

2. How can we be a Church of England school when 96% of parents and pupils are Muslim?

As an avid reader of *The Church Times* for many years, I have been aware that there has been a continuing debate over the policy of church schools, particularly in multi-cultural areas where the majority of pupils are of other faiths. Now I am dealing with the reality of such a church school, the question has become an acute and urgent one.

What is the Church of England wanting to do with a school such as ours in an area such as ours? What policies, or lack of them, have led to a school with a Christian foundation to which Christian parents do not send their children? On the other hand, what is the Church of England's Board of Education about when, because of its Christian Foundation, our school cannot access the excellent service provided by Bradford's Interfaith Centre for Muslim assemblies to our Muslim pupils?

I ask these questions in exasperation because, as a Governing Body, as staff and as a local church, we are being constantly confronted by the ironies and contradictions of our position. And yet, speaking as a member of the Governing Body, I do not think we have any idea why the Anglican Church wants us to be a church school at all, nor how we should act with integrity in the difficult and sensitive position in which we are placed. Sometimes I dare to wonder whether church schools should follow church membership and clergy out of the inner city, and leave schooling here to the state and Muslim organisations. In any case, I really do think that this issue should be discussed with Governing Bodies such as ours. We need to know the Church of England's policy regarding schools such as ours. Furthermore, if these church schools are felt by the Church to have a role in the inner city, we as governors need support and training to deal with the situation sensitively and appropriately. It astounds me how little some of our Governing Body know about Islam for instance.

3. The vast majority of children and parents at our school are of Asian origin – the great majority of staff and governors are not.

This issue once again raises the challenges and difficulties of becoming effectively multicultural in a multicultural environment – especially as a church school.

As an active parent governor, I was constantly aware that as a white Christian I could not be representative of the overwhelming majority of parents and their concerns. On certain issues my position could feel extremely uncomfortable. For instance, I have pressed for a new school building on a better site even if this means travelling further; however, I know that the parents I represent want to have a school close to their homes – even if this means having an inferior building on an inferior site.

In recent months, we have had the largest proportion of Asian governors on the Governing Body and attending meetings that we have ever known (four out of thirteen) – until recently we had two Asian parent governors, one of whom turned up regularly to meetings. So, in the context of a school with a 96% Asian Muslim attendance, set in a locality where over 50% of the population is of Asian origin, the people making the key decisions at our school do not share the culture, religion or first language of those on whose behalf these decisions are made. One recent example was the unsympathetic attitude of some governors to children and staff taking time off for the Muslim festival of Eid. This, despite the fact that, as a Church of England school, we should recognise and respect the importance of religious observance. As a Governing Body, I feel we need to be acutely aware that we are making decisions in the interests of children whose culture and perspectives we may not understand. Therefore, we need to be proactive not only in recruiting more Asian Muslim governors, but in building a dialogue of understanding with the parents and community we seek to represent.

I recognise that the issue is more complex than this. For example, the Governing Body is not entirely responsible for its own make-up – the Church, the DfEE, and the Asian community itself all have their part to play (indeed, Asian parents voted me in as a parent governor). There are issues to do with deprivation and disadvantage, of culture and language, but also of confidence. This is a difficult and sensitive issue but it needs to be tackled.

4. Governing Bodies are being given more powers and responsibilities which I feel the Governing Body of our school is not capable of fulfilling.

There are several points which make me say this, and with them come wider issues around the expectations being made

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