



SRE Update

Celebration of SRE Direction Answers Hope

A spirit of cooperation and concern brought together over 200 people who responded to an invitation to celebrate SRE. The inter-faith celebration was held on 21st September 2010 at the NSW Department of Education and Training in Sydney city. This event was organised by ICCOREIS and the Australian Christian Lobby to celebrate 130 years of SRE in NSW schools.

Together with host Rev Richard Quadrio, Chair of the NSW Council of Churches, the following speakers affirmed the place of SRE and the contribution of all involved:

- Mrs Ann Maree Whenman - Chair of ICCOREIS
- Rt Rev Dr Peter Jensen - Anglican Archbishop of Sydney (via video)
- Mr Khaled Sukkarieh - Islamic Council of NSW
- Mr Yair Miller - President of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies
- Cardinal George Pell - Catholic Archbishop of Sydney
- The Hon Verity Firth MP - NSW Minister for Education and Training
- Mr David Hutt - NSW Director of the Australian Christian Lobby
- Rt Rev Ray Smith - representing Sydney Anglican Diocese.



Alongside these official speakers were a number of guests with a very special interest in SRE. These included Heads of Churches, Canon Alan Langdon, who was instrumental in formulating the original SRE policy, Polly Seidler, whose grandfather once served as Minister for Education, many SRE teachers, others who were concerned for their grandchildren, and visitors from as far away as Newcastle and Canberra.

Some highlights...

Ann Maree Whenman

Ann Maree welcomed everyone to the celebration on behalf of the members of ICCOREIS. She stated that the Commission was delighted to host the event and she thanked the Department of Education and Training for providing the venue. Ann Maree particularly welcomed all the SRE teachers who attended. SRE teachers were asked to stand and their presence and contribution were acknowledged with enthusiasm by all. Ann Maree spoke of the importance of SRE and the contribution it continues to make to public education in NSW.



The Hon Verity Firth MP

Peter Jensen

Dr Jensen spoke of the long-standing commitment of the Anglican Church to the provision of SRE in NSW government schools. SRE is seen as a major community partnership and part of a well rounded education. He urged the Education Minister to publicly express the support of the NSW government for SRE in government schools.

Khaled Sukkarieh

Khaled thanked everyone involved in SRE for their contribution to schools and the strengthening of public education. He cited research that has shown that belief in God makes people less stressed and that faith is good for the soul. It is important for Muslim children to learn the Islamic creeds, manners and to study the life of the prophets. The Islamic Council celebrates SRE and the opportunity it provides. As providers, we need a declaration from the government not to weaken SRE, for the benefit of our children. There needs to be proper discussion of the issues, with mutual respect.

In This Issue

SRE Celebration	2
Regional Training	3
Ethics Update	4
Training in the Hunter	4

(continued page 2)

Celebration of SRE

(from page 1)

Yair Miller

Yair stated that the Jewish community has also been involved in the provision of SRE since it was first offered in NSW, currently providing teachers in 70 schools. Religious education is one of the primary responsibilities of Jewish parents (see Deuteronomy 6), and is a crucial component of forging one's Jewish identity. The Talmud repeatedly emphasises the importance of education, beginning at six years of age, and with a recommended class size of not more than 25 students! The Jewish community in Australia is blessed to have the opportunity to teach SRE in schools.

George Pell

Cardinal Pell noted that the Catholic Church in NSW has 2000 volunteer SRE teachers; there are approximately 15000 across the state from all denominations. The petition presented to the NSW Parliament, in favour of SRE, attracted 52000 signatures.

Verity Firth

The Education Minister gave a brief family history. Her grandfather was the Anglican Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn and her parents were active in Christian camping ministries. She attended SRE at school and believes it is an important part of a child's education, as it teaches them to live a moral life, to exercise their conscience, to love and forgive and not to be judgemental. She recognised the work of SRE teachers and the role of the providers, including ICCOREIS. The Minister also gave some background on the place of SRE in public education. In the Public Instruction Act of 1880, religious instruction was separate to other education. The enquiry that led to the Rawlinson Report of 1980 was a response to community concerns and gave assurance that religious instruction was an important part of public education.

The Minister gave her assurance that the provision for SRE, as specified in Section 32 of the Education Act 1990, will not be changed.

In relation to the ethics course, the Minister stated that the evaluation report is expected by the end of September. The course was intended to only be offered to students who had already opted out of SRE, and if something is offered in the future, it will be on this basis. However, no decision will be made until the evaluation report has been properly considered.

