

SPIRITUALITY IN SCHOOLS

by David Wells

Extracts from the presentation given at the L.A.C.E weekend, May 199 by David Wells, Advisor for Adult Education for the Nottingham Diocese.

We need to take a fresh look at the nature of spirituality in young people before determining the best approach to adopt when working with them.

Adolescent Spirituality

In young people, spirituality is akin to activity. Their active participation is essential if the process is to have any appeal to them and any effect on them. They are psychologically geared to finding out for themselves and they want to discover rather than to be told. Consequently, we need to find a role for young people in the spirituality of the school. Experience of participation is what changes young people, and therefore, if they are to find "God", it will be through experiences and by participation.

Compared to adults, young people have different views about the physical world. They also have different views about the spiritual world. They have an à la carte approach to everything. They can be critical and questioning, and they tend to live in absolutes. For them, things are either black or white. This means that they tend to be very generous and that they are inspired by the ideal of justice. Conversely they are revolted by injustice and anything they see as unfair.

There are certain gender differences to be taken into account. Boys see themselves as achievers ("I can do that"), whereas girls are more ready to accept limitations. Boys set out to beat the world, but paradoxically they are more insecure. However, we must avoid stereotypes. These gender differences are not fixed. Both can identify with a hero on a journey; both can see themselves as "ascenders and climbers", struggling in their search for meaning and identity.

Approaches to Spirituality

Traditional model

This emphasises ritual and form. In theory the symbols all have a meaning, but there is a danger that the form may be conveyed without the meaning. Religion then becomes a series of reflex actions, like genuflecting. It is important to encourage young people to stop and think about what they are doing and why they are doing it. Surface features do not necessarily indicate the underlying reality.

Mystery awareness model

This emphasises the sense of wonder and awe in the face of existence. It is a valid base to spirituality but it depends on the ability to take a panoramic view of life and of the world. This requires a certain physical and psychological maturity, and consequently it is more appropriate for the upper age-groups in a school. Younger children do not focus on the panoramic view; they tend to see things on the small scale. We must respect this natural development.

Conversion model

This sees spiritual development as a life-long process of change. Change is set off by catalytic moments in an individual's experience, usually as a response to particular persons. An incident provokes a new kind of reflection and thus leads to qualitative change. We normally only become aware of such changes after they have taken place. The conversion model seems to be the one most likely to be fruitful in young people. In this approach, spiritual development is a process of discovering one's own abilities, previously unrecognised. Such moments of discovery can be a source of genuine joy. There is a striking similarity between the

Conversion model of spirituality and the process of catechesis as presented in the General Directory of Catechesis. In both cases we are dealing with a cyclic process which moves through a clear set of stages, starting and finishing with "witness":- witness, conversion, apprenticeship, initiation, maturing, proclamation, witness.

The Role of the Teacher

The primary role of the teacher in this model is that of "witness" and "companion". When exploring spirituality with young people we have to be ready to move from being teachers to being witnesses. They do not want to know what we believe. They want to know what it means to us. They want to know, if we really believe it. Authenticity is all important! The teacher accompanies the pupils through the process, and at the end of it they, too, assume the role of witnesses to one another.