

Ep.8 Let's Go Further - Playing the long game: what the Church of England can bring to FE

The [Church of England](#) is the largest provider of faith-based schools in the UK and has representation in around 80% of further education colleges. So, what is its current role in education and what is its long-term vision?

The Reverend Nigel Genders CBE is Chief Education Officer of the Church of England. In this conversation, he explains how the Church strives to work for the 'common good' in education; the link between Christian vocation and vocation in colleges; and the challenges the Church has faced in expanding its work in FE.

We look forward to your company for the last episode of this series, as we conclude our focus on equity, diversity and inclusion.

About Nigel Genders CBE

The Revd Canon Nigel Genders is the Church of England's Chief Education Officer and Chief Executive of the National Society. Nigel leads the work of the [Church of England Education Office](#) which serves the church's ministry with children and young people in churches, schools, colleges and universities. The Church of England provides 4,700 schools educating over a million children and is committed to a vision for education which is deeply Christian, serving the common good.

Nigel's role in education has developed throughout 31 years of ordained ministry working in a variety of roles, including: vicar, school chaplain, governor of a university, chair of governors in primary and secondary school, Director of Education for Canterbury Diocese, Head of School Policy for the Church of England and he has been Chief Education Officer since 2014.

Nigel was awarded the honour of CBE in the King's birthday honours list in June 2023.

Transcript

Joe Mcloughlin 0:02

Hello, and welcome to Series 2 of Let's Go Further, a podcast from the Skills and Education Group that challenges the way we think about skills and education.

I'm Joe Mcloughlin, Foundation Manager at the Group. And in this series, I'm speaking to people from inside and outside the education sector, about equity, diversity and inclusion. In this episode, we're talking about the role of religion in education. And joining me is the Reverend Nigel Genders, Chief Education Officer of the Church of England, which is the largest provider of faith-based schools in the UK, and has representation in around 80% of colleges. I just wanted to begin with a broad question and just ask if you can tell us a little bit about the church's role in education in the UK historically?

Nigel Genders 0:45

Yeah, I mean, that's one of those questions that could go back as long as you want. But right from the beginning of the church's kind of life really there's been an involvement with education. So in this country, you can trace that back to 597 AD when Augustine came over and brought Christianity to Britain. And the kind of sense that education was part of that movement, right from the beginning led to the founding of schools, king's scholars schools, and things like that. But I guess the main turning point was in 1811, when the charity which I worked for, the National Society, was founded, and became a movement for mass education for the poor and disadvantaged in the country, and led to the kind of development of thousands of schools that were not for the wealthy, rich families who could afford it education for their boys as it would have been then. But it was mass education for the poor and the disadvantaged with a vision that every child should have an opportunity to access education. And, you know, the state joined in with that as a good idea some 50 years later. So it wasn't until 1850-1860 that the state really got involved in that. And then the subsequent history is one where the church and the state have kind of managed that relationship and, and found a way to ensure that both partners can play a part in education, probably the kind of key moment was the 1944 Education Act, where that settlement about who provides what in terms of church education or state education was kind of established? So there's, there's a very quick potted history, Joe, in terms of the last couple of 100 years at least.

Joe Mcloughlin 2:22

And where does that leave you now? How many schools are you working with? Or how many learners are you guiding?

Nigel Genders 2:27

Yeah, so in the in the school sector, that means that the church now across England and Wales provides just over 4800 schools, that's just over 1 million children are in a Church of England school every day of the week. So of those in

the English context of those 4700 schools in England, 4500 of them are primary, 200-and-something are secondary. So we've been really, very majority focused on primary schools. But so 800,000 young people in a primary- Church of England primary school, that's one in four of all primary schools, and about 200,000 in a Church of England secondary school.

Joe Mcloughlin 3:10

And kind of thinking about where faith meets the national curriculum, kind of what does what does that look like day to day? Is it I suppose what I'm asking is, how does a- how would a church school differ from a from a state school?

Nigel Genders 3:21

Yeah, and a really interesting question because our schools are schools with a religious character, they are schools, like any other maintained state school, they deliver the broad curriculum they're, they're there to do the kind of the whole of the educational journey. And and yet they have a particular emphasis in in terms of ensuring that the the ethos, and the character of that school is one where the, the characteristics of it are such that the collective worship, the religious education, the the way the curriculum is treated, are all through the lens of our deep Christian understanding. And you know, that that means that you know, there'll be particular points where you'd say 'ah so the collective worship syllabus, or the RE curriculum might be slightly different in a church school than a non church school, but actually what we want in all of our schools, is for that Christian character and ethos to run through the whole of the life of the school, like, often use the metaphor of you know, the writing through a stick of rock, that wherever you cut the life of the school, you should be able to recognise that the impact of the character and the ethos on the whole life of the school is one that brings you know a real sense of flourishing to that school community.

