

DEVELOPING A RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CURRICULUM FOR UNITING CHURCH PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The genesis of this project was in a wide-ranging consultation with Uniting Church Australia (UCA) schools in Victoria and Tasmania about what could be done to improve the quality of Religious Education (RE) in these schools. This process led to a number of comments about how RE was being delivered.

The responses can be grouped into four general areas. Firstly, the need for assistance in planning and delivering of quality RE in the classroom. Many schools lacked expertise in RE and needed specific practical help to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. Secondly each UCA school is autonomous and creates its own curriculum. A lack of a systematic approach to RE was noted, what many respondents typified as a 'bitsee' approach, that is, we do a bit of this and a bit of that. The 'bitsee' approach also depended on who was teaching the subject. Some chaplains lacked teaching qualifications whilst some teachers lacked the religious education knowledge and understanding. In the past where those schools who had trained/experienced personnel the religious education curriculum was better planned and taught than in those schools that had teachers/chaplains with little training/ experience in teaching RE. Thirdly, when discussing current approaches to RE there was a lack of depth and sequence in content. This was especially evident in how topics were covered over a number of years. Schools in the past had used Christian Council for Education in Schools (CCES) material or the Catholic Education Office materials, choosing the relevant units and adjusting them for their own particular needs but what was often lacking was a clear sequential approach. Fourthly, an audit of existing programs revealed an absence of rigorous curriculum models resulting in a reliance on resource based approaches, where key resources such as a video or texts drove how RE was taught.

In the light of this consultation, a number of approaches to assist UCA schools to improve the quality of religious education were considered. The most appropriate response, that is, the one that addressed most clearly the four areas of concern raised in the consultation was to invite schools to participate in a program that was aimed at developing an RE curriculum that could be used in participating primary schools.

Some Background Comments about UCA Schools and Religious Education

Before describing the curriculum model adapted it is necessary to make some comments about how RE is approached in UCA schools and also about some of the features of these schools, especially how they can be contrasted with the Catholic system. The first point to note is that the UCA schools are much more autonomous than schools in the Catholic system, where there is a strong collegial sense (Ryan, 1997). This can be explained both by the history of UCA schools and that they are not part of a system where there is a centralising, authoritative bureaucratic agency. This was not always the case prior to union in June 1977 when the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational Churches formally united (Basis of Union, 1992). When it comes to developing curriculum material in areas that are not prescribed by mandated government policy such as the Curriculum Standard Framework, UCA schools do this on their own initiative. The UCA schools that responded to the invitation to be involved in an RE curriculum development project did so on the basis of what is best for their school. UCA schools do not have an agency such as the Catholic Education Office requiring them and then assisting them to develop RE programs. Furthermore each UCA school has its own characteristics, history and enrolment profile. UCA schools include very well known and long established private schools and schools which have opened relatively recently on the fringes of large cities such as Melbourne and have relatively low fees and multicultural, multifaith enrolments.

Enrolments in UCA schools do not reflect a strong denominational bias (Merritt, 1996). Students from a variety of faith backgrounds are well represented as well as students who do not have a strong affiliation to any tradition, Christian or non-Christian. This has implications, for the starting point of any discussion about how religious education (RE) should be presented in the school. Perhaps the most important consideration in discussing how RE is carried out in UCA schools is to recognise that typically the discipline is not prominently represented in the whole school curriculum. For most UCA schools now, RE is taught between once and twice per cycle. This represents approximately forty to sixty lessons per school year, which is considerably less than the amount of RE taught in Catholic schools. In attempting to develop a curriculum which will have application in a wide variety of settings – as stand alone units or within enquiry based learning it was decided to develop units that could be included in

existing fields of enquiry, for example, *My Family*. Five lessons have been developed to sit within the Primary Years Program – International Baccalaureate (PYP). Units may be developed in the future to fit within the scope and sequence of a school as there are many generic fields of enquiry across schools. Such units may then be added to the total curriculum available to all schools. It is envisaged that the document will be reviewed and updated at least biennially.

Developing a Curriculum Model

One key issue that emerged in discussions with schools that expressed an interest in the project was whether or not the program should recognise a Christian presumption in the emerging curriculum. This issue crystallised after drafting preliminary materials for discussion and review. On the one hand some argued that the material produced needed to distinguish itself from other KLAs such as SOSE, Studies of Society and Environment, which also includes a number of topics such as teaching about values and human moral development. Those with this view expected to see examples of explicitly Christian content in the program, such as reference to scripture and invitations for students to pray. Another view was more cognisant of the diverse and diffuse religious background of many of the students in UCA schools. Participants with this perspective were much more comfortable with units that could be situated in other parts of the curriculum and which displayed a more general humanistic focus.

