Inviting school children into our church buildings to share our story is a positive move. Younger people, who may not have hands-on experience of heritage buildings before will often be overwhelmed by the ‘wow factor’ that your church can offer and a school visit can be a rewarding exercise for everyone involved – children, teachers, helpers, parents and church volunteers all benefit in the short and longer term.

Our church buildings offer huge potential to schools in terms of resources and space. Churches are generally safe places to work and explore, and churchyards in particular are open spaces but well defined and secure.

While RE might be an obvious topic there are other subjects our churches can offer for learning. History, Geography, English, Citizenship, Art and Design, Maths and Science are just a few of the options. More detail of that later in this action guide.

Teachers like the idea of ‘Learning outside the Classroom’ and offering their pupils a different teaching environment. In the present economy, making trips to places of interest on the doorstep can seem like a better option. The most expensive costs associated with school trips tend to be travel and entrance fees, both of which can be taken out of the equation if the school making the visit is only a walking distance away and the church doesn’t make a charge for entry!

‘Divine Inspiration’ has real experience of developing partnerships between church and school and the content of this action guide draws from what we learnt in 2010 through our inclusion as a Landmark project for the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment’s ‘Engaging Places’ initiative. The benefits to all – the school, the church, the children and, subsequently, their families - were immeasurable. Many children we worked with subsequently took their families to visit the churches we introduced them to with confidence, knowing that they would be welcomed warmly and that their visit would be unconditional.

Good preparation made to welcome school groups into your building will reap rewards and this action guide aims to take you through the practical issues you need to consider and introduce you to some creative ideas for sharing your space.

**Working out your ‘offer’**

Ask yourselves some simple questions:

- Do we have a nominated person in our congregation – who may or may not have experience in dealing with young children but who is CRB cleared – who is willing to act as a facilitator between church and school?
- What stories have we got to share with young people? See Ideas for Learning later in this document.
- Is it our building or our churchyard that may be most useful and valuable to a teacher as a learning resource?
• What facilities can we offer that the visitors will need? Toilet facilities, parking, disabled access? If school is next door are these things crucial?
• How many children can we safely accommodate at a time?
• Is our Health and Safety Policy and the Diocesan Safeguarding Policy easy to share electronically? Do we know and understand these documents and what they mean?

Making the Offer

Once you have these things down on paper you can make an approach to your local school. They may already make regular visits to your building and the children may already be familiar with the church, the vicar and the way you do things but if this ‘relationship’ doesn’t exist invite the teachers into the building so they can see for themselves the potential that you have for sharing your space and resources.

Teachers in Key Stages 1 and 2 – that’s Infant and Junior in old money! – will plan their classroom activity well in advance, so don’t expect a visit to take place immediately.

Have ideas ready for a teacher to look at to get the ball rolling. If you spend some time looking at your building with fresh eyes you’ll see all kinds of possibilities. Teachers will see opportunities also so this is where your partnership working really begins. Teachers will be looking for ‘cross curricular’ value in what ever they decide to deliver, so building data collection, for example, into activities will add value to whatever they decide to focus on.

Ideas for Learning

Your church affords opportunities to explore many topics. Try not to be too prescriptive – the school may make one visit or even several visits over the school year, and your role will be in accommodating whatever the school and teacher decide is appropriate for them.

• **Geography and Mapping** - Your churches place in the landscape, its local history and the built environment around it.
• **Science and Data Collection** - Your churchyard has a diversity of wildlife to explore and collate. The churchyard species could be mapped and the details turned into a resource for visitors to use.
• **Maths** - The memorials inside and outside the building will give a teacher plenty of opportunities to explore maths topics using dates and ages.
• **History** - Encourage the children to be church detectives, following clues, noticing the symbols and observing the use of materials and styles of architecture. Preparation of timelines can be an activity to illustrate this.
• **Citizenship** – Simple activities for very young children based on caring for old and precious things e.g cleaning brasses or dusting. Older children may debate why the church building is such an important place to the community, why it is still functioning as a place of worship and what it means to those who worship.
• **IT** – Developing a map or trail for visitors to use. Collecting data and turning this, through the use of computer software, into a useful tool for navigation or a record of the history of the church.

• **Creative Writing** – Allowing the children to explore the sensory elements of your building, what it feels like, smells like, how the light works in the church in the stained glass, the feel of the materials. Churches can be catalysts for emotional responses.

• **Story Telling** – exploring the stories in the stones and memorials. What kinds of people worshipped here? The important and the ordinary, the rich and the poor. How did the war affect the community? Are there any interesting events that are recorded in church?

• **Art and Design** – the use of patterns and shapes in the building and in the furnishings. How is design linked to function. If you were designing a church now what might you do differently!

### Preparing for the visit

Make sure that the building is tidy, safe and that you are clear about agreed protocol for dealing with emergencies on site. The school will almost certainly provide all the required assistance in terms of staff and supervision of the children.

Welcome the children and introduce, in simple terms, the story of the church and some of its history. Make sure that the person who does this is engaging and isn’t tempted to use too many dates, especially if the children are very young. Don’t presume that a child will be interested in the things you are interested in! Many will not have visited a church before and will have no clue, unless they have had preparation in the classroom, about your building and what it’s for. Make sure that you know how much the children have been told about their visit to your church beforehand. You could also offer to visit the children in their classroom to answer any questions they or their teacher might have about their visit to your church.

Be encouraging and allow the children freedom to explore. This may mean removing some things that could be accidentally damaged. If you plan to take photographs that include children make sure you have permission from the class-teacher. School data collection would normally cover this but ask to be certain.

### Links to Resources

The following are some links and details of books that will assist you as you explore this area of work.

• Writing a risk assessment for your site – top tips from the Health and Safety Executive
  


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