multi-denominational schools attempt to do that."
SACRAMENTS

The Group then considered the issue of preparing children for sacraments. "The teachers don't do it," participants explained. "The teachers aren't associated with any one religion and, therefore, the children feel that the teacher could be for any of them, that there in no association or teacher favouring a belief – or any conflict between the parental beliefs and the teacher beliefs." The Group believe this is one of the advantages of multi-denominational education.

"There is a very clear distinction between religious education and religious instruction," participants pointed out. "Religious education is so much broader, whereas instruction is taking a belief and then practising and instructing in the practice. And it is an advantage for the children that they are seeing the broad picture – and it good for the maturing of the children's thinking."

TEACHER EDUCATION

The issue of religious instruction as an element of teacher education aroused particularly strong feelings amongst the Group. "You have to change the way state education happens," participants stated. "It has to start with teacher education." However, the range of different experiences of religious education that participants had while at a college of education has enriched the ethos of their schools. "I think that one of the very positive things about the multi-denominational sector is the fact that teachers have come from a wide range of backgrounds – from all the training colleges of Ireland," one participant suggested. "I think that is hugely enriching for the staff, and for teachers personally. I would be loath to see that go." The teacher did believe that, nevertheless, there is a need for change, particularly given the development of Educate Together schools throughout the country. "What about the kids we are teaching now?" one participant asked. "Will they be denied access to a college of education if, in ten years, they want to go on to do teaching because they have not been given a particular kind of religious education?"

Interestingly, the Group reported that colleges of education look for placements for their students' teaching practice at multi-denominational schools "all the time". Such trainees do not teach religion during their period with the school.

The Group also discussed the issue of induction of new teachers. "We should definitely be highlighting it that the colleges of education are not assisting with induction," one teacher suggested. "It has become quite a sizeable sector and teaching of religious education is simply not being addressed at all." Teachers coming to a multi-denominational school for the first time are faced with many challenges, participants pointed out. "Each school has developed according to its own influences. So does every school, in a sense, but if you go to three multi-denominational schools you will find them all very different in operation of the core curriculum. This means that it is quite difficult for the multi-denominational schools to put together a document that
would give new teachers some sense of the core ethos of the multi-denominational system – by definition, it is always changing: "It can't really be too rigid," a participant agreed. "You need to be able to adapt to circumstances from one year to another, depending on who is in your class." However, participants felt positively about this flexibility. "It is one of the joys of the core curriculum – that space within it to deal with an issue that might arise by chance, depending on what's happening in the individual children's lives."

TEACHERS' DECISION TO JOIN THE MULTI-DENOMINATIONAL SECTOR

Although in the past, teachers would have explicitly set out to join a multi-denominational school, the Group believe that people will do less so in the future, due to the increasing number of Educate Together schools being established. The Group believes that there is still an element of the public that does not take the sector seriously enough. "I still get phone calls from a representative of one of the Churches," said a participant, "Telling me of a job that has come up in one of their schools – as if I would be much happier there."

Younger teachers had strong reasons for joining: "I started a few years ago," a participant said. "I was sick of the whole insular feeling of the religious school down the road, and the multi-denominational system seemed more open. It certainly suits my beliefs of inclusivity and mutual tolerance."

The Group was asked why they had chosen to teach in multi-denominational schools. Their response was overwhelmingly positive. As one participant put it, "Joining the Educate Together sector was the most liberating thing that ever happened to me in my working life."
APPENDIX 4

RESULTS OF AN INTO SURVEY ON TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TO RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION / EDUCATION

APRIL 1996
TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TO RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION /EDUCATION

INTO Annual Congress 1995 adopted a resolution directing the Central Executive Committee to:

Organise and conduct an independent, confidential attitudinal survey on the range of teachers' feelings concerning:

- the requirement to teach religion instruction in schools.
- the situation facing those teachers whose religious beliefs have undergone profound change since they first began teaching and who, for reasons of conscience and self-esteem, no longer wish to teach religious instruction.
- their role in preserving and fostering the denominational ethos of schools and their preference or otherwise for a more pluralist alternative.
- issues pertaining to the predominant position of the churches in managing schools and to control of schools via ownership of school property.

The survey on Teachers' Attitudes to Religious Instruction/Education was conducted by the INTO during the month of February 1996 resulting from the resolution adopted at Congress 1995.

Following the piloting of the questionnaire it was distributed to 1554 primary teachers in the Republic of Ireland. A total of 819 valid returns were received in time for analysis which represents a response rate of 52.7%.

PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

The gender composition of the respondents was approximately 25.5% male (N=208) and 74% female (N=603). Eight respondents did not answer this question. This broadly reflects the actual gender composition of the teaching profession in primary schools in Ireland which is 22.1% male and 77.88% female (source Department of Education, June 1995).
GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

The sample of 1554 comprised INTO members from each county in the state. The sample in each county was chosen randomly in proportion to the number of INTO members in that county.

There was a good distribution of teachers in the various age categories:

**AGE**

- 28.7% of the respondents (N=235) were under 35
- 50% of the respondents (N=410) were between 35 and 50
- 21% of the respondents (N=172) were over 50
- 2 respondents did not answer this question.

**Age Group of Respondents – Total (N=817)**

- Over 50 years 21%
- Under 35 years 29%
- 35-50 years 50%

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

There was also a good distribution with regard to the numbers of years of teaching experience of the various respondents. Of the total respondents to this question (N=771), the age breakdown was as follows:

- 14.78% had under 10 years' teaching experience (N=114).
- 36.3% had between 10 and 20 years' teaching experience (N=280).
- 32.29% had between 21 and 30 years' teaching experience (N=249), and
- 16.6% had over 30 years' teaching experience (N=128).

TEACHING POSITION HELD

Teachers in the sample were also identified in terms of the teaching position held by them. The respondents (N=818) comprised of:
• 4.4% administrative principals (N=36).
• 14.79% teaching principals (N=121).
• 66.7% assistant teachers (N=546).
• 4.76% remedial / resource / home / school / community liaison teachers (N=39).
• 9.2% comprised of others (N=76), 4.8% of whom comprised the category of vice principal (N=40).

The remainder in this category included privileged assistants, special teachers of travellers, special class teachers, teacher counsellors, substitute and temporary teachers.

PATRON BODY
When the respondents were asked to categorise the type of patron body of the school they taught in:
• 95.2% of the respondents (N=775) stated that they taught in schools with Roman Catholic patronage.
• 3% of the respondents (N=25) taught in schools with a Protestant patronage.
• 0.85% of the respondents (N=7) taught in schools with a multi-denominational patronage.
• 5 respondents did not answer this question.

PREPARATION FOR RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES/SACRAMENTS
When asked about their attitude towards the amount of time spent in their schools on preparation for religious ceremonies and sacraments:
• 2.2% stated that they felt that the amount of time spent was insufficient (N=18).
• 81.4% stated that they felt that the amount of time spent was acceptable (N=658).
• 16.3% stated that they felt that the amount of time spent was excessive (N=132).
• 11 respondents did not answer the question.

The above figures indicate that a majority of teachers are happy with the amount of time devoted to preparation for religious ceremonies / sacraments, in their particular schools. One in six teachers believes that the time given to religious ceremonies and sacraments is excessive.
Teachers' Attitudes with Regard to the Amount of Time Spent in their Particular schools on Preparation for Religious Ceremonies / Sacraments.

Total (N=808) - Not Answered (N=11)

- Excessive: 16%
- Insufficient: 2%
- Acceptable: 82%

CURRENT RELIGIOUS VIEWS AND OUTLOOK

When asked to indicate their current religious views and outlook the following is the picture which emerged:

- 66.2% Roman Catholic (N=541)
- 1.59% Protestant (N=13)
- 27.78% Broadly Christian (N=227)
- 1.2% Atheist (N=10)
- 1.8% Agnostic (N=15)
- 1.3% Comprised Others (N=11)

2 respondents did not answer this question.

Current Religious views and Outlook - Total (N=817) - Not Answered (N=2)
RELIGIOUS VIEWS AND PATRONAGE OF THE RESPONDENTS' SCHOOLS

Of the 27.78% who categorised themselves as broadly Christian 92.5% of them (N=211) taught in schools with a Roman Catholic patronage.

4.4% of them (N=10) taught in schools with a Protestant patronage.

0.88% of them (N=2) taught in schools with a multi-denominational patronage.

Of the 3% (N=25) who described their current religious beliefs as either atheist or agnostic, 76% of them (N=19) taught in schools with a Roman Catholic patronage. 4% (N=1) taught in schools with a Protestant patronage. 8% (N=2) taught in schools with a multi-denominational patronage and 8% of them (N=2) taught in other schools with other forms of patronage. Not answered (N=1).