Discussion of this issue was resolved along the lines that the program should be reflective of a religious education paradigm which engaged directly in a study of religion and whilst there were to be overlaps with other curriculum areas the program should be able to stand alone and recognised as having a distinctive focus. This generated discussion about how much the program should be reflective of Christian content. It was decided that the overview should be developed in the context of schools that share a Christian heritage. As well as including units that were explicitly relevant to a Christian heritage it was envisaged that other more generic units would include sections that reflected a Christian worldview in their content and some units dealing specifically with other religious worldviews.

A Typological Approach

After discussion of what material would be included in a potential program, it was agreed that the approach which best suited the needs of participating schools was a typological one. This approach, organised material in the curriculum according to clusters or types of content areas that have some characteristic features (Lovat, 1989).

Typological approaches to religious education have a long history in the planning of religious education curriculum in Australia (Habel & Moore, 1982; Buchanan, 2003). They allow for a sequential and systematic approach to curriculum development by highlighting where and how often various themes are covered (Lovat, 2002). In terms of working with UCA schools a typological model also provides much needed flexibility, allowing schools to choose the units that are most appropriate to their school setting. This is a necessary acknowledgement of the autonomous nature of UCA schools. It was important to recognise that the amount of time dedicated to RE in UCA schools was relatively small so schools needed to develop a disciplined approach to what units they selected and be able to provide a rationale for their selections. Once the four typological categories were established, units appropriate to each area were included under the four headings. The four general content areas were: Understanding Myself, Understanding Others, Understanding The World and Understanding The Faith Community. Included below is the typological table that shows the units planned for middle primary.

The units are written to be used by lay teachers (as well as chaplains). Some teachers will need to consult with chaplains on some matters. Each unit includes up to five lessons. In planning the unit an important emphasis is on providing teachers with practical assistance. This recognises some of the concerns of teachers in our consultations that they felt inadequate in teaching and planning RE. Each unit is situated within a particular teaching and learning framework and lists preliminary considerations as well as some possible student outcomes, a faith dimension, reflection on experience and points for teacher reflection. Below are some examples of this background for Unit 3.6

Justice and Peace:

- **Teachers' reflection** – teachers are encouraged to reflect on their own lives and relationships and note that a loss of peace requires an action to rebalance. This too is an element of justice.
- **Teacher notes and extension notes** – exploring the concept of justice as being in right relationship with myself, others, the world, and with God.
- **Reflection on experience** – when have you made a decision to act justly?

This particular unit, like many, would have application across the world religions for those schools that desire this. A key aspect of the curriculum project is to provide teachers with lesson outlines that provide for both sequential learning and learning in some depth. This explicitly addresses the concern of teachers that RE

move beyond the 'bitsee' approach described earlier. Listed below are the titles of the lesson

sequence along with one of the teaching strategies provided in Unit 3.1, *Many People, Many Stories*:

Table 1

Typological Categories To Be Used in Middle Primary RE Curriculum Model in UCA Schools

Understanding Myself	Understanding Others	Understanding the World	Understanding the Faith Community
1.1 Choices	2.1 My family	3.1 <i>Many people many stories: Many worldviews</i>	4.1 Remembering our stories
1.2 Disappointment and resilience	2.2 Love	3.2 Nature: God's Creation	4.2 Prayer
1.3 Sharing my life	2.3 Friends	3.4 Caring for the environment	4.3 People of faith: Christianity, Judaism, Islam
1.4 This is me: A reason for celebrating	2.4 Belonging: Who's in, who's out	3.5 Time for reflection	4.4 Easter
1.5 Moods and emotions	2.5 Forgiveness	3.6 Justice and peace	4.5 Christmas: The story of Jesus
1.6 Trust	2.6 Pancake Day: Helping others	3.7 The Dreamtime	4.6 Encountering the scriptures
			4.7 Signs and Symbols – in Christianity, Judaism Islam
			4.8 The Uniting Church in Australia: Who are we?

Lesson 1: Who and what – students sit in a circle and tell their stories about who they are and what they have done.

Lesson 2: Facts and meanings – Read the story provided and discuss and identify the story's information and meaning using worksheet 1.

Lesson 3: Different ways of storytelling – brainstorm modes of storytelling, for example, song, prayer, art, dance, architecture, film and so forth.

