

Faith and Society Files: Church and School - Love your Local Further Education College

Every church community is served by, and therefore potentially could serve, one or more colleges. Discover some ways in which your church could support its local FE or Sixth Form College.



'It is a truth universally acknowledged that' many 16 – 19 year olds in the UK have never been inside a church building at any time. It is also true that many Christians have never been inside a Further Education (FE) College. Yet every church community is served by, and therefore potentially could serve, one or more colleges.

'Historically the church has struggled for well over a century to find a satisfactory way of relating to the highly mobile, largely work-related, pragmatic secular culture of FE. It did not have an institutional church presence and there seemed to be little or no religious studies ... the sad fact was Further Education had been neglected.'¹

1 Jenkins C (Spring 2005) Chaplaincy in an inclusive lifelong learning culture. *Journal of Chaplaincy in Further Education* Vol 1.1 page 8)

A conference in July 2002 organised by Dare 2 Engage also found that this was true. Invitations were extended to Christian churches, youth services and teachers/lecturers who were in any way involved with 16 – 19 year olds in education 'to bring together those who are involved in the work to find out what is already happening and more importantly what works.'

There was a good attendance but sadly not so much to report. When it came to FE colleges there were only a few full time chaplains – including one Baptist chaplain in Scunthorpe, a number of visiting clergy supported by the Church of England and Methodist FE adviser and some Christian Unions facilitated by UCCF.

In recent years there has been a greater openness amongst colleges to having a better understanding of the faith community – not least because it helps them with recruitment and retention of students and also to deal with equality and diversity issues.

The aim of this File is to open up the potential for the local Christian community to begin to love their local college by:

- Gaining some understanding of the system
- Exploring ways this is being done around the UK
- Highlighting some resources to make the local work possible.

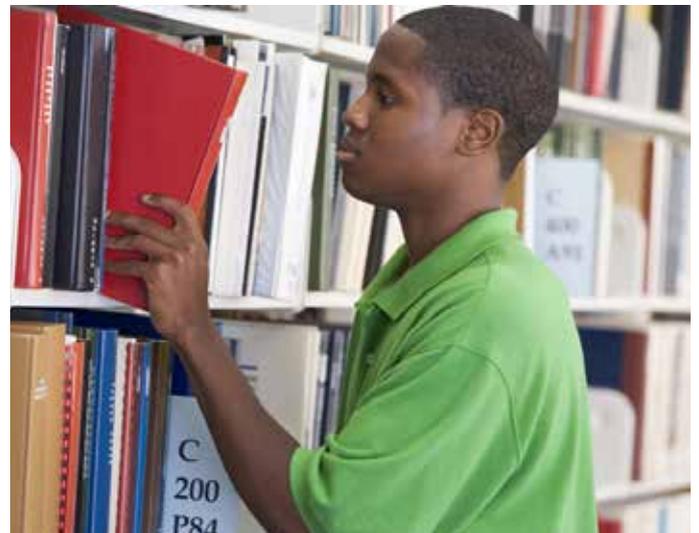
Where to start?

If you know little or nothing about Further Education and Sixth Form Colleges it is a good idea to gain an overall picture. The Association of Colleges² (England), Colegau Cymru³ and Scotland's Colleges⁴ have information about colleges in general and local colleges on their websites. Look out for 'College Key Facts' for a good snapshot of what you can expect to find in a college.

Warning – colleges can change very quickly – even their names and size (mergers and de-mergers!) so get up-to-date information as much as you can.

Colleges have many different areas of study and cover all ranges of ability from foundation to post graduate. They also have a wide age range but especially cater for 16 – 19 year olds.

Very few colleges offer RE as a subject for study.



2 www.aoc.co.uk

3 www.fforwm.ac.uk

4 www.scotlandscollages.ac.uk

Recent developments

Colleges are keen to deal with their students fairly on matters of equality and diversity. They are also very interested in promoting community cohesion.

An important study from a faith perspective was carried out in 2007 called *Making space for Faith* which revealed that students of all faiths and none felt that college should be a place where they could access information about faith and be allowed to develop their spiritual lives. This is a useful tool to know about when speaking with college management and you can find this and many other documents relating to chaplaincy or work in a multi-faith context in FE on the website of The National Council of Faiths and Beliefs in Further Education.⁵

Colleges are inspected in much the same way as schools. The new *Ofsted – 2009 Common Inspection Framework* provides some encouragement to the colleges to strengthen their provision for faith work.

In a description of an outcome for learners it states that 'inspectors will evaluate the extent to which ... learners develop personal and social skills, including, as appropriate, spiritual, moral and cultural aspects' and that inspectors will determine whether 'learners receive individual care and support to promote their learning and development, and to help them achieve their potential'.

A second area where there is opportunity is in the *Equality and Diversity in Self-Assessment (Guidance for colleges and providers)*, LSC/LSIS 2009. Here the new equality strands are: Age, sexual orientation, religion or belief, pregnancy and maternity, gender reassignment

Because of the way colleges are inspected, these aspects are part of the judgement as to how effective the whole college is and will limit the grades given to the college if the college cannot prove that it is up to standard.

Look out for ways that you and your church could help colleges with this.



How do people already working with the sector view their work?

Incarnational

'The Lord is with us', being a tangible presence of God in the Institution.