In light of the fact that 95% of the respondents indicated that they taught in schools with a Roman Catholic patronage, it is of particular interest that over a quarter of the respondents classified their current religious views and outlook as 'broadly Christian'.

The category of 1.3% others (N=11), all taught in schools with a Roman Catholic patronage and their description of their religious views and outlook included the following explanations:

- committed Bible believing Christian.
- Catholic but with grave doubts.
- I am Roman Catholic but I would not agree fully with its doctrine and beliefs.
- Belief in a power / creator / spirit / God.
- Humanist.
- Slightly disinterested Roman Catholic.
- A Roman Catholic who disagrees with a lot of the 'rules', of the institutional church.

OBLIGATION REGARDING GIVING RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION/EDUCATION

Teachers were asked to give their opinion concerning whether or not primary teachers should be obliged to give religious instruction/education in primary schools:

Of those who responded (N=795), more than half [58.6% (N=466)] felt that primary teachers should not be obliged to give religious instruction/education in primary schools. And 41.3% of the respondents (N=329) felt that primary teachers should be obliged to give religious instruction / education in primary schools.

This is of interest with reference to the current situation where teachers are obliged to give religious education / instruction, if they are employed in denominational or multi-denominational primary schools.
Obligation with Regard to Giving Religious Instruction / Education – Total (N=795)

No – teachers should not be obliged 59%
Yes – teachers should be obliged 41%

Attitude Towards Giving Religion Instruction/Education

When the respondents were asked to describe their attitude towards giving religious instruction/education:

- Approximately half [48.2% (N=394)] stated that they taught religious instruction/education willingly.
- 19.58% stated that they were not opposed to giving religious instruction/education (N=160).
- 17.2% stated that they just saw religious instruction/education as another subject they have to teach (N=141).
- 9.9% stated that they would prefer if they didn’t have to give religious instruction/education (N=81).
- 5% of those who responded (N=41) stated that they did not teach religious instruction/education. Of this group, 16 were class teachers.

The picture outlined above indicates that only a minority of 10% are opposed to the teaching of religious instruction/education. Those who stated that they did not teach religious instruction/education included administrative principals, remedial/resource teachers and home/school liaison teachers, as well as class teachers.
Teaching Religion in the Primary School

Attitudes towards giving Religious Instruction / Education - Total (N=817)
Not Answered (N = 2)

AGE CATEGORY OF THE RESPONDENTS AND THEIR ATTITUDES CONCERNING THE GIVING OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION/EDUCATION

When the age category of the respondents was cross referenced with the preferences of the respondents, with regard to their attitudes towards giving religious instruction/education, the following emerged with regard to the various age categories of teachers.

Teachers under 35 (N=235).
- 34.8% teach religious instruction/education willingly (N=82).
- 23.4% are not opposed to giving religious instruction/education (N=55).
- 24.6% just see religious instruction/education as another subject they have to teach (N=58).
Appendix 4

- 12.7% would prefer if they did not have to give religious instruction/education (N=30).
- 4.2% did not teach religious instruction/education (N=10).

Teachers between 35 – 50 (N=409).
- 45.2% teach religious instruction/education willingly (N=185).
- 20.78% are not opposed to giving religious instruction/education (N=85).
- 18% just see religious instruction/education as another subject they have to teach (N=74).
- 10.26% would prefer if they did not have to give religious instruction/education (N=42).
- 5.6% did not teach religious instruction/education (N=23).

Teachers over 50 (N=171)
- 74.26% teach religious instruction/education willingly (N=127).
- 11.69% are not opposed to giving religious instruction/education (N=20).
- 5.26% just see religious instruction/education as another subject they have to teach (N=9).
- 4.67% would prefer if they did not have to give religious instruction/education (N=8).
- 4% did not teach religious instruction/education (N=7).

It is evident, therefore, that a greater percentage of the older respondents teach religious instruction/education willingly, while a great percentage of the younger respondents would prefer if they didn’t have to teach religious instruction/education.

THE RESPONDENTS’ CURRENT RELIGIOUS VIEWS AND OUTLOOK AND THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARDS GIVING RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION/EDUCATION

The following is the picture which emerged with regard to each of the following religious classifications.