Joe Mcloughlin 4:39

And just thinking about that ethos, and that character, in kind of preparation for today, I was reading over the church's vision for education, and the mission statement there was a deeply Christian serving the common good view of education. And I'd just be curious to hear your thoughts on what is deeply Christian in this context and what is the common good?

Nigel Genders 5:01

Yeah and we've worked very hard on that strapline because when we were producing our vision, we were really clear that we didn't want to produce a vision for Church of England schools. We wanted to produce the Church of England's vision for education. And I think there's a big difference between those things is that we, yes, we do provide a lot of schools, but our vision for education is one which we think is one which can be relevant to all schools and every aspect of education. And so we went for the kind of the strapline of deeply Christian serving the common good, because we wanted, we want to be really clear about our deep convictions and our heritage, and the theology that underpins our thinking and what a school's Christian vision is. And that's why we worked really hard on on four core themes around wisdom. I mean, wisdom is not a word that you tend to hear in the education sector very often, but actually, what we're interested in is how we educate children and young people in a way which helps them to become wise and to learn how to live wisely. Wisdom and hope, you know giving a sense of you know failure isn't the end of the story. When people have difficult times, there's always a chance for a fresh start, and a hope and aspiration, which gives a sense of a future hope, and certainty. Of community and how we live well as in communities with each other. They're all at the heart of Christian theology, the kind of the dignity and the respect that we give to people. So all of those themes are really the underpinning deep Christian theological convictions that we have, we want to be really clear about where they've come from how that depth of Christian thinking influences our vision. And yet to make sure that it's not about just providing schools for the faithful or faith schools, or whatever terminology gets used. But it's going back to what I was describing in terms of our roots in 1811. It's about education for all. So, so our schools, we pride ourselves on being church schools for the whole community. And we're about enabling the whole community to flourish. And so when we say the common good, that's what that's what we're talking about, we're saying that we want the whole of education to be something which the whole of society can benefit from. And so we see our role as as supporting that common good, not just being a kind of subset for those who particularly think that faith is an interesting thing for them. I mean some of the things I've been talking about earlier today, and during this week, have been around how we encourage those children in those in schools to then play their part in society and become courageous advocates for social justice or racial justice or, or whatever the issue might be, to make sure that they're able to really play their full part in society.

Joe Mcloughlin 7:46

So I wanted to turn now and look a little more at the sector that we work closest with, which is, you know, the the further education and skills sector. And I just wanted to ask if you could set the scene for us kind of how does how does the church currently get involved with further education, colleges or skills providers?

Nigel Genders 8:04

Yeah and it's obviously it's a very, it's a different scenario and different context to the school sector, because there isn't any kind of systematic involvement or systemic involvement in in that we don't provide FE colleges in the way that we provide schools. So in the school sector, the the fact that we've provided those schools over those hundreds of years means that we're tied in at a governance level, and in terms of the ownership of the school sites, and the land and all of those sorts of things. That's not the case in FE. And yet, we know that there are twice as many 16 to 18 year olds in in FE colleges as there are in all the entirety of the school sixth forms put together. So so although we're not tied in at the governance or the kind of the statutory level within the FE sector, then we know that our vision for the common good must include FE colleges as well. So we see colleges as being real partners in that community building. And it tends to be on a much more informal basis, therefore in FE than it is in the school setting. And we, you know, there are examples where that informal nature is such that churches will come alongside their college leaders and assist with things like I don't know, the Prevent anti-extremism agenda would have been one example or how does the church help the college in resourcing spiritual and moral and social and cultural education? What does it do about building community cohesion? But it tends to be on a much more informal case by case basis in terms of understanding the local context, rather than the more systemic kind of rooted basis that we have in the school sector through particularly through the governance of those schools.

Joe Mcloughlin 10:01

So what you've just said there kind of reminds me of a lot of what the church's recent review of involvement in FE colleges, the vocation transformation and hope review stated, which was, at a really simple level, there isn't enough engagement as you'd like to see, given the sort of size and scale of colleges. And that review set the target that within the next five years, each diocese would seek an active partnership with each of its FE and sixth form colleges. A couple of years in now, since that publication, how is that five year plan going?

