

Roots, Shoots, Fruits, or “What colour is your Hydrangea?”

If you visit the National Gallery in London about two-thirds of the paintings will be “distinctively Christian”. However, is it always immediately obvious with some of the old masters whether the story they tell, or the virtue they espouse is uniquely Christian? You have to be able to interpret the art, to “be in the know” to fully understand and appreciate the full religious message of what is before you, in other words to be Biblically or theologically literate. In many ways Church schools are similar to such great art; there will be occasions on which the onlooker will be able to see a distinct Christian approach in the life of a Church school, and other times when they will question whether, like all schools, the organisation is simply based on shared human values. There is a huge overlap between fundamental human beliefs and practices and Christian beliefs when they are worked out in practice in a school, especially as in Britain the values system is itself rooted in the nation’s long Christian history (even if it doesn’t always acknowledge it), but the important issue in the Church school context is “Where are our roots?” *It is the rootedness of a Church school that makes it distinctive.*

The Bible is full of images and stories which speak of the relationship between God and humankind—one of those images, of being rooted or grounded in God helps to explain the notion of Church school distinctiveness. Once you have discussed the imagery with others, the next question to ask is “...so how does this look and feel in *our* Church school?”



Roots, Shoots, Fruits

What colour is an hydrangea? Your answer will depend on the pH value of your soil—an acidic soil will produce blue flowers and an alkaline one pink—but they are all still hydrangeas. They have been affected through and through by the soil in which they have taken root. It is the same with a Church school; if a school’s ethos is rooted in Christian teaching and relationships it should be visible in the kind of plant that is produced—the structures of the school (the shoots) should bear distinctive flowers or fruits (the lives of pupils and others). So where are **your** roots?

Blessed is the man...whose delight is in the way of the LORD.....He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

All Church schools have the following ethos statement in their Instrument of Government:

“Recognizing its historic foundation, the school will preserve and develop its religious character in accordance with the principles of the Church at parish and diocesan level. The school aims to serve its community by providing education of the highest quality within the context of Christian belief and practice. It encourages an understanding of the meaning and significance of faith and promotes Christian values through the experience it offers all its pupils.”

The way this ethos statement is interpreted will reflect the individual circumstances of schools, which vary greatly, but below we show some of the ways this can be unpacked using the images of “roots, shoots, fruits”.

Roots	Shoots, Fruits
<p>All Schools will have a central statement, in addition to their statutory ethos statement, which may go by the name of Mission Statement, Vision Statement or School Values. This is where the Christian foundation of the school is made clear and distinct. The roots may be explained Biblically as e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The two great commandments found in Matthew chp 22 vss 37-9 “Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.” • Or as the two key values of love (agape) and community (koinonia). Agape is further unpacked in the great “love is..” passage of I Corinthians chp 13, with Jesus’ death on the cross being the supreme example of Agape. Koinonia is best encapsulated in the image of the “body of Christ”, where all are valued (I Corinthians chp 12) or in the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in inseparable communion. 	<p>The love of neighbour and the concept of community mean that each member of the school has both the scope to be fully themselves but also to participate equally in the common life. The Church school is a place where people are nurtured, strengthened and grown as whole human beings and a place where everyone feels supported and loved, even if they have difficulty in loving themselves. Agape love wants the best for each person, the best educationally (of course) but also the best as a whole person, and we know that if a child doesn’t feel loved and valued it inhibits their capacity to learn and their love of learning.</p> <p>The koinonia / community is a structured, respectful place, a rich and secure setting based on firm principles in which people can flourish. With any community, relationships are important, and this includes the involvement of people within the decision making of the community (e.g. school council).</p> <p>The school also learns to be a part of (at the heart of) the local community, to share its concerns and be open to those who seek help, support and resources.</p>
<p>The first Church schools were founded by people who sought to challenge the idea that there was no point in educating the poor. An overwhelming notion that drove them forward was one of service to all in the local community, and that still holds true today. This links with the Biblical image of Jesus as a Suffering Servant and with his washing of the disciples’ feet, like a servant not a leader, on the night before his death. To paraphrase the words of Mother Teresa “we are the hands and feet of Christ working in our schools”.</p>	<p>The concept of servanthood is one that permeates a church school. The governors, who give so much time voluntarily and freely, model this effectively. The work which many headteachers and staff put in to helping those who are struggling ,and often supporting their families as well, is an important service. Pupils, themselves, are encouraged to work not just for the good of the school community, but also for others—the enthusiasm and concern with which many schools enter into charity fundraising events is just one example of how they find their place in the world in service of others.</p>