Prophetic

'Voice in the wilderness', raising issues, supporting specific causes and including these on the margins and unrepresented groups.

Pastoral

'Walking alongside', providing support in various ways at a level that is appropriate, emotionally, physically, spiritually and socially.

Educational

Supporting the development of faith, by providing a variety of resources to enhance enquiry and understanding by direct and indirect teaching

How to get started

- 1 Identify your nearest college
- 2 Establish whether or not you already have links with the college through staff or students or a local project that you are part of. If there is involvement, become part of it - but still read on because you will be able to spot where some help might be needed.
- 3 Do a bit of research. These days you can start with the college website – this will give you a good picture of the way they hope to be understood and how they market themselves.
- 4 Pay the college a visit – the ease of this will vary from area to area. Check for open days or services offered by the college – hairdressing, trainee restaurants etc.
- 5 Start praying for the college
 - Yourself
 - As a church, along with other education and community events.

Now this is where there is a bit more work involved

- 1 Get other churches to pray too. Colleges serve a wide area and are generally much more open to approaches from a number of churches rather than one at a time. The approach by one church might be interpreted as a recruitment drive whereas by a number is easier to see as service.
- 2 Plan ways of being involved. Every college is different, as is every group of churches. This is a good time to contact Festive⁶. Festive was set up in 2007 in partnership with Scripture Union and UCCF to offer Christian support to students and staff in Sixth Forms and FE Colleges. Their aim is to see local churches loving their local colleges and getting involved in serving them. They have growing expertise and links with many developing pieces of work.



6 www.festive.org.uk



There are a number of models

Offering to develop a Chaplaincy and/or become a 'Visiting Vicar'

If this seems to be a good option this can work really well. There are already a number of Baptist chaplains in colleges who will be able to help and there are some great resources on the website of The National Council of Faiths and Beliefs in Further Education⁷.

Student-led work with a Christian Union or other group

Students are well-placed to be ambassadors in their local colleges and make a real difference. They need encouragement to do this and the right kind of support eg prayer, advisory board provision, funding and training. Often colleges in urban areas with tight security prefer this approach. It is also possible for these students to be involved in the student union or in a mentoring scheme.

Staff-generated work with college where staff negotiate time to offer support and help

This happens in a number of places and often these staff report that they find it very hard to access the type of support they would value from their local church community. Other staff report that they have been pleased to receive offers of help from local youth workers and clergy.

7 www.fbfe.org.uk

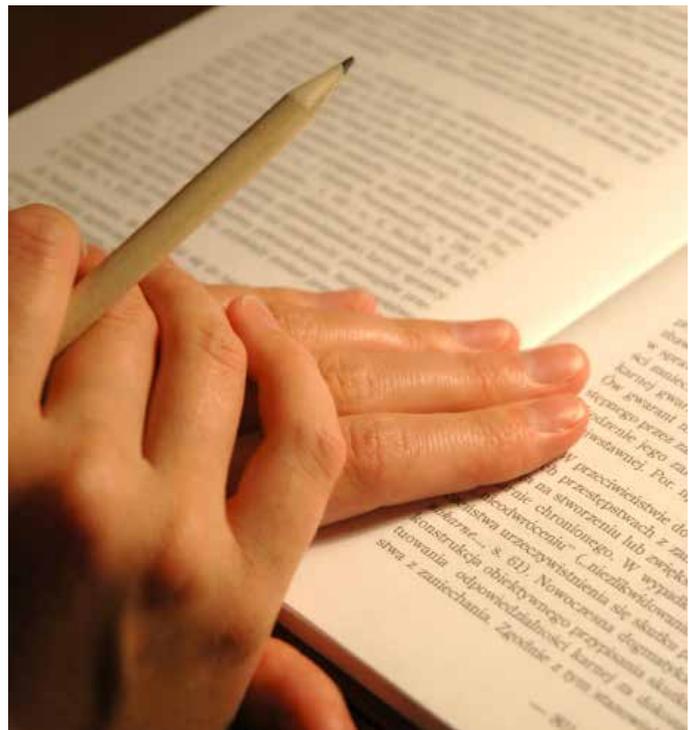
Festive

is a network for all students, staff and supporters to encourage a vibrant witness to the Lord Jesus in the FE sector. For more information see www.festive.org.uk or contact Toni Coulton at info@festive.org.uk



Other ideas:

- **In North Wales** the local churches, including a number of Baptist churches, have funded a project worker in the college for a number of years. The aim of the project is to facilitate a Christian Union and to be available to talk with people on matters of faith. There is an expectation that the project worker will lead tutorials where appropriate and organise events to raise awareness of the Christian faith.
- **In the North East** a tutor approached a local church and asked if they could organise an event where some questions of faith raised by the students could be answered. The church has since organised a weekly hot potato session with a cheap lunch and questions given in the previous week answered over lunchtime. This has proved very popular with the students and is now in its third year.
- **Dare 2 Engage** have some excellent resources especially commissioned for work amongst college students. The Breathe resource is a stunning spiritual learning experience that a group of churches might offer to sponsor for a local college⁸. Information of other material such as day conferences and art exhibitions can be found on the Dare 2 Engage website.⁹



Whatever you do, remember that colleges are professional bodies so aim to be as professional as possible.

⁸ www.breatheresource.org.uk

⁹ www.dare2engage.org