

A conversation with Rosemary Woodward

Rosemary Woodward is a typical ACT member. She has been a classroom teacher for over thirty years. *ACT Now* is delighted to be able to celebrate an exceptional achievement with Rosemary. In March 2001 she started on the distance learning MA in RE run by the Stapleford Centre in conjunction with St John's College and validated by the University of Nottingham. In September 2004 Rosemary completed the course and was awarded the best distinction ever given by the University on this course.

In this article Trevor Cooling interviews Rosemary about her teaching and her MA.



Rosemary with Danetree pupils looking at Artefacts during the faith week

Can you tell us a bit about your teaching career and how you ended up with responsibility for RE?

I trained to teach at Westminster College, Oxford, and began by studying both 'divinity' and history, although I eventually chose history as my BEd subject. Having graduated I began teaching in 1973 in a middle school in Stoke-on-Trent, but two years later I moved to Epsom in Surrey where I have lived ever since. Sixteen years ago I joined the staff of Danetree Junior School and I'm still there.

In 1996 the post of RE co-ordinator became vacant and I felt that, as a Christian, I should apply. I didn't really know what was involved, and had little knowledge of the changes which had taken place within the subject in the years since I left college. To be honest, I was finding RE one of the hardest subjects to teach.

So what made you decide to take an MA?

I had a most inspiring 'A' level teacher at Godalming Grammar School. Mr Lewis taught me for both history and RE and he changed me from being an insular vicar's daughter into someone who could think and question without feeling that my faith was threatened. Mr Lewis showed me what a mature Christian faith looked like. For various reasons, I was not able to go to university. Despite enjoying my time at Westminster, I have always felt that I had never really been academically challenged. As our three sons grew up and began moving on to university and beyond, I realised that, after twenty years of helping with homework, I now had this 'time slot' to myself.

I decided that, if I was ever going to return to academic study, now was the time, and I began investigating history MAs. I found just the right one for my interests, but it involved two year's full time study in Edinburgh – a little impractical! I looked

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further and did send off for details of the Stapleford courses. The graduate diploma courses sounded really interesting and practical, but I felt that I needed something more academic. The MA included the word 'philosophy', something I had found really uninspiring when forced to study it at college. I decided to increase my musical qualifications instead, with limited success!

Two years later I was again considering an MA and went back to the Stapleford literature. In the meantime I had learned a little more about the state of RE at the end of the 20th century, mainly



Rosemary with her thank you gift – a chicken!



The heads of the schools at Kimilili and Danetree



Presents from Danetree children are distributed

through courses and co-ordinator briefings provided by the local authority RE advisor. Only one module included philosophy, while the others all looked interesting and practical, so I decided to explore further. When I contacted Stapleford my queries were answered promptly and fully. I was also given guidance for obtaining help with financing the course before I had even considered this aspect. Eventually I was convinced, signed the contract and approached the initial meeting for the ten students embarking on the MA journey in

Rosemary Woodward is a classroom teacher and RE coordinator at Danetree Junior School in Epsom. Recently she worked as a member of the Religious Education Agreed Syllabus working party for Surrey, writing units of work.



Trevor Cooling is currently Secondary Education Adviser for the Diocese of Gloucester and the Course Leader for the distance learning courses offered by the Stapleford Centre. Before that he was a Principal Lecturer in the University of Gloucestershire. As from 1 January 2006, he will be Director of the Transforming Lives Project.

Both Rosemary and Trevor are longstanding members of ACT.

March 2001 with both apprehension and excitement. I certainly had no idea that the course would open up a whole new world for me! For example, I have represented my union on SACRE and have helped write the LEA Agreed Syllabus for RE.

Can you tell us a bit more about your experience of the MA course?

From the very beginning the approach was supportive and non-threatening. Staff became friends as they encouraged and assisted. At the same time there was never any doubt that this was an academic exercise, with rigorous standards set by the University of Nottingham that had to be kept.

The course materials were very user-friendly and all units were well resourced with the libraries of Stapleford or St John's College supplying the literature needed. Each new topic built on the information already covered in previous units, and, because each module was broken into small sections with thought provoking assignments at all stages, I don't think I realised just how much new material I was actually learning. By the time I came to write the dissertation, I had gained enough confidence to feel that I could explore and develop my own ideas.

A lot of people think distance learning is a lonely experience. Did you find that?

It can be. But it meant that I was free to manage my time to suit my life, very important for a busy teacher with a growing family. The most memorable parts of the course were the weekends and summer schools which allowed all the students and tutors to meet and compare experiences, as well as build relationships. These were special

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times as, instead of working in isolation at home, I realised that others were asking the same questions, tackling the same assignments, and feeling the same frustrations. Each time we all left with deeper friendships, and with new enthusiasm for the study.

Tell us something about your dissertation?

Before I met my husband he had spent two years teaching in Malawi on VSO. His love of Africa has never waned and in 1999 I accompanied him to Western Kenya. It was not long before my school was developing links with a Kenyan school.

I became aware of a possible link between these interests and my MA. A government circular says that children should gain a thorough knowledge of Christianity that reflects the Christian heritage of this country. However, many young people see the church as irrelevant to their modern lifestyles. In



Children from Dreamland School in Kimilili

Kenya, on the other hand, I had seen at first hand Christianity which was growing, vibrant and appealing to the young. I was able to share fellowship with Kenyan Christians and we had a great deal in common, despite our cultural differences, based upon our common faith in Jesus.