Roots	Shoots, Fruits
<p>For the local church their Church school is a “Threshold Place”—whereas people may be worried by the idea of entering a church building just to see what was going on, in a Church school they have the opportunity of hearing the Christian message and experiencing Christian worship and the cycle of the Christian calendar in a non-threatening way. A Church school is not out to convert people to the Christian faith, but it is a place where it is “safe” to talk about matters of faith. The “duty” of the school’s leaders and managers is to build that place where there is no ideological pressure, but where Christian values and signs are an integral part of the life and teaching. The Christian faith is <i>modelled</i> (which for many uninitiated will be easier than understanding the theological language of the Church.) To use another popular analogy, it is a place of “warm fires and open doors”.</p>	<p>Collective Worship is at the heart of Church school life as it is the time the community gathers and reinforces its attitudes and identity. It is the time at which Bible stories can be told and Christian teachings shared—although it remains the prerogative of each individual to decide whether they will listen and “own” them in their entirety—faith is a matter of the heart and cannot be forced.</p> <p>The curriculum can also be a vehicle for sharing Christian teaching—history, PHSHE, science and the environment, for example, all offer opportunities for conversations on morals and values.</p> <p>Teaching Christianity as part of the RE curriculum is on the syllabus of all schools, but often limits itself chiefly to religious phenomena, rather than asking questions about belief and faith. In a Church school there is the opportunity to encourage Biblical literacy (the knowledge of Bible stories and their meanings) and also theological literacy (talking about the beliefs and concepts of a faith). At the same time RE encourages a sensitivity and respect to the faiths and beliefs of others. The Church school has a responsibility for sharing the meta narrative of faith and helping pupils demystify it and make sense of it. It forms people who are not reduced to inarticulate embarrassment when faced with discussing the big questions of life and truth.</p>
<p>The God of Creation. A belief in God as Creator includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An understanding of mankind as stewards of the earth • A belief that people are made in the image of God (“<i>imago Dei</i>”) and that they too are creative beings. 	<p>The Church school is a creative place, a place of challenge and a place of growth, acquiring skills, and of new directions. People are eco-aware and care for their natural and built environments.</p> <p>To see others as, like oneself, made in the Image of God is to see everyone as equal and to be treated with respect. In the school context this means creating an ethos in which <i>every</i> person is truly valued.</p>
<p>Jesus was preacher, teacher and healer and one who welcomed those whom other religious teachers of the time avoided (e.g. women, children, lepers). He proclaimed the “good news” - the “Gospel” for all. Through Christ there is a model of full humanity, but one which may appear to run counter-culturally (as Jesus himself appeared to be to the establishment).</p>	<p>A Church school aims to be a place of academic excellence, including the spiritual, the manual, the technical, the aesthetic and the non-verbal—in other words to offer a complete and generous education for all. It is a place which “heals the gap”. It forms people who have moral strength and spiritual depth by offering a foundation for personal and social values based on the ministry of Christ.</p>

Roots	Shoots, Fruits
<p>Salt and Light. Jesus taught his followers that they were called to be like salt and light as these are both seemingly small things which can have an enormous effect. (Matthew chp 5 vss 13-16) Salt flavours a dish and improves it, and a light suitably placed can reach a great distance and guide others. However, beware, both of these elements can lose their effectiveness if handled thoughtlessly.</p>	<p>How can your Church school affect lives? Assuredly the lives of all those who are part of the school family will be touched in some way. The school provides clear moral frameworks, fosters a love of learning and fosters whole human beings—it grows society. It also has a wider effect as the school plays its role in the local parish, the local cluster of schools and the Diocese as a whole. Is the school a beacon of excellence?</p>