David Hutt

David stated that this event had been organised to celebrate the tremendous work that so many people do in providing SRE, and equipping children for the challenges ahead of them. He thanked Peter Adamson and Sue Sneddon for their work in organising the celebration.

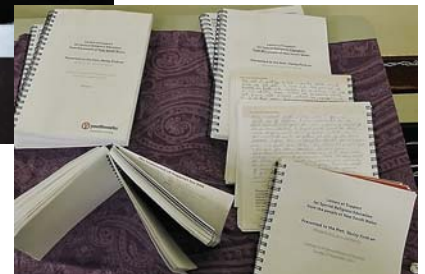
Ray Smith

Ray stated that, in fact, SRE has been a part of the education system for 161 years! His experience of SRE included teaching a class of 300 students in the school assembly hall at Tamworth High School. He was also a member of the organisation that preceded ICCOREIS, and is gratified to see the benefits of many years of collaboration between churches.

Ray recounted an experience with a man he counselled who was alcoholic and suffering depression. In his darkest moments, he told Ray that he was reminded that "with God nothing is impossible" - a lesson this man had remembered from his Scripture (SRE) lessons many years before. He overcame his addiction and depression and is now working in rehabilitation, assisting others.



On behalf of Anglican Youthworks, Ray presented Education Minister Verity Firth with 2000 letters and statements of support for SRE collected from the 3000 Anglican SRE teachers in NSW.



In his closing statement, Richard Quadrio observed that the churches may not always appear to be very organised, but about this particular issue they certainly are!

*Photography by Ramon A Williams
Worldwide Photos*

Report from an SRE Supporter

Much anticipation surrounded the gathering of SRE providers, church leaders, heads of faith and the Minister for Education, Verity Firth. The highlights for me were the acknowledgement by ICCOREIS Chair Ann Maree Whenman of all the SRE teachers in the room and those they represented across the state. The fact that representatives from Muslim, Hindu and Jewish faiths were present as well as a large contingent of Christian leaders was a powerful sign of unity and purpose. Cardinal George Pell made the point clear that this gathering was representative of mainstream churches across New South Wales, a point not lost on any state politician facing an election in the new year. It certainly was worth travelling down to this event if only to hear the

Education Minister assure us that SRE would not be harmed under her government. Likewise a letter read from Shadow Minister, Adrian Piccoli, was reassuring. However, it should be noted that neither politician ruled out the possibility of approving the implementation of ethics lessons during SRE time in government schools. We have no alternative but to await the government's decision, confident that we the churches and faith groups of New South Wales have been heard on this issue. Our appreciation and gratitude goes to ICCOREIS which made such a gathering possible at such a crucial time.

John Donnelly, Chair of CCRESST

A Helping Hand Across the Regions

NSW is a huge area, and those who work in the more remote regions know the difficulties of travelling the many kilometres to reach remote communities and SRE teachers. One of the recommendations from the special report put together by Mary Smith was that providers need to work more collaboratively to provide adequate training and support to SRE teachers in all areas. In other words, the more remote regions could be assisted in training by some of the metropolitan regions with more resources at their disposal. This story is one of those 'good Samaritan' stories where the Western Inter-Church Committee (WICC) was able to engage the expertise of their city cousins.

Six inter-church training days have been held in the Western area of NSW this year, including Bathurst and Orange. Two involved assistance from other regions.

At Wallerawang, WICC invited Mr Paul Worthington and Mrs Wendy Hord from Parramatta to present a training day for the volunteers. It was a full day of interaction between presenters and attendees. The topics presented were *Characteristics of Children*, *Stages of Faith* and *The Use of the Bible in the SRE Classroom*. Time was also allocated for looking at resources and sharing ideas.

Monday 31st May was Dunedoo's day for SRE training. Nineteen people put aside personal duties to attend. The presenters were Mrs Mary Smith from Greta and Mrs Zofia Slupik from Lochinvar, who both shared from their varied and comprehensive experience.

The SRE teachers who attended these training days went home with fresh ideas, assured that their teaching techniques

and the resources they provide for the students are appropriate, engaging, and provide quality teaching.

All the SRE training, whether by local or guest presenters, encourages and assists the volunteers who go into state schools each week to teach the students about God's love for them.

Utilising both local trained teachers and visiting trainers has brought a freshness of ideas and resources and an assurance that what the SRE teachers are teaching is of benefit to the students. In the future, it is likely this collaboration will be aided by the greater use of electronic resources. The availability of training via the internet or distance learning will be a further benefit to teachers in the regions.

Helen C Ryan, WICC



Feel Too Far Away? Try

I recently received a phone call from a Coordinator in Gilgandra who had a few questions to ask about the GodSpace curriculum. During the conversation I discovered that the team members were going to be meeting at her home the following week for lunch, so I suggested ringing them and chatting using a speakerphone.