I realised that Christianity is not, primarily, a religion of the western world. I felt that, if pupils in British schools are to understand the Christian faith as it is lived in the world today, they had to look beyond the restrictions of the English church. I was amazed by the statistics. In 1900 70% of those claiming to be Christians in the world lived in Europe. By 2000 that figure was only 29%. In the same period the church in Africa had grown from a

mere 2% of the world's Christians to reach 18%. I became convinced that there was a need for my teaching of Christianity to explore a more global church.

I decided that this provided a subject for my dissertation. So in 2002 I used a return visit to Kimilili in Western Kenya to gather information. I spent time interviewing and observing the work of fourteen Kenyan church leaders and workers in order to understand more of their beliefs, motivation and concerns. I became convinced that I shared a common core of beliefs with each of these Christians, based on the supra-cultural truths of the Christian Gospel. This faith, whether lived out in England or Kenya, is the same. It was, therefore, possible to study the experiences of Christian individuals or groups living within any culture, in order to look for common threads which pointed to the beliefs at the heart of the Christian tradition. I collected as much personal experience, video and photographic evidence as possible while in Kenya, to provide material for lessons in England.

Back in England, I used this information to develop some lessons. My aim was to explore whether material gathered within an African culture had anything to offer in deepening the pupils' understanding of Christianity. One lesson was trialled with 157 Year 6 pupils. They were asked to write what they would expect to see if they were told they were going to watch a video of Christian worship. Their responses displayed a reasonable level of understanding of what happened in an English church building, but concentrated on quiet prayer and worship. Only 8% gave any indication that children might be in any way involved in the worship. The pupils were then shown a video of a Kenyan church at worship, and asked to give their reactions. The video included features one would expect to see in many English churches every Sunday. The Sunday school girls present a dance, the congregation sing, there is a collection, open prayer, a sermon and ministry. This church had amplification and a keyboard for accompaniment. The pupils, however, were amazed by what they saw. 32% commented on being surprised to see

Information

IcFEM

The school in Kimilili, Kenya, which Rosemary visited and studied is run by the Inter-Christian Fellowships' Evangelical Mission (IcFEM), an indigenous Kenyan organisation which aims to build people up, both spiritually and practically, especially in rural areas, so they become self-supporting. IcFEM village programmes include welfare, agriculture, education, health care, discipleship ministry, and relief.

ACT Now readers may be interested to know that Ann Lipson (another *ACT* member) is also involved with IcFEM and features regularly in *ACT's* Prayer Diary.

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the girls dancing while 40% noted that the service was lively, joyful or sincere. Only 3% commented negatively. Indeed 73% indicated that, given the opportunity, they would like to take part in some aspect of the Kenyan service. Interestingly only 9% of the children commented on the building, although the Kenyan one was a simple wooden structure with benches and hand made decorations. It was the worship itself which caught their attention.

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This experience strengthened my belief that exploring the life of Christians in a very different culture helps children to understand Christians who live in their own community. Because the children did not see the sort of worship they expected, their interest was aroused, and they paid more attention to the content of the lesson. Building on this, we could talk about the concepts that lay behind the worship they had observed. This, in turn, led back to a study of the Christian church in England, as some children were able to explain that they danced, sang similar songs or recognised other features from their own experience of church. Thus the study of global Christianity actually increased the pupils' understanding of a faith which existed within their own community, and so served to enhance teaching of the Christian heritage of Britain. So that was what I argued in my dissertation.

It wasn't only my classroom teaching that benefited. At the same time links were built and Danetree School was able to welcome Kenyan friends on a visit, as well as write letters and raise money for equipment. Although beginning as an RE link, the interest became cross-curricular and developed to involve the whole school. I had succeeded in not only carrying out an interesting and rewarding academic study, but also applying what I had learned and seeing it bear fruit in the learning of my pupils, both in RE and beyond.

Has doing the course made a difference to you as a teacher?

Yes. Doing the course has given me far more confidence in approaching RE lessons myself, and in mentoring others on the staff. Moreover, I know what I am trying to achieve in my own teaching

and feel confident in talking to the class about both my own faith and those of others. Before I tended to be a bit apologetic about the whole idea!

Did the course present any challenges to your Christian faith?

As I suggested, the course was rigorous in its academic standards, and as such I had to ensure that all my work was of a consistently good standard. It was never easy. The study made me question and test my own views, and did not allow for any complacency, but at the same time I never felt that my own faith was in any way threatened – if anything it was strengthened, because I had to ponder issues which I had never really considered before.

What do you hope to do now that you have all this spare time?

Hmmm! As I write this I don't feel as if I have any spare time as I have embarked upon a week long, whole school 'Festival of Faith' with the theme 'Faith makes a difference'. All the children are visiting a place of worship and will spend the week involved in a wide range of activities including

- visits and visitors
- literacy and drama
- music and art
- ICT and video
- craft and design
- African Christianity!

The week will culminate in a whole school celebration on Friday afternoon. For me this event is the climax of my MA – my chance to share what I have learned with the school and those in the communities around it.



Danetree's headteacher, Lis Butcher, admiring the 'Praise Wall'. Every child in the school (over 400 of them!) wrote a praise poem on a 'brick'

Information

The Stapleford

Centre offers courses for RE teachers, for those interested in the general issues of relating Christian faith to education and for schools workers. If you are interested in the distance learning courses run by Stapleford please contact Heather Miller at:

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