The word “distinctive” means both “different” and “characteristic”. A Church of England school is *not* distinctive because of the personal faith of its staff, governors and families, as it is a neighbourhood school and not a church. However, it should be distinctive in the way in which it tells, and models, the story of Christ and Christianity in all aspects of school life, but, of course, in an appropriate way for its educational context. Church schools develop their distinctiveness best by looking at where their Christian character is rooted, rather than looking sideways and comparing themselves to other schools.

Taking further the analogy of “roots, shoots, fruits” Jesus’ Parable of the Sower may be reinterpreted to help think about the ways in which Church schools engage with their Christian foundation. (Matthew chp 13) In the parable a sower uses the traditional broadcast method of flinging seed with wide sweeping movements across the field and as a result not all of it falls on good soil—some falls on the path, some amongst thistles and some on shallower rocky ground. The parable is interpreted as showing the different ways in which people respond to hearing the Word of God, but it can also be taken to answer the Church school question “where are your roots?”

- A school where the seed is on the rocky ground will be one which attempts to put up a show of being a Church school but has not really thought through its core Christian values and where these stem from. It knows what it should be doing, and does its best. but doesn’t consciously work at deepening and feeding its roots.
- A school where the seed falls on the path will lose its seed to the birds which snatch it away; it listens to those who challenge the Church foundation and say it is unimportant, and so does not flourish as a Church school.
- A school whose seed falls amongst thistles is one where all those other pressures of school life are so all consuming that eventually they choke everything else and the school loses sight of its church school identity.
- Where the seed falls on good soil it grows deep roots and (in the parable) produces a harvest of immense proportions. A Church school which is sure of its roots and can link the concerns of the Gospel to the life of the school in a conscious, planned, lived way will thus grow itself and its children to their full potential.

So, how deep are your roots? Use the questions which follow to discuss this together.

This imagery asks three key questions of the Diocese of Ely's Church schools, namely:

What do we stand for? (Core Christian Ethos—Roots)

What do we measure? (Activity—Shoots)

What will be our legacy? (Impact—Fruits)

What do we stand for? - Roots

The question is asking:

- The nature of the core statements which define the school ethos and character and whether they are clearly Christian in their language and intent.
- How these core statements were arrived at and “owned”.
- How these core statements are constantly, consultatively and consistently shared with pupils, staff, governors, parents and the wider community.
- How these core statements inform and affect school policy and decision making
- Whether all members of the school community, whatever their age and understanding, are aware of the school's core Christian ethos and what it means to them in their personal role and choices.
- Whether the school is an open, welcoming and inclusive institution.
- How the church school and local church community work in “family” partnership.
- How the headteacher, senior management team and governors promote the distinctive Christian vision of the school.
- Whether senior roles in the school are understood in the context of Christian leadership.

What do we measure? - Shoots

The question is asking about teaching, learning, worship and relationships in different areas of church school life (ethos) and how these are rooted in the school's understanding of itself as a Church school:

Collective Worship

- Whether collective worship (“worship in community”) is seen as occupying an important role at the heart of school life, and how this is expressed.
- Whether collective worship is effectively planned, resourced and monitored
- Whether the school meets legal expectations (viz. worship offered daily for all pupils of the school unless withdrawn by parents / carers)
- Whether collective worship is structured around the Church's year and whether all acts of worship include identifiable Christian teaching.
- How collective worship develops pupils' understanding of Anglican faith and practice whilst retaining an ecumenical dimension.
- How the atmosphere for collective worship is created through setting, symbol, song and silence.
- Whether collective worship consistently offers a wide variety of quality worship experiences.
- Whether pupils have opportunities to be engaged in worship, including themselves being worship leaders.
- Whether worship is carried out using language and concepts which are readily accessible to all present.
- How special collective worship occasions, especially at significant times of the year, are shared with the wider school community and the local church community.