Roman Catholic Views and Outlook (N=540)
- 61.48% teach religious instruction/education willingly (N=332).
- 19.44% are not opposed to giving religious instruction/education (N=105).
- 13.1% just see religious instruction/education as another subject they have to teach (N=71).
- 2.96% would prefer if they did not have to give religious instruction/education (N=16).
- 2.96% did not teach religious instruction/education (N=16).
Protestant Views and Outlook (N=13).
- 53.8% teach religious instruction/education willingly (N=7).
- 15.38% are not opposed to giving religious instruction/education (N=2).
- 15.38% just see religious instruction/education as another subject they have to teach (N=2).
- 15.38% would prefer if they did not have to give religious instruction/education (N=2).

Broadly Christian Views and Outlook (N=226).
- 22.5% teach religious instruction/education willingly (N=51).
- 23% are not opposed to giving religious instruction/education (N=52).
- 24.77% just see religious instruction/education as another subject they have to teach (N=56).
- 21.23% would prefer if they did not have to give religious instruction/education (N=48).
- 8.4% did not teach religious instruction/education (N=19).

Atheist Views and Outlook (N=10)
- 10% teach religious instruction/education willingly (N=1).
- 10% are not opposed to giving religious instruction/education (N=1).
- 20% just see religious instruction/education as another subject they have to teach (N=2).
- 60% would prefer if they did not have to give religious instruction/education (N=6).

Agnostic Views and Outlook (N=15)
- 6.6% are not opposed to giving religious instruction/education (N=1).
- 40% just see religious instruction/education as another subject they have to teach (N=6).
- 33.3% would prefer if they did not have to give religious instruction/education (N=5).
- 20% did not teach religious instruction/education (N=3).

Categories other than those described above (N=11)
- 18.18% teach religious instruction/education willingly (N=2).
- 36.36% just see religious instruction/education as another subject they have to teach (N=4).
- 36.36% would prefer if they did not have to give religious instruction/education (N=4).
- 9.09% did not teach religious instruction/education (N=1).
The pattern which is evident above is that teachers with Roman Catholic and Protestant religious views and outlooks are more likely to teach religious instruction/education willingly, than teachers with views that are Broadly Christian, Atheist or Agnostic in outlook.

**CHOICE OF SCHOOL ETHOS**

When teachers were given an opportunity to choose the type of ethos which they would like their school to present:

- 43.44% stated that they would like their school to present a denominational ethos (N=351).
- 48.1% responded that they would like their school to present multi-denominational ethos (N=389).
- 8.41% stated that they would like their school to present a non-denominational ethos (N=68).

It is interesting to note that while fewer than half wish their schools to present a denominational ethos, only a small minority of 8.4% would prefer if their school had a non-denominational ethos i.e. a school where no religious instruction/education would be taught.

At the moment there are only 14 multi-denominational schools out of a total number of 3,203 primary schools in this country (source Department of Education for school year 1994/95). The answers of the respondents seem to indicate that the majority of teachers favour an increase in the number of schools presenting a multi-denominational ethos.

**Choice of School Ethos – Total (N=808) Not Answered (N=11)**

![Pie chart showing choice of school ethos]

- Non-Denominational: 8%
- Multi-Denominational: 48%
- Denominational: 44%
- Not Answered: 11%
TEACHERS WITH A PREFERENCE NOT TO GIVE RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION

When the respondents were asked whether or not they had informed the school authorities of their preference not to give religious instruction:-

Four answered yes and 112 responded no. These 116 respondents, whose preference it is not to give religious instruction/education, represent 14% of the total sample of 819. Of the 116 who responded to this question there was only a small minority of 3% who felt confident enough to come forward. Three of the four teachers concerned received a supportive reaction from the school authorities.

The respondents (N=112) who were unwilling or unable to inform the school authorities with regard to their preference not to teach religious instruction/education were asked to rate what prevented them most from doing so on the scale of 1 – 9. The following rating emerged:

1. Fear of the consequences particularly with regard to employment, job mobility and career prospects.
2. Fear of a hostile reaction from the board of management.
3. Fear of misinterpretation.
4. Lack of knowledge concerning legal and contractual obligations in this area.
5. Fear of not being redeployed if on the panel.
6. Fear of a hostile reaction from the parents.
7. Fear of a hostile reaction from the principal.
8. Fear of isolation.
9. Fear of a hostile reaction from other members of staff.

PREFERENCES REGARDING RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION/EDUCATION

The preference of the respondents concerning the teaching of religious instruction rated from 1 – 5 are as follows:

1. I would prefer to promote the denominational ethos of my religious denomination in a single denominational school.
2. I would prefer if my school had a multi-denominational ethos.
3. Religious instruction/education in schools should be provided by the clergy/parish, sister/others but not by teachers.
4. Religious instruction/education should be voluntary for pupils and teachers and take place outside of school hours.
5. I believe there should be no religious instruction/education programmes in primary schools.

