

So, what *is* a SACRE ... and *what* *does it do?*

Meeting together

It's 7.45pm on a glorious summer evening and a group of 25 people is sitting around a square of tables at one end of a church hall. Before the meeting started, they had all been welcomed by the minister and given a guided tour of the building. Now there is a real buzz as these women and men talk in twos and threes, many of them very animatedly, and their ideas are recorded on large sheets of paper as they work.

Not the usual church group, however ... there *is* one dog collar, but there are also a couple of turbans and a yarmulke, as well as three Muslim headscarves. The talk is of young people and their learning. Plans are being made for a conference for Y10 pupils from across the educational community to meet together and share, through a variety of activities, what they believe, and what it might mean to have a religious faith, although that is not to assume that they all will be religious, far from it.

This is a meeting of the local SACRE. The last meeting was held in the mosque nearby, when the small group work focused on scrutinising pupils' work from KS3 in preparation for thinking about the needs of Y10 pupils in the borough. The next will be in one of the local secondary schools, to finalise plans for the forthcoming event designed to meet some of those needs. Some of these people, members of SACRE, will be there to lead workshops and to get to know a few of the pupils for whose Religious Education (RE) they are responsible. It will also be an opportunity for teachers to meet the people behind the 'SACRE' label, and for students to understand better what it means to serve the community.

So, what is a SACRE?

The Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) is part of the local government machinery. Prior to the Education Reform Act of 1988, RE was the only aspect of the curriculum statutorily prescribed, although that prescription was, and remains, a local prerogative. In the 1944 Act, Local Education Authorities (LEAs) – as they were then – were empowered by law to set up their

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SACRE to enable that local determination to be more effective and some, but by no means all, LEAs responded. In 1988, however, the law changed and LEAs had a duty laid upon them to constitute their own SACRE. There was a lot of activity, but little real understanding about what these new bodies should look like. Their composition, however, was clear.

Every SACRE must have four committees: Committee A is made up of representatives of Christian denominations and other religions, reflecting the principal religious traditions of the area; Committee B comprises the Church of England representatives; Committee C is the teacher representatives (often from the teacher associations) and finally, Committee D consists entirely of Local Authority (LA) representatives (often, but not exclusively, elected members). This wide representation is designed to ensure a comprehensive local knowledge whilst recognising diversity of interest. An effective SACRE is a powerful local voice for communities with a stake in Religious Education. So, every LA must have a SACRE and it must meet sufficiently often to fulfil its statutory duties.

What does a SACRE do?

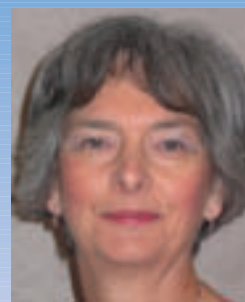
The main function of the SACRE is to advise the LA on matters related to Religious Education and Collective Worship in schools. By law, every SACRE must publish an annual report of its work; advise the LA on matters to do with RE and collective worship, including the need to review its agreed syllabus every five years, and consider appeals from schools wishing to modify the legal requirement for collective worship to be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character'.

Effective SACREs also give advice to schools on methods of teaching agreed syllabus RE; advise the LA on the provision of training for teachers; monitor the quality and provision of RE and collective worship in schools, and consider complaints about RE and collective worship referred to them by their LA. In a recent series of inspections of SACREs by Ofsted, HMI also judged SACREs on the contribution they made to social harmony and community coherence, and on their partnership with the LA.

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Julie's publications, most of which are the result of close collaboration with teachers, include *A Gift to the Child* (1991, Simon and Schuster), *A Gift to the Child: Series II* (2006, Articles of Faith) and a series of handbooks and supporting materials written over the past 12 years on behalf of the local SACRE. She has also produced two books to resource collective worship, one for secondary schools and one for primaries.

Julie is an elder at Carrs Lane United Reformed Church in Birmingham, where she has worshipped for almost forty years. She is Chair of the Free Churches Education Committee.



This is a considerable workload for a committee of volunteers meeting usually three times a year, ie once a term, although a minority meet more frequently, especially when there is a particular piece of work to be done.

How does a SACRE work?

Individual SACREs have their own constitution so there is a wide variety of practice and some are more effective than others, but much hinges on the support the SACRE receives from its LA. For all SACREs, each of the four committees has equal voting rights when making decisions, one vote per committee, irrespective of the number of members it has, and all committees have to register a vote for a decision to be made. In most SACREs, most of the time, there is discussion and agreement about issues without the need for a vote. Every LA must take note of, and respond to, advice from the SACRE.

SACREs are well placed to promote much needed 'community cohesion'

How does the agreed syllabus come about?

The locally agreed syllabus is the statutory document for RE in the LA. It sets out what should be taught to pupils in all key stages and what is expected of them. It is produced by the Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC) which is a separate legal entity from the SACRE, but is made up of the same four committees (and frequently, but not always, the same people). The agreed syllabus has to be reviewed every five years. Support for this process was produced in the form of *The Non-Statutory National Framework for Religious Education* (2004, QCA). The Framework was written by RE

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professionals and endorsed by representatives of faith communities. Subsequent to its publication, it was agreed by all the major faith communities that it should form the basis of the RE curriculum in all voluntary aided schools (ie schools which are run by religious bodies and have a distinctive religious character) as well as all community schools (ie schools which are *not* run by religious bodies and *do not* have a distinctive religious character).

What is the role of faith community representatives?

Faith community representatives on Committees A and B act as a valuable link between their faith community and the educational community; they bring the voice of their community to decision making about RE; they help other SACRE members (and teachers) to understand their faith. They also help members of their faith community to understand the nature and purpose of Religious Education in schools and the contribution their faith can make to children's understanding of the world. It is crucial that there is an understanding of the way religion is used in education, and the difference between RE in schools and faith development in a worshipping community.

The most effective SACRE members have this understanding; are interested in – but not necessarily experienced in – education; are prepared to attend SACRE meetings regularly, reading papers beforehand if possible; are willing to talk about their faith for the benefit of others on SACRE; and are prepared to go into school (if they are able) to talk about their faith or contribute to collective worship. Perhaps you know someone who may be a potential SACRE member! Maybe you can imagine being involved yourself ... on that summer evening, in a church hall or a mosque somewhere.

What is NASACRE?

The National Association of SACREs (NASACRE) is an organisation that exists to provide support to local SACREs and to represent them nationally. All 151 SACREs in England are affiliated to NASACRE. They receive a termly newsletter keeping them up to date with national developments, and have the opportunity to send representatives to a variety of

events including the annual general meeting. NASACRE is served by four officers: chair, vice chair, treasurer and secretary, and an executive of eight nominated by their SACREs across the country and elected at the AGM.

NASACRE is a member of the RE Council of England and Wales (REC) and is presently involved in planning for the building of SACRE capacity as part of the REC's proposals for a National RE Strategy, through its partnership with the DCSF. NASACRE is committed to strengthening SACREs, to bring all of them up to the standard of the best. Members of the NASACRE executive committee have been instrumental in developing training for potential SACRE members from various faith communities.

Over the years, I have met many teachers who are blissfully ignorant of the existence and significance of their local SACRE. Certainly, when I was a young primary school teacher myself, I did not know that there was a body called SACRE, let alone understand what it was for. So, when I became a Local Authority Adviser, I made it a point of publicising SACRE and its work, and encouraging the SACRE I served to make sure its profile was consistently high, both with schools and teachers and with the powers that be in the LA.

SACRE members offer a wonderful example of service to the community and, if properly resourced, are well placed to promote much needed 'community cohesion' – something that is at the top of both national and local agendas just now.

■ Julie Grove