- Whether collective worship is led with sensitivity and respect for those present who are members of different faith traditions, enabling them to still share in the occasion with integrity.

Religious Education

- Whether RE has an important role in the school curriculum, at least comparable to the way in which other curriculum subjects are regarded, and how this is demonstrated.
- Whether teaching and learning in RE is exciting and challenging, and at least meets national standards, but often exceeds them.
- Whether the curriculum time allocated to RE always meets, and at time exceeds, the requirements of the Syllabus.
- Whether the school is using additional Christian teaching material recommended by the Diocese.
- Whether RE encourages the development of both Biblical and theological literacy.
- How the teaching of Christianity in RE actively contributes to the Christian ethos of the school as well as encouraging understanding and respect of other faiths.
- How the RE subject leader is chosen and supported so as to be in their role—and how they support others.
- Whether resources for the subject are both adequate and of good quality.
- Whether pupils have a positive attitude towards RE and can understand its importance as a curriculum subject.
- Whether RE encourages pupils to ask big questions, form their own views on religious issues, and discuss matters of value, meaning and purpose in a safe and respectful atmosphere.
- Whether pupils recognise the role that faith can play in everyday life.

School Life and Ethos

- How the school supports and encourages pupils to grow as learners and achieve their full potential, with regard to both their personal attributes and their academic aspirations
- Whether the school actively promotes all-age learning
- How the values of the Church school can be traced both in approaches to the curriculum and classroom management.
- How the school's practice is designed to support the spiritual and moral development of all, regardless their own personal faith or life stance.
- Whether the school is a "safe" place in which beliefs, personal views and individuality can be expressed without fear of personal rejection
- How the Head teacher, senior management and governors plan, encourage, monitor and challenge the school community to realise their Church school vision .
- Whether the school recognizes that a Church school education is not limited to RE and collective worship, but that all aspects of school life can contribute, both implicitly and explicitly, to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of all pupils.
- How the adults of the school community model the vision in action and how this impacts on pupils and families.
- How the Christian foundations of the school are made visible in the school environment, website presence, and communications.
- How the school resources the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils with areas such as reflective displays and spiritual gardens
- How relationships within the school, at all levels, demonstrate the school's Christian values in action.
- How the school links with the local community, in particular the diverse religious communities from which pupils may come and the parish(es) the school serves

- How effective the pastoral system is from the different standpoints in the school

What will be our legacy? -Fruits

The question is asking about the impact being a member of a church school could have on an adult or a child, and the impact that the school makes in its local community. How does the school judge its impact? What evidence is there to be found in pupil and parent voice as well as in statistics?

Where can we find evidence of pupils who are:

- secure, safe and supported in their life and learning and flourishing in both their personal and academic development
- aware of their role as a member of a community and their responsibilities for the community in which they live, both now and in the future
- Biblically and theologically literate, and who are prepared to ask, and answer, the big questions of life
- able to recognize the place that personal belief and faith has in people's lives, whether or not they identify with their actual beliefs
- able to understand the difference between right and wrong and the consequences of their actions upon themselves and others
- respectful of others
- young people of moral strength and spiritual depth
- creative, questioning and imaginative
- valuing and respecting cultural and religious diversity locally, nationally and internationally
- feeling valued both as an individual and as an essential part of the whole school community

One Final Image

The image of the stick of seaside rock takes this question of impact further. It asks how the Christian values ("the roots") of the school run throughout the whole school and are owned by, and affect the lives of :

- All Staff
- Pupils
- Governors
- The families of pupils
- The local community

Do all these groups understand the special nature of their Church school? Clearly younger pupils and the senior team will not explain

Christian values in exactly the same way, but where these values are made explicit in school life and the teaching on which they are founded is shared, then the youngest child will be able discuss them in a meaningful way at an appropriate level for themselves. If they cannot then there is something wrong with the stick of rock!

