

# your school assembly

## Collective daily

- worship is changing —
- it ranges from pop music to PowerPoint, writes **John Naish**

If you were to walk into Kingswood School in Corby, Northamptonshire, first thing in the morning, you would be in for a rather odd surprise. You would find more than 250 secondary pupils and staff sitting together in a square, in total silence, for up to five minutes.

The daily reflective pause is part of Kingswood's spiritual start to the day. It may not resemble the type of "hands together, eyes closed" religious assembly that many parents remember. But the Quaker-inspired silence is emblematic of how teachers are reinventing daily collective worship to meet both the needs of our modern mixed society and the requirements of educational law. In the process, schools are embracing multi-faith traditions and using everything from pop music to PowerPoint.

Faith in schools has had a bad press of late. A recent survey by the polling company Comres indicates that many state schools in England no longer provide group worship. The survey, commissioned by the BBC, found that 64 per cent of the 500 parents questioned said that their child did not attend daily acts of collective worship.

Meanwhile, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers has questioned how much schools and parents want daily worship. And the National Secular Society is claiming that group worship even amounts to a breach of human rights. It is campaigning in the House of Lords to drop the requirement for compulsory worship from the Education Bill, which is currently at the committee stage.

As the law stands, all maintained schools in England must provide a daily act of collective worship that reflects this country's "broadly Christian" traditions. Schools where most pupils come from other faiths can ask to be excused

from the Christian requirement. And parents can withdraw their child from worship. But supporters of daily worship say that the rules can be interpreted so imaginatively that they can suit people of all traditions and none, ensuring that faith-orientated assemblies play a vital role in preparing children to be spiritually and socially rounded adults.

Bruce Gill, the chair of the National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education, says: "Collective worship used to be an opportunity to give the school a hymn, a prayer and a ticking off. Now it can be so different. It is an opportunity to get children to reflect on their values and behaviours. It is for educational nurturing, an important role in these times when we are worried about people's sense of community."

Such values are amply evident at Kingswood Secondary in Corby. As its head teacher, David Tristram, explains: "The assemblies may not be strictly Christian, but they are of a broadly Christian or spiritual nature. Sharing that amount of silence among so many people is very powerful, very special. When students first do it, I explain to them that this few precious minutes are going to be their only opportunity to have silence for the rest of the day. I hope it helps them to develop contemplative parts of their brain that may not otherwise be developed in today's world of constant distraction."

### Online today

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This practice was instigated in 1965 by Kingswood's first head teacher, Alan Bradley, who was a Quaker. He decided that assembly would be non-hierarchical. So the teachers and pupils all sit in a square together in silence for three minutes or more, until someone gets up and speaks. "In the Quaker tradition, someone speaks when the spirit moves them. But we need to be



All maintained schools in England must provide a daily act of collective worship that is "broadly Christian" in character

more scripted than that," says Tristram. "It may well be someone like me, getting up to speak on an inspirational subject such as becoming a young leader, or about the core values of our school. These values include equality, community and respect, which are encapsulated in this silent assembly."

"People who visit the school are amazed. The idea of getting a load of 15 to 16-year-olds, for example, to sit contentedly in total silence nowadays is beyond many people's comprehension. Ofsted were blown away by it." Indeed, in its latest report, Ofsted inspectors classed the role students play in assemblies as "outstanding".

Supporters of collective worship believe it is in far more robust health than the BBC survey suggests. Jane Chipper-ton, who chairs the Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants, believes that the results were distorted because the survey took a restricted view of what constitutes school worship. "It is not only about morning assembly. Many secondary schools are far too big now to gather everyone together in that way," she says.

"The law now allows collective worship to be at any time of day in any form of group. That is how a lot of collective worship now happens. This can involve things such as using material

from programmes such as Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* to make the experience far more media-friendly for children, with time built in for reflection so that pupils of all faiths or none can buy into the experience."

Last month Jonathan Gardiner, the head of St Mary's Church of England Primary School in Kettering, Northamptonshire, e-mailed all the schools in his county to ask about their group worship activities. "Everyone was doing something that fits the guidelines," he says. "For example, one secondary school I spoke to has a twice-weekly formal assembly that is not of a broadly Christian nature, but instead focuses on moral, cultural and spiritual matters. Another school recently held a two-day celebration on Hinduism, linked to Holi, the spring festival associated with Krishna."

Gardiner describes his own school's collective worship as "all-singing, all-dancing". This is sometimes literally true, as the school works with a nationwide charity called Pop Connection, which teaches children to sing and record faith-based modern songs that promote values such as reverence, gratitude, compassion and humility. "Other assemblies may involve PowerPoint presentations, or plays or demonstrations that challenge the children to

think about things such as conflicts that are happening in the world," Gardiner adds. "The children will do their own assemblies, too. It's all about getting them involved and thinking."

Collective worship can also play a vital role in community building, especially in mixed-faith communities, according to Dr Alan Lee, the executive principal for the Federation of Bedford Catholic Schools. "We have all faiths in our schools, with strong representations of Muslims and Jews," he says. "We have a prayer room, which is for all faiths. We have a Catholic community chaplain, but he is available for all faiths, too. We seek the truth and we believe in individual discovery."

He adds: "The foundation of our collective worship is about being inspired by example. Older children lead the collective worship, and younger children are inspired by that. It is a very powerful way forward. It is all about finding imaginative ways to create collective worship." The result, he says, is that the school pupils have absorbed faith-based practices into their daily habits.

"We believe in serving one another. That feeling pervades what we do here. Our pupils have a drama group and basketball team; before they perform or compete, they pray together. They really feel that it is inspiring for them."