Nigel Genders 10:35

Yeah, it's been perhaps a bit slower than we'd anticipated. I mean, we landed that report, just in you know...most of the work was done pre-pandemic, but the report landed right at the beginning of the global pandemic. And we recognise that colleges have had quite a lot to think about and to do in that time. But the commitment to...from the Church of working with FE colleges in this way is really still as resounding as it was when we wrote the report. It's about how we

ensure that you know at that local level, we're able to build those partnerships. We're not at the point at the moment in terms of having a kind of a group of colleges that wants to come together and work in a more formal way in with the Church of England. But there's a real definite passion for...and local commitment to working at an individual level. And that's, that's kind of been done through chaplaincy...you know chaplaincy is one of the kind of key things which the church provides to FE colleges. And we're really keen to see that develop. And we're beginning to do some work in that area, one or two other areas around apprenticeships, for example, or some of the green skills agenda. And seeing the relationship with those colleges develop in that way is something which is happening on a case by case basis in different dioceses. But we were quite bold about the kind of the aspiration to then form a wider group of colleges. I think we're still a few years off that being being a reality. But we're very sure about the individual relationships, particularly in the area of chaplaincy, for example.

Joe Mcloughlin 12:17

So would you say then that the the kind of the most positive work, the most successful work in terms of partnership building or outreach to colleges has been around that pastoral support the more sort of the socially minded side of things rather than the actually explicitly educational side of things?

Nigel Genders 12:33

Yeah. And I think that the...you talked about the 80% figure earlier, as you're introducing it, Joe, and we know that there are huge numbers of colleges where the church the local church has engaged with them through chaplaincy, what that tends to be at the moment is voluntary part time chaplaincy. Where...and again, that's slightly different to you would experience if you went into a Church of England secondary school, for example, where there'd probably be a full time paid chaplain as part of the school staff. So we're starting from a basis which is much more part time voluntary chaplaincy, but how colleges are valuing that role as chaplains are able to go alongside students and and support them through what's been a pretty difficult and challenging time, particularly in in terms of people's mental health and wellbeing and some of the pastoral support that children- students are able to access. We're seeing a real appetite for what-how do we create chaplaincy, which is much more formal and sustainable and, and the church is beginning to invest in you know ensuring that those kinds of opportunities for chaplaincy are ones that can develop and become more substantive kind of full time roles with much greater therefore impact in terms of the ability to be able to engage with students across the college's community.

Joe Mcloughlin 14:00

So you spoke briefly there about the kind of the benefits that colleges are seeing from chaplaincy, although it's hard to to measure at the moment, because it's, you know, part time and on a voluntary basis in most cases, are there any are there any dangers or challenges that you see kind of relating to this role? So the idea that they can be independent, relatively independent within the system, but not part of the system? Is there a is there a danger or risk there that that you that you have to manage or see on a day to day basis?

Nigel Genders 14:29

Yeah, I mean, I think that, you know, one of the one of the joys of chaplaincy and why they're so why it's so successful as a model in educational settings is that you know students can talk to the chaplain as someone who's not marking their their work or assessing them or you know, they're not connected to the kind of the life of the college in quite that same formal way. So it gives a freedom to be much more open and you know to have that kind of development of a relationship. That's great. That's a really important and fundamental thing about chaplaincy. The danger, I suppose, is that if you if it is kind of part time voluntary ad hoc, you don't get the consistency of approach. And so...or even the profile, I suppose, which which is needed in order for students really to be able to access that service effectively. So it just becomes part of the other wider leadership of the college in terms of the relationship that the chaplain has with with students in terms of it being on a formal educational basis, I think it does, nevertheless need to be hardwired in to the college's life. So that in terms of profile and the ability for the chaplain to have a space and a place where where students know where to reach them and to access them, is really important. So so it's kind of keeping that yes, the kind of minister without portfolio is a good analogy, you don't want to be responsible for kind of the assessment of the students in that way. But having a clear role within the wider strategic leadership of the of the college, I think, is something which we found certainly in the school setting brings real added value to the chaplains and chaplain's role because it's not just about the students actually, you know really important on that basis, but we find that our chaplains are also often there for staff as well. And for for being able to help be a listening ear to staff and to be able to help them in some of the complexities of the things that they're managing, to have that kind of chaplaincy approach for staff and students is really important. And so therefore being, as I say, hardwired into the kind of the structure of the college is really important for that purpose.

Joe Mcloughlin 16:48

So I just wanted to take a step back away from the kind of the day to day interactions with colleges, growth of chaplaincies, growth of partnerships, that kind of thing. And I wanted to ask you about the power of vocation in Christian

thought. So I appreciate it won't necessarily mean skill development, or job based learning or kind of more practical learning, as it's often used in our sector in our area. But I was wondering, do you see an overlap between the kind of Christian terminology and the work of colleges?

