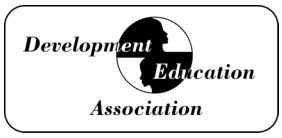
Active Faith:

Global Citizenship and Learning for the Future

A report of the DEA seminar held on 21 June 2006

Produced by the Development Education Association



ACTIVE FAITH: GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP AND LEARNING FOR THE FUTURE

Wednesday 21st June 2006 – Taplow Court, Berkshire

Aims of the Seminar:

- To motivate faith communities to contribute to raising awareness and deepening understanding of global citizenship and sustainable development.

Specific Objectives:

- To review contribution levels of activity within faith communities on learning about global issues and sustainable development

- To discuss and identify specific contribution faith communities can make to UK society's engagement with the principles of global citizenship and sustainable development

- To assess priority needs within faith communities in terms of building increased capacity, skills and knowledge for global citizenship and sustainable development

- And to explore the possibilities of a common initiative which takes forward the issues raised at this event.

How we will work together today:

- Knowledge that we each bring different perspectives
- Knowledge that we each have something of value to offer

What does our faith bring that can contribute to UK society's engagement with the principles of global citizenship and sustainable development?

- Faith is a unique tension between raising consciousness and taking action
    - "My faith itself led me to get involved in sustainability issues; a life conviction and a lifelong commitment."

- Faith enables relationships/connectedness: seeing an element of the divine in everyone. Respect and integrity of this relationship. A vital core exists in every person. Another way of expressing this is that we are all Children of God. Faith enables one to come from and act on this belief and perspective.

- Faith brings all ages together (aside from perhaps the world cup football!).

- Faith brings a realism about human nature. It brings a humility and a recognition of human failure. Through faith forgiveness is possible and one can move forwards.

- Often the secular perspective can be 'I can't make a difference, this problem is too big' – faith brings a ridiculous optimism; faith and hope in the future. Faith is energising – it contains the ability to change for the better. It enables you to say "This is an enormous problem – and we'll tackle it!"

- Sustainability – faith enables you to draw on a limitless source to find ways to continue through huge obstacles.

- Universality – our faiths have been around a long time – they will remain after we've gone. This universality gives perspective – this perspective is balanced by/in tension with the need to act now in this life.

- Have the awareness that everyone has faith in something – it may not be 'religious' faith

- There can be tension between the languages of different types of faith. But even if the words are different (in many cases) the philosophy is basically the same.

- A reminder of the dangers of 'too much faith' – that faith itself has been the cause of conflict.

Emergent Themes:

1. Exploring the polarisation within faiths between the 'conservative' and 'liberal' positions:
   - Historically faith has always contained good and evil
   - There is a definite tension within faiths caused by this polarity
   - How 'conservatives' across faiths have much in common as do the 'liberals' across faiths
   - 'Liberal' is the wrong word – it does not emphasise the strength and clarity of purpose of these groups within their faiths
   - Currently it is the 'conservative' end that has the airtime and (seemingly) is creating the agenda.
   - How can 'liberals' gather effectively together to strengthen and influence the predominant agenda? What position could 'liberals' take collectively?

2. The correlation between young people, their faith and their ability to engage:
   - The diversity and dialogue project (www.diversityanddialogue.org.uk) shared by Hannah Clayton of Save The Children was a project bringing together different faiths and secular groups to work together on global issues with some sense of a conscious unity of purpose. Some of the findings when reviewed together were unexpected:
     - Young people of faith had the ability to engage and articulate themselves well
     - Young people with different faiths had the ability to interact and engage together across their faiths
     - Those young people with no (religious) faith, who had 'secular' backgrounds found it more of a struggle – they had to be helped to find ways to communicate
     - There was a clear gap between those who were religious and those who were non-religious
   - How could this knowledge be used moving forwards to support all young people without establishing a new polarisation of those of faith and those without a faith?

3. The certainty is that it is a time of increasing uncertainty, complexity and insecurity and that these activities and initiatives to develop active faith for global citizenship and sustainable development within, across and beyond faith communities are increasing in their need and importance.
   - How to message positively and empower people?

Sharing Contribution Levels (some examples):

Kevin Fray (One World Week) shared how One World Week had broken down divisions in different faith groups. He shared some of his personal journey of how through progressing One World Week he had challenged his personal misconceptions about other faiths. Through his warm and engaging presentation he encouraged us to do more of the same. Kevin is also currently involved in setting up `soccer for peace'.

Jeffery Newman (Rabbinic Development Foundation) explained that post the 1992 Rio Earth Summit a huge consultative process begun via UNESCO between different countries and communities including faith groups which resulted in the Earth Charter. Unfortunately the US and the UK were not part of UNESCO at this time and so had not been part of this process (which helped explain why so few of the participants had heard of it). He said we can't help the environment without global awareness of social justice. The great thing about the Earth Charter was that it was so specific about what one can actually do. He sees his role as to introduce the Earth Charter to the UK including to schools and businesses and expressed his desire for those present to work with him on sharing the Earth Charter in the UK.

Chris Rolls (Methodist Relief and Development Fund) described how his organisation was helping 16 Methodist schools all over the country get global issues put on the curriculum. For example schools were becoming involved in eco issues, using fair trade products, engaging with overseas projects and visits, partnerships with schools abroad and campaigning. This was being tied in with local people and organisations. He was looking for funding to extend this to the 60 Methodist schools in the state sector.