Lesson 4: Jesus the Storyteller – group rewrites same meaning/message into their own story form, based on one of the parables of Jesus (Lesson 4 can be adjusted to include perspectives from other religious worldviews if the situation requires – this will be further developed in consultation with educators from Jewish and Islamic schools).

Lesson 5: Silent story – in small groups, create and perform their own pantomime story.

A feature of the project is that it places RE in UCA schools within a Christian context, whilst recognising and respecting the diverse background of students. This can be seen in the lesson sequence given above which allows for reference to Jesus and, in this case, the parables of Jesus within a lesson sequence that recognises the strong appeal of stories to students of this age.

The place of World Religions is affirmed as an important dimension of the curriculum. There is

ample research which affirms this while giving Christianity primacy in a Christian school. There are several ways World Religions can be integrated into the RE curriculum. This document will offer a variety of approaches in different units. Schools will then proceed in whatever way is appropriate to their setting.

Some Emerging Issues

Schools that have been involved in the writing, development and trailing of units have reported a number of issues that have arisen as a result of being part of the process. In all cases these issues are an indication of life and vitality. By taking this approach to RE it can be almost guaranteed that challenges will have to be faced as the present approach to RE in some UCA schools does not make strong demands on either the students, teachers or the schools.

The first concern relates to the skills, competencies and background of the teachers who are involved in the program. In UCA schools it is unusual to have teachers who have specific training in RE. This can be coupled with a lack of connection with worshipping communities on the part of most teachers. In this regard teachers at UCA schools are no different from their peers in other denominational schools. The result of all of this is that teachers lack confidence and are generally uneasy about teaching RE. One way of alleviating

this is to provide a curriculum that is well structured and provides clear support for quality teaching and learning in the classroom. In overseeing the development of units we have tried to ensure that all completed units do this. Nonetheless teaching RE for most teachers still requires a willingness to move beyond established skills and competencies, or as one teacher remarked, this stuff really takes me out of my 'comfort zone'. It is hoped that as teachers become more familiar with material and the approach that is being taken, that they will see that what is being proposed here fits very well within an educational paradigm and skilled teachers should be able to transfer many of their skills to a new content area. At the same time some schools are recognising the need for specialist training in RE and have supported their teachers doing postgraduate study in RE. This is a development that can only be encouraged.

Arising from the need to provide units that are as practical and helpful as possible, however, does require a significant commitment on the part of those who are writing the units. This became evident to us when we received feedback from schools on preliminary drafts of the units. Some of the comments noted that some of the units were much better than others. This discrepancy in quality could usually be explained by the expertise of those who worked on the unit and the amount of time that they had to complete the task.

The curriculum was designed to accommodate the expectation that some units would be used more often than others. It was anticipated that different schools had a different emphasis on what content they saw as pivotal to RE. The amount of time, however, that is required to produce, trial, modify and complete a unit may not allow for all the units to be developed. As UCA schools operate without a supportive bureaucratic mechanism with the capacity to levy and then provide funds to a project such as this, it falls to schools to provide release time for teachers to help develop the units. An experienced RE curriculum professional has been engaged to work with and support the teacher/writers. In these circumstances it may be necessary to develop a smaller number of units that are specifically tailored for schools who are interested to making RE more relevant and school specific. If this trend is confirmed then future discussions could be directed toward the idea of a core curriculum or key content areas.

An unexpected issue that has arisen in some schools has been a renewed interest in RE and how it is taught at the school. Some of this has been in the form of critical comment about aspects of this project; such as the proposed units do not cover all required areas or that teaching of RE took valuable

time away from more important curriculum areas. This discussion is, however, a very welcome development because it places RE in UCA schools as a discipline that is worthy of serious educational discussion and critique. This is a significant improvement on the previous situation, where as RE had a low profile and did not feature strongly in the curriculum its place was uncontested and uncontroversial. Providing the rationale and arguing for RE in participating schools is also providing a healthy sign of faith life in UCA schools.

It needs to be noted that this curriculum would be appropriate to be used in all church affiliated independent schools. Those units which relate directly to the Uniting Church could be replaced or removed (for example Unit 4.8, *The Uniting Church in Australia – who are we?* and Unit 2.6 *Pancake Day – helping others*).

As a result of wide interest in the project, the national body of the Uniting Church in Australia, The Assembly, has allocated resources for 2005 to continue the work. The authors have been invited to speak to principals and other interest groups in Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia.

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