



Professor Leslie Francis engages with launch participants.

Celebrating religious diversity in the UK: Launching new resources

The launch of a new academic book (*Attitudes to Religious Diversity: Young People's Perspectives*) and new curriculum resources (*Exploring Why* series and *Exploring Our World* series), focusing on young people and religious diversity, took place in Coventry Cathedral on the evening of 27 January 2017. The curriculum resources, aimed at 3 to 7 year olds and published by Bear Lands Publishing of the St Mary's Centre, have been informed by the findings of the Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity Project led by the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU) at the University of Warwick.

Speakers at the launch included the Very Reverend John Witcombe (Dean of Coventry Cathedral), Professor Robert Jackson, Dr Elisabeth Arweck, Professor Leslie J Francis, and Dr Tania ap Siôn. Responses to the new publications were made by the Rt Revd Dr David Walker (offering a Christian perspective) and Dr Abdullah Sahin (offering



The Rt Revd David Walker, Bishop of Manchester, responds to the new publications.

a Muslim perspective).

Connecting curriculum development and research

At the launch participants heard how Aled and Siân's adventures in the two new curriculum development series *Exploring Why* and *Exploring Our World* were inspired by the findings from the major research project pioneered by the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit into Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity (funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council) under the leadership of Robert Jackson. This project embraced both qualitative and quantitative research, working among young people between the ages of 13 and 16 years in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and London as a special case).

The qualitative strand employed interviews and focus groups. The quantitative strand analysed nearly 12,000 questionnaires.

Professor Leslie J Francis, current Director of the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit at the University of Warwick, spoke about how the quantitative data informed the book and also the curriculum resources. In the case of the latter, three major findings from the quantitative research helped to shape the curriculum resources:

"The first major finding was that too many young people who are themselves members of religious communities (Christian as well as other faith groups) experienced misunderstanding or bullying because of their religion. This is an issue that needs to be addressed. The second major research finding was that it is the young people who have least involvement in religion who hold the most negative attitudes toward religious diversity. For the benefit of community cohesion and acceptance of diversity in the public square, better contact needs to be made between secular and religious communities. The third major finding was that young people considered that school was the major factor to influence their attitude to religious diversity, and that school was more influential than home, television and the Internet. In other words, religious education really does work to build a more inclusive society. There seems value, therefore, in investing in good curriculum resources concentrating on this topic for use in schools. It also makes sense to start doing this early, in the formative first years of primary school."

Dr Tania ap Sion, Project Director for the curriculum resources and one of the authors, spoke about the design and the conception of the two series. She introduced the main characters, Aled and Siân, as two young people who enjoy exploring the world around them:

“Aled and Siân are two young people who are naturally curious. Their curiosity starts with themselves, and then moves beyond themselves, to their immediate circle of friends, to those who attend their local school, and to other children in their neighbourhood. ‘I wonder why?’ is a question that Aled and Siân ask again, and they discover that this question has meaning only when they start exploring themselves (what they do, think and feel), and when they start engaging with others, and with difference. Aled and Siân have a ‘naivety’ about them – their openness means that they live in an exciting world, filled with all kinds of potential. It is this potential that the St Mary’s Centre hopes to offer with these new curriculum resources for 3 to 7 year olds, the *Exploring Why* series and the *Exploring Our World* series.

We have thought carefully about the presentation and the structure of these resources, and in this, we have taken very seriously the creativity of teachers, and their ability to shape learning spaces both inside and outside the classroom in meaningful ways for their individual contexts. No one area, school, class, or teacher will be the same as another, and this is certainly evident when it comes to matters concerning religious diversity. So, for this reason, our resources have an inherent flexibility built into them. There is an openness of exploration that means each theme presents a real adventure, and along the way both teachers and learners cannot help but ask their own fundamental questions, find out about what others around them do and believe, and reflect on how they personally respond to all of this. There is no closed agenda here, all that is required is some honest engagement.”

Gratitude was also expressed for the Welsh Government sponsorship that enabled the creation of such a large resource bank to support education concerned with exploring attitudes to religious diversity, and to make them freely available.

For further news items about the launch visit:

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ces/research/wreru/latestnews/>

<https://phys.org/news/2017-01-religious-contributes-cohesion.html>



Dr Tania ap Sion contextualizes the curriculum resources.