Robert Einser (World Jewish Fund) explained they were helping to educate various Jewish groups and Jewish organisations to become part of the Make Poverty History Campaign. There is a Jewish social action month in October during which there will be activities to help local communities. Primary activity is *currently* fund raising.

Robert Samuels (SGI-UK) explained that the SGI-UK was currently supporting the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development / the Earth Charter through an exhibition called Seeds of Change. This is available to be shown around the country by the organisational membership and has raised awareness in the UK as well as the rest of the world.

Ruth Conway (European Christian Environment Network) described an interfaith conservation project which was enhancing 30 acres of land.

Helen Gilbert (St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace) described 'The Tent'. This is a structure created in the back of their medieval church where all different faiths are coming together to share their faiths and difficult issues surrounding faith and conflict. She would love to invite dialogue with different faiths at the meeting and get us all involved and move the project forward.

Robert Pierce (Christian Aid) is working with young people and their gap year schemes. He mentioned a group of 'gappers' recently returned from a year in Nicaragua where they'd been involved in an educative Aids awareness project. The gappers learnt so much from

this and have brought their knowledge home to share with their local communities in the UK. Ironically, despite Nicaragua being a 'poorer' country economically than the UK the gappers felt it was they who had learnt from the Nicaraguans rather than the other way round.

Thalia Carr (Reading Council) talked about 'What Christians Do', an event which encouraged Christians from different denominations to take action over Climate Change. Although people are reading about Climate Change they're still not putting their Christian practice and Climate Change action together. She said there was lots of interest in the event which comprised talks and different workshops followed by commitments and prayers at the end of the afternoon. She suggested the importance of bringing the whole entity of Christian practice and global action together.

Exploring Priority Needs:

- There are those faith groups who are at just the exploratory stage and those who are well established in this work – for those in the exploratory stage there is a need to understand and learn more from those groups where work is already being done and is well established.

- There is a need within faiths to strengthen the link between our faith and global action and explore/explain how faith cannot be separated from/leads to action
    - *Jeffery Newman (Rabbinic Development Foundation)* expressed that he thought the Jewish groups for example were rather lost. The Muslim community he reflected had united effectively to deal with various issues affecting them, but he was having trouble conceptualising how to engage Jews effectively in global issues.

- How to harness the energy and interest generated from the Make Poverty History campaign? *Doug Bourn (Development Education Association)* said there are 9 million people on the database who are registered as being interested in the Make Poverty History campaign, but no one was very sure about how to use this huge interest to generate positive action. *Ruth Conway* reminded the group of how much more powerful it is when people can act in a group and asked how we could harness this energy towards action for climate change. She shared that a movement of 'eco congregations' has been set up to help people look at what they can do to help the environment and workshop global issues

- A varied range of activity *is* happening on the ground; within faiths, through multi-faith activity and within communities across faith and secular groups of people.

    - How can these initiatives be increased particularly with young people?

    - How can we extend and build on existing activity such as One World Week and The Earth Charter rather than creating new initiatives from scratch. *Kevin Fray (One World Week)* said he'd welcome anyone using `One World' as a hook to push their own global awareness issues.

    - Is there a way to make these projects and examples accessible and available as resource to draw on in our own work:
      1. To serve as a source of encouragement for those of us engaged in this work
      2. To support further work

- It was expressed that we all have a unique role to play/job to do at this time.

Further Work on Three Themes

1. **Engaging and influencing the 'conservatives' within our own faiths**
   - The group explored clarifying a core set of values which had a common language, of which the whole spectrum of belief within a faith could agree on as the basis for dialogue. As a starting point the group began working on what a Christian set of core values might be.

2. **Strengthening the understanding/making clearer the link within our faiths between faith and action**
   - We must articulate the connection between our faith and being a responsible citizen.
   - To move forward we could find people who are interested in issues and work with them.
   - How to/should we use our faith to create passion in people to do more for the environment?
   - The group focussed on possible active multi-faith work at The Tent at St Ethelburgas. A series exploring The Earth Charter has been taken forwards since the event

3. **How to share our ideas**
   - The group discussed how individual religions could best use their resources to work for global issues. This was balanced the insight that religion is there to strengthen the individual so they can go out and work in society for society.
   - It included a discussion on:
     - The fear of many within faith groups of campaigning on issues and thereby becoming `too political'. Faith can be a comfort zone for people. If you practice a faith for a comfort zone it's uncomfortable to move into a radical active altruistic zone.
     - That much social change comes from religious people, for example Gandhi and Martin Luther King.
     - What is the purpose of one's faith: faith can empower people to go out into society. Should we use our faith group as a tool to do more or as a training ground to strengthen our individual compassion to `go out' and take action.
     - Becoming involved in the `Fair-trade' products and movement (i.e. using their products or having a Fair-trade stall etc) is a great place for a faith group to start. It is very altruistic and powerful but not seen as controversial.
     - It's a challenge to go out of our faith groups into the greater society.

Moving Forwards

- Initially participants felt they would like the day to be more than a talking shop balanced with the dilemma that if we create yet another group what priority will it have amongst all our other priorities
- For some the opportunity to network; to connect and reinforce the work individuals are already involved in is meaningful in and of itself
- Moving forwards it would be useful to find a way to share existing materials and information individual participants have access to with one another
- It was felt that it would be valuable for those who wish to continue to explore a range of possible initiative(s) that would move forwards the active faith agenda

Parked items for future consideration

- The desire to hold a more personal/deeper dialogue, for example to explore how our faiths 'colour' our perspectives and to share how individuals came to their perspectives.