The first preference of teachers is the preservation of the current status quo which pertains in a majority of schools namely the promotion of the denominational ethos of a single religious denomination in a particular school. The second preference of the respondents was that of a multi-denominational ethos.
The ratings here indicate that there is still a desirability that religious instruction/education be an integral part of the primary school curriculum.

TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS OTHERS OPTING OUT OF THE TEACHING OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION/EDUCATION

When the respondents were asked what their attitude would be towards a teacher in their school who had stated that for reasons of conscience they no longer wish to teach religious instruction/education in school:

- 74.2% stated that they would respect the teachers honesty and rights to hold alternate views and be supportive towards him/her (N=604).
- 14.25% stated that they felt that religious instruction/education is an integral part of the primary school curriculum in schools and that teachers should teach it (N=116).
- 7.7% stated that all teachers employed in denominational schools should be prepared to give religious instruction/education and if they are not they should seek employment elsewhere (N=63).
- 3.9% indicated that individual teachers opting out of religious instruction/education could lead to an increased workload for other members of staff and could create a bad image for the school (N=32).

It is evident, therefore, that a majority of teachers are both understanding and accommodating towards teachers who feel that for reasons of conscience they no longer wish to teach religious instruction/education in the school.

**Teachers' Attitudes towards Others Opting Out of the Teaching of Religious Instruction/Education - Total (N=815) Not Answered (N=4)**

![Diagram showing teacher attitudes](image)
AGE CATEGORIES OF THE RESPONDENTS AND THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARDS OTHERS OPTING OUT OF THE TEACHING OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION/EDUCATION

When the above questions were cross referenced it yielded the following information:

Respondents Under 35 (N=234)

- 11.9% felt that teaching religious instruction/education is an integral part of the primary school curriculum (N=28).
- 76% said that they would respect a teacher’s honesty and rights to hold alternate views and be supportive towards him/her (N=178).
- 3.8% stated that they felt that individual teachers opting out of teaching religious instruction/education would lead to an increased workload for other members of staff and could create a bad image for the school (N=9).
- 8.11% stated that all teachers employed in denominational schools should be prepared to give religious instruction/education and if they are not, they should seek employment elsewhere (N=19).

Respondents between 35-50 (N=409)

- 10.5% felt that teaching religious instruction/education is an integral part of the primary school curriculum (N=43).
- 77.26% said that they would respect a teacher’s honesty and rights to hold alternate views and be supportive towards him/her (N=316).
- 4.1% stated that they felt that individual teachers opting out of teaching religious instruction/education would lead to an increased workload for other members of staff and could create a bad image for the school (N=17).
- 8% stated that all teachers employed in denominational schools should be prepared to give religious instruction/education and if they are not, they should seek employment elsewhere (N=33).

Respondents over 50 (N=170)

- 25.88% felt that teaching religious instruction/education is an integral part of the primary school curriculum (N=44).
- 64.1% said that they would respect a teacher’s honesty and rights to hold alternate views and be supportive towards him/her (N=109).
- 3.5% stated that they felt that individual teachers opting out of teaching religious instruction/education would lead to an increased workload for other members of staff and could create a bad image for the school (N=6).
- 6.47% stated that all teachers employed in denominational schools should be prepared to give religious instruction/education and if they are not, they should seek employment elsewhere (N=11).
WILLINGNESS TO GIVE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION/INSTRUCTION TO THE CLASS OF A COLLEAGUE WHO WISHES TO OPT OUT OF THE TEACHING OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION/EDUCATION

Respondents were asked if they would be prepared to give religious instruction/education to the class of a colleague who wishes to opt out of religious instruction/education if s/he were to teach a secular subject to their class during the period of time they would be giving religious instruction/education to his/her class.

Of those who answered this question, 64.6% responded yes (N=515) to the above scenario while 35% responded no (N=281).

EXPERIENCE OF TEACHERS OPTING OUT

When asked if a teacher in their school had opted out of the teaching of religious instruction/education:

2% responded yes (N=16) while 98% responded no (N=784).

Of those who opted out half of them (N=8) had the support of the school authorities, 37.5% did not (N=6) and 12.5% did not respond to this question (N=2).

