

# Over 150 Catholic Educators attend first ATCRE National Conference

On Saturday 8th February 2020, it was standing room only in the Waldegrave Drawing Room at St Mary's University for the much anticipated ATCRE first national conference.

The Association of Teachers of Catholic Religious Education was formed in March 2018 with the support of the Catholic Education Service (CES) and is now an associate member of the National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisers (NBRIA). The mission of the organisation was to provide a national representation and support specifically for teachers of Catholic religious education.

Already ATCRE have begun to live out their wider mission as they will be leading the teacher consultations on the new Religious Education Curriculum Directory during Spring 2020. They will continue to work with the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) and National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE) to provide a voice for Catholic RE teachers.

**We asked a few people who attended the conference to share their view of the day, or some of their highlights:**

The inaugural ATCRE conference was a long awaited and welcome opportunity for teachers of Religious Education, academics and others from across the country and beyond, to be nourished and empowered by stimulating keynote speakers, to share new ideas and good practice in a rich variety of workshops and be exposed to current curriculum research and how it relates to Catholic Religious Education.

The tone of the day was set by Mary Myatt, who challenged colleagues to have a sense of humility around the curriculum and privilege thinking over task completion. She urged delegates to continue to ensure that the Religious Education curriculum provides stretch and challenge for all students, a message reinforced by Bishop Alan Williams SM, who reflected on the deployment of

models and images to make the complex accessible. Michael Merrick gave an impassioned presentation around a Catholic curriculum model leaving delegates with much food for thought and Philip Robinson, provided a comprehensive update on the Religious Education Curriculum Directory revision, with ATCRE leading on the teacher consultation aspect of this.

The conference concluded on a high note and delegates left confident in the knowledge that this was just the beginning of something that will continue to gather momentum and grow over time. These few hours renewed and strengthened delegates in their commitment to their critical roles in supporting the mission of the Church in Catholic education.

**Catherine Bryan - Assistant Director (Education), Catholic Education Service**

The inaugural ACTRE conference was answering a prayer I have had since qualifying as an RE teacher six years ago. I have always valued the opportunity to network and share ideas with colleagues. However, the conferences and meetings I have attended outside the Diocesan training have always focused on RE in non-faith schools. Whilst I have always come away from them with ideas, I knew that they didn't quite fit the Catholic context I work in.

Within a minute of grabbing a coffee in the Waldegrave meeting room I found myself in a conversation with primary colleagues and secondary colleagues discussing how we were marking the Year of the Word; over lunch I was speaking to colleagues from Bristol and learning what they do for Core RE; and then I was sitting in a room where the keynote speaker was calling us to see the curriculum in a Catholic school through a Catholic lens. The unspoken understanding between all gathered about the challenges, the joys and areas of growth within Catholic education meant that even though many of us in the room were 'strangers' we were truly united with a



(Matthew Dell, Chair of ATCRE)

*I was delighted that the hard work of the executive team paid off. We delivered a varied and stimulating day to nourish RE teachers. For the first national conference it showed that we can easily overcome a silo mentality of school and diocese, and in the spirit of cooperation, share as a family of Catholic educators.*

common calling to live out our vocation in Catholic schools. On the train back to Waterloo a group who had been at the conference spent the entire journey talking about the Catholic Mission and Curriculum, much to the confusion of our fellow passengers!

ATCRE provided me with a conference experience that spoke to the core of my school and department context. It challenged me. It inspired me. It encouraged me. It rekindled my hope (and enthusiasm) but most importantly it reminded me of why I choose to work in Catholic education.

**Emma Westbury - Head of RE, Nicholas Breakspear Catholic School**

The ATCRE Conference left me with a profound sense of unity which stemmed from attending a day with a large number of other Catholic educators, sharing the same ambition. It was entirely refreshing to receive input, not only about the need for excellent education, but the moral responsibility we have to form our pupils in their faith. Mary Myatt reminded us that mediocre was not an option when teaching authentic RE, Fr Eamonn referred us to the example of Pope Francis in being credible leaders, and Michael Merrick implored us to 'treasure knowledge and preserve the jewels of Catholic culture'. As Catholic educators in all capacities, we must stand together, encourage one another and work to carry out the mission of providing outstanding, intellectually stimulating and spiritually sound education for our pupils. What an uplifting start to the year!





In particular, Michael Merrick enthused the delegates at the ATCRE Conference 2020 with an inspiring talk on the need for teaching the truths of the Catholic faith. He stated that as RE teachers in Catholic schools, we have a duty to ensure that pupils, regardless of their personal faith, leave school with a thorough understanding of Catholicism. Merrick argued that we shouldn't have a situation in which pupils in our care are unaware of key Catholic teachings and symbolism, such as the importance of Lent or why Catholics receive ash crosses on Ash Wednesday. There is a depth and beauty to the Catholic faith of which we should be proud. Merrick stated that in an increasingly secular culture it is vital that RE teachers in Catholic schools are effectively communicating this to pupils, in order to 'treasure knowledge and preserve the jewels of Catholic culture'.

**Helen Bridges, Secretary ATCRE**

We all treasure certain things, not necessarily for their material value. We may have been given a piece of jewelry by someone we deeply care about and so the jewel becomes a constant reminder of the relationship we have with them. In this way one could describe the seminar on CAFOD delivered by Susan Kambalu. A little jewel that has become a constant reminder about our relationship with the world, a relationship which cannot be forgotten or diminished.

During the seminar we were reminded about the pressing issues that still exist in the world: lack of clean water, sanitation, food, education, refugees, ... all well underpinned with current statistics and delivered in an interactive way. The session included a discussion about our responsibility for the world, especially the poor, which grows from the philosophical concept of interconnection. For Catholics, the interconnectivity stems from the relationship that God, the Creator, has with his creation. We are all his children and are all called to look after one another. As

teachers, we are called to bring the whole world into our classrooms and from our classrooms we interact with the world.

**Peter Hornak - ATCRE Executive Committee**

Philip Robinson, RE Adviser for the CES, gave the final keynote of the day. A whistle stop tour of the story so far regarding the revision of the curriculum directory. The current suggested framework shared is seeking to provide content that is sequential throughout the year from EYFS up to KS5 but that is progressively more complex year on year. The revised document will have sought consultation with diocesan advisers, academics, school teachers and pupils and will be in place for September 2021.

The whole ATCRE Executive are delighted about the conference. It has exceeded even our highest hopes and expectations. It has confirmed our conviction that there is a real need for an RE subject association specifically for those who teach it in Catholic schools.

**Julia Cunningham, Vice-Chair of ATCRE**



Philip Robinson  
with the final  
keynote of  
the day

For me, this conference was only possible, and so successful, as a result of social media and the "new democracy" offered by the internet. We have actively worked with Diocese education teams, and we have welcomed every member of these teams as a member. However when compiling feedback, not one person found out about ATCRE, or the national conference, via this route. Nearly half of the attendees attended, as they had joined the membership and got emails directly. Around 40% found out via social media, and then the final 10% from personal invite from the hard working executive committee. We currently have nearly 800 RE teachers on our email list, not just Heads of RE, but those spending the most time in the classroom living out that important vocation to teach Catholic RE. ATCRE seem to have found a way to provide a space to share, to communicate and to work together beyond the boundaries that may have limited Catholic RE in the past. There is an exciting future ahead, and we want to continue to reach out to more teachers. This conference was just the start!

**Andy Lewis - Communications Officer, ATCRE**

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