That was one option for talking with a group of people who were physically quite a distance away.

But then we discovered we both had access to *Skype*, which is a free software application that allows users to make free (if on a computer) voice calls over the internet. If you have a web cam or built in camera in your computer you can also see each other, although it works just as well with the audio by itself. This is a great way to chat with one or two people or a group, wherever they are, as long

as they have internet access. In fact, in much the same manner as holding a conference call via the phone, you can connect with a number of people in different locations.

No longer is distance a deterrent to those with access to the internet (if the government provides that access nationally). The group in Gilgandra and I (in Sydney) had a great time as they asked their questions and I could answer in real time.

Why not see who you can connect with to chat, to encourage, to do training?

For details see www.skype.com/intl/en/home.



Cheryl Clendinning
Production Coordinator
GodSpace
www.godspace.org.au

Free Resource for Christmas! The Christmas Story

Three animations/lessons that tell the story of Jesus' birth. Ideal for all children's ministries.

Available to download free from www.jesusallaboutlife.com.au/resources/children.html or to purchase on DVD for \$5.00 from the Bible Society bookshop on 02 9262 6355.

Update on Ethics Pilot

Background

This is an issue which has been raised for many years by the Federation of Parents & Citizens Associations of NSW (P&C) in response to addressing the needs of the children who opt out of SRE, who seem to be disadvantaged. The P&C suggested that a viable alternative would be to offer an ethics course to these children. The St James Ethics Centre undertook to provide such a course. In November 2009 the NSW Premier gave permission for a 10 week trial to be carried out in 10 government schools during second term 2010.

The Pilot

The pilot was managed by the Department of Education and Training (DET) and all children in Years 5 and 6 at the pilot schools were given the opportunity to participate. The result was that many SRE classes were drastically reduced and many SRE teachers at these schools saw this as a threat to the continuation of SRE.

During term 3 classes returned to normal, although there are only anecdotal reports on whether the total number of children returned to SRE classes. Most reports indicate that they did.

Evaluation of the Pilot

The DET employed an independent evaluator, Dr Sue Knight from South Australia, to assess the benefits of the ethics course with a view to making a decision about offering it across the state.

Dr Knight attended a meeting of the Director General's Consultative Committee, where she received input from the

members, including representatives of ICCOREIS, SRE providers from other faiths, DET teachers, the P&C and the NSW Teachers' Federation. Most of the major church denominations also sought and received permission to send their own evaluation of the pilot to Dr Knight prior to the report being written. Dr Knight's report was due to be completed by the end of September, but there has been no indication from the DET as to when and if this evaluation will be made public.

Response from the Churches

There has been wide media attention given to this issue, with television programmes *Stateline*, *Insight* and *Compass* all featuring the debate. The Australian Christian Lobby organised a petition in support of SRE which has attracted over 50,000 signatures. Both the Minister for Education and the Shadow Minister have issued statements that SRE is not under threat, and they acknowledge the general community support for religious education in schools.

Current Action

The P&C has requested that all P&C Associations inform their school communities about the facts and then vote on the following motion:

"That the NSW Minister for Education changes DET policy to allow secular ethics classes to operate as an option for children who opt out of scripture/SRE classes in NSW primary schools".

For more information see the P&C website, www.pandc.org.au/presidents-message.seo.

Further updates will be posted on the News page of the ICCOREIS website, www.iccoreis.asn.au.

Training in the Hunter

Members of the Christian Committee for Religious Education in Schools Support and Training (CCRESST) have continued to meet the needs of SRE teachers in the Hunter Region. Encouragement days provide training and support in a relaxed informal setting at various locations across the region.

Here are some snippets from recent training days.

Broadmeadow: Jenny Harris demonstrated the possibilities of using interactive whiteboards, while Zofia Slupik had us cutting and pasting crafts, and Felicity Lee guided us through the Religious Education Resource Centre. Many SRE teachers shared experiences ranging from



working with high school students to creating PowerPoint presentations.

Singleton: Zofia Slupik shared crafty Christmas ideas with SRE teachers from Maitland, Singleton, Muswellbrook and surrounding districts. Mary Smith chaired an interesting discussion about local challenges facing the ministry.

Salt Ash: Jan Craft worked with the local coordinator to set up training at Salt Ash Public School. John Donnelly introduced teachers and assistants to the marvels of interactive whiteboards. All participants took the opportunity of this hands on approach and left feeling confident to have a go!

*John Donnelly
Chair of CCRESST*

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