Nigel Genders 17:15

Oh, for sure. Yeah. And and you reference our report that we produced in 2021, around vocation, transformation, and hope and, and vocation, absolutely fundamental to our understanding of what education is about, and why we want to engage in this sector in such a clear way. So every person has has unique gifts and abilities and motivations. That's kind of what is fundamental to our Christian understanding of who we are as human beings. And and God calls us as who we are, to be the unique people that we are. That's that's fundamentally what vocation is about, as far as I can understand it, you know we're called to use our gifts in the service of others, we're we're called to ensure that, you know, what we do in our lives is paying attention to kind of who we are as individuals. So yes, colleges are absolutely at the heart of preparing people for future careers and for education that enables them to achieve in in particular areas of the different what we call vocational courses. But that's about actually preparing them to be and equipping them to be human beings who can both aspire and use their gifts and talents and cope with their struggles and be the human beings that they need to be to actually live out their life in a way which is a life in all its fullness, as we say in our vision. So, so further education, and what colleges are doing is fundamentally about vocation. And Christianity is fundamentally about vocation. So we see so we see the two go together in that way.

Joe Mcloughlin 18:59

Recognising that then, because I think the phrase you used there was kind of the the fullness of life or the kind of the full human being, as it were, so that when you go to get educated, it's not just about a qualification, it's about a whole range of perspectives that you learn that you develop, what do you hope that the kind of the church gains in return in response, kind of what do you what would be what would be a success for you, I suppose what would be a benefit for you?

Nigel Genders 19:23

I think that it's, it's fundamentally about children and young, well, young people in the college context, knowing that actually, the Church wants them to thrive and to flourish and to find that fullness of life which I was referring to, to ensure

that you know that they see themselves fully as being part of what the church's story is about, which is about finding meaning and purpose and that kind of deeper sense of a growing sense of who they are in terms of their own identity and value and worth and self worth. And and so for the church, I mean the church nationally as the Church of England, we've set out an aspiration to be younger and more diverse. We we know that, you know, going back to what I was saying earlier about the the sheer numbers of students in in FE colleges, more than double that are in schools in terms of the 16-18 age group. So the church really wants to engage with society and enable young people to find that fullness of life. Well, you know, what better place to relate to them than in further education colleges. So we're, we're, we're about ensuring that every young person can fulfil their God given potential. For some that will mean finding meaning and purpose in a kind of deep and personal and growing relationship with God. But going back to what I was saying about the common good, our hope is that for all that sense of self worth, and vocation will bring the hope and the transformation that enables them to be who God wants them to be. And that's our purpose. That's why it is about in in the FE sector, as well as in the school sector, about being deeply Christian serving the common good, because we're fundamentally wanting to engage with this sector in a way which enables that common good to bring transformation to the world in which we live. I often boldly say, as I as I talk to school leaders, that the business that we're in is, is the formation of children and young people for the transformation of the world. It's a massive undertaking. And boy does our world need transforming when you see the complexity of the world in which we live. And so our engagement, whether it be in school, or in college, or in university, is is about ensuring that we enable that transformation to happen for every person and every person's life. And and that's what we're seeking to do by being more involved in, in further education just as we are through schools and higher education.

Joe Mcloughlin 21:59

And so that commitment then, that sounds like a long term commitment for you, that'll be something that you'll be working on with the church into the future?

Nigel Genders 22:06

Yeah, it is very much a long term commitment. And we know that the political cycle is such that since our since we published that report in 2021. I think there have been five Secretaries of State for Education in that time. And and each comes with a kind of their own sense of priorities. But what we always say is that the Church, the Church of England has been here in terms of our own education for the last couple of 100 years in its formal ways. And we want to be here for the next 200 years, continuing to have this emphasis. And so we are into long term commitment. That is exactly the DNA that the church brings to

this. It's not about a political cycle. It's about a long term commitment. And just as we've been committed in the school sector for that period of time, we want the church to engage in further education colleges and in the FE sector in a way which shows that long term commitment to the fantastic work that those colleges are doing to bring the the hope and aspiration to young people to grow and to fulfil their purposes. And the church is committed to being in that game for the long term and and will seek to develop the relationships on a college to college basis, in a way which enables that commitment to be understood and appreciated, and to be developed and will be one that goes on for years to come. So the Church of England's aspiration for younger and more diverse. It's set out as part of its 10 year plan. But it's much more than 10 years it's about our commitment to children and young people in this nation for for generations to come.

Joe Mcloughlin 23:47

Thank you to my guest the Reverend Nigel Genders and to you for listening. We hope you enjoyed the conversation and that it's got you thinking about the connection between religion, education and wider society. This episode is the last in the current series of Let's Go Further. But all episodes from this series and the first series are available wherever you receive your podcasts. And you can keep up with us at the Skills and Education Group on Twitter @SkillsEduGroup or search Skills and Education Group on LinkedIn and Facebook. Thanks for listening. I'll see you next time and let's go further together.