

Letters to God

HELPING SMALL (AND NOT SO SMALL)
CHILDREN TO ASK BIG QUESTIONS

by Rachel Warwick

"dear God, how did you get invented?"

This was six year old Lulu Renton's letter to God, written during an activity at school just before Easter. To help with her search for answers, Lulu's parents sent the letter to various church offices, including the Archbishop of Canterbury. You might have seen his reply in the papers over Easter - a beautifully written piece, suggesting how he thought God might respond. The letter is available at "<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/damianthompson/100084843/a-six-year-old-girl-writes-a-letter-to-god-and-the-archbishop-of-canterbury-answers/>" and is well worth a read.

Asking children and young people what they would ask God is a great activity which you can adapt to use in many settings in schools. It might be a big graffiti wall or floor, a washing line with questions pegged on, a postbox, or a discussion activity in a classroom. The possibilities are vast, but here's a few ideas:

- ▶ Have a "questions for God" postbox or graffiti wall in a public area in the school.
- ▶ Use it as a discussion starter in a small group setting.
- ▶ Leave it as a challenge at the end of a lesson looking at whether or not God exists.
- ▶ Set up a Facebook page a few weeks ahead of an assembly and invite students to post their questions there (don't promise full answers though, unless you are God!), which you can then refer to in the assembly
- ▶ Use it to help students who are struggling with a particular situation (bereavement, family breakdown etc) to express their questions and difficulties.

What about the answers?

Adults who see this activity running in a school often ask 'when are we going to answer the questions?'. It's valid to ask, but being directed at God, many of these questions aren't easy to answer. You'll find that in most cases the pupils don't want an answer, so much as the space to ask the questions and to express their thoughts. It also helps them to see that they are not the only ones asking these questions.

It is refreshing for children and young people to meet Christian adults who will admit that they have questions too. The words "I don't know" can have more impact than your attempt at an answer (even if you are the world's best theologian!). Jesus used questions in his teaching and often left them unanswered. On the road to Emmaus, he even disappeared as soon as the disciples had recognised who he was. I don't know why (that's one of my questions!) but I wonder if it is because he knows that it is through the wrestling with these questions that we understand more of who he is.

There's also a distinct possibility that having had the opportunity to express a question in this way, a pupil will then go on to investigate finding an answer for themselves. Perhaps they will ask other questions later, look for things to read online or in books, or even just take

some more time to reflect on what they think. In the process they will learn more, think more and understand more. Some will find answers, others won't, and some will find themselves closer to God than when they started with their question. Providing given answers to these questions sometimes deprives the asker of the chance to grow through the journey of searching for an answer themselves.

Who do you think God is?

A great follow up to this activity is to get the pupils thinking through how they might answer the question if they were God. Pick a few questions to hand back out, or let the group choose their own if you trust them. Give them some time to talk about what the question is really asking, and how they think God might answer it. Their responses will reveal plenty about how they view God - powerful? caring? judgemental? disinterested? nonexistent?

Perhaps you could ask a whole class to answer the same question, but give each group a different set of characteristics for the "god" who is answering each time. Which one do the pupils prefer? Is there one which sounds more like the god they know?

Does God actually talk to us?

There's also plenty of space in this activity to get pupils thinking about how God could answer these questions. Having written their questions down, challenge the students to be looking out for answers in whatever form over the coming days. Perhaps through a conversation with a friend, an unexpected event, an inner feeling or picture or a new understanding of something. God could speak in all sorts of ways. Illustrating this with a story from your own or someone else's experience would be invaluable here.

What about the pastoral stuff?

When it comes to this sort of thing, some pupils will show you what's on their mind fairly obviously, like the boy who covered one graffiti wall with his question, "Why did my baby sister have to die?". It's not difficult to know what he is thinking. For this pupil, this activity is more than a simple educational exercise in spiritual development, it's therapeutic, an opportunity to ask God to explain the really difficult stuff in life. And for you as a schools worker, a chance to open up that conversation and help him find the support he needs.

However it is not always that clear. On one occasion, a girl we knew wrote a simple question in the corner of the wall: "Can you give my dad a mobile phone or a Facebook account?". Later on, someone added a comment nearby, "Yes, but do you really want him to have one?". A fair response really, after all, who wants their parents on Facebook? But the original question reads very differently when you know that the girl's dad died unexpectedly about a year before. She wasn't asking that her dad would get a mobile phone, she was asking for the chance to have just one more conversation with him. It is a great reminder to make sure that we don't always take these questions at face value - sometimes the authors are trying to communicate something much deeper.

These suggestions are by no means a comprehensive list of the ways to use this - the possibilities are endless and, being so simple, you can take it anywhere without much hassle.

I love using this resource in schools. I'm always amazed and inspired by the depth of the questions that are written, especially in primary schools. We often take them and display them in the staffroom afterwards, so the teachers can see what their pupils really want to know. If you want more information about the philosophical side of this sort of thing, there are some great resources at <http://www.philosophy4children.co.uk/>.

Lastly, I've mentioned answers already and the fact that it's not always necessary to find them. Even so, tempting as it is, I'm sure Rowan Williams and his press office would appreciate me saying that it's probably not a good idea to package up all your pupils' questions and post them all to Lambeth Palace!

Rachel Warwick is the national project director of Breathe and director of Orison
Find out more about her projects here:
www.breatheresource.org.uk
www.orisonschools.org.uk