DIFFICULTIES FOR SCHOOL AUTHORITIES

82.7% of those who responded were of the opinion that if a teacher was to express a preference not to teach religion in a denominational school that it does not create insurmountable difficulties for the school authorities (N=656), while 17% were of the opinion that it would (N=137).

When given a choice of options with regard to what was the best option to cater for a person who opted out of the teaching of religious instruction/education of those who responded (N=803):

- 59% felt that the best option was for the person to exchange a subject with another teacher (N=474).
- 36.2% felt that the best option would be for a nun or a member of the clergy to take over the class (N=291).
- While only 4.7% felt that the best option was for another member of staff to teach the class (N=38).

DISCRIMINATION BY SCHOOL AUTHORITIES

Opinion was more or less evenly divided with reference to whether or not teachers would be discriminated against by the school authorities if they were to express a preference not to teach religious instruction. Of those who responded (N=678):

44.6% felt that they would be discriminated against (N=303), while 55.3% felt that such teachers wouldn't be discriminated against (N=375).

Teachers who had opted out of teaching religion were asked if they had been discriminated against in applying for a principalship or other job.
Teaching Religion in the Primary School

Of those in this category who responded to this question (N=54), 13% stated that they had been discriminated against (N=7), while 87% stated that they hadn’t been discriminated against (N=47).

**Discrimination by School Authorities – Total (N=678) Not Answered (M=141)**

When these respondents, who had opted out of teaching religious instruction/education, were cross referenced with their particular age profile, it yielded the following results:

**Respondents under 35 (N=20)**
25% stated that they had been discriminated against in applying for a principalship or another job (N=5), while 75% said that they had not (N=15).

**Respondents between 35-50 (N=22)**
100% stated that they had not discriminated against in applying for a principalship or another job (N=22).

**Respondents over 50 (N=12)**
16.6% stated that they had been discriminated against (N=2), while 83.33% stated that they had not been discriminated against in applying for a principalship or another job (N=10).

**TO INFORM OR NOT TO INFORM?**

When asked whether a teacher who, for reasons of conscience, would prefer not to teach religion would be better off keeping their religious beliefs and preference to themselves rather than inform the school authorities of their position, of those who responded (N=810):

- 26.9% felt that yes they would be better off keeping their religious views and
preferences to themselves (N=218).

- 40.6% felt that they wouldn't, in other words that they should not try and hide their view but should be prepared to inform the school authorities of their position (N=329).

- 32.46% stated that they didn't know what the best option was for someone in such a predicament (N=263).

This high percentage of don't knows may be due in part from the respondents' lack of experience of individuals opting out of the teaching of religious instruction/education in their particular schools.

The Dilemma – to Inform or Not Inform School Authorities –
Total (N=810) Not Answered (N=9)
OWNERSHIP OF SCHOOLS

33.4% of respondents (N=271) felt that the churches should continue to own schools where they own the property, while 39.2% felt that they shouldn't (N=318) and 27.2% of respondents stated that they didn’t know (N=221).

Ownership of Schools - Total (N=810) Not Answered (N=9)

CONTROL OF ETHOS AND MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOLS

When the respondents were asked whether or not they thought the churches should continue to control the ethos and the management of schools which they own, 44.6% felt that they should (N=362), 38.2% felt that they shouldn't (N=310) and 17% stated that they didn’t know (N=138).

A majority here indicated their preference for the continuation of present practice with regard to the control of the ethos and management of schools by the Church authorities of the schools which they own.

Control of Ethos and Management of Schools - Total (N=810) Not Answered (N=9)
MANAGEMENT

69.8% of the respondents (N=566) felt that the churches should relinquish their numerical majority on Boards of Management in favour of equality of representation between the partners in education while 17.4% felt that they shouldn't (N=141) and 12.7% stated that they had no opinion regarding same (N=103).

There was clear majority opinion in favour of change concerning the current management structures in schools towards a more democratic form of school management, where there would be equality of representation between all of the partners in education.

Management - Total (N=810)  Not Answered (N=9)
OWNERSHIP OF SCHOOL BUILDINGS

With reference to the ownership of school buildings 66.6% felt that the state should own school buildings (N=540), while 12% felt that they shouldn't (N=101) and 21% expressed no opinion by indicating that they didn’t know (N=169).

At the moment the majority of schools are owned by the respective churches. A clear two thirds majority expressed the views that there should be a change towards the ownership of school buildings by the state.

Ownership of school buildings - Total (N=810) Not Answered (N=9)