



**Opening address by Oona Stannard, Chief Executive and Director of CESEW at the
“Keeping Faith in the System” conference**

14th October 2009

I am very pleased, on behalf of the various representatives nationally who provide schools with a religious character to welcome you to this conference.

1. It is being sponsored by DCSF and we thank them for their encouragement and support of the project *Keeping Faith in The System*, and not least for enabling today's proceedings to happen in this prestigious venue which reflects the gravitas and importance of this event. I would like to thank Ed Balls, Secretary of State, for the key note address which he will give and also to thank Leslie Hastie at his Department for her commitment and hard work in bringing this conference to fruition.
2. **So why are we here?** Well we are here to mark and continue the work began by *Faith in The system (FiS)* when it was published in September 2007.....**We are here to continue and take forward a success story !!...the success story of schools with a religious character**, (or as they are more colloquially known in the media , *faith schools*), building on their firm foundations and showing how those of us involved in the provision of these schools collaborate and support one another for the development of education and the wellbeing of pupils and the wider community. **Yes, our interests and concerns may start with the pupils of schools in our own tradition but not exclusively so** - we also have a responsibility which we willingly accept to collaborate and support appropriately within the wider family of maintained schools.
3. The publication of **FiS** was a welcome coming together of government and faith school providers to **highlight the contribution of faith schools as valued partners in the school system**. It was an opportunity to dispel myths and to show the reality of schools with a religious character .I would like to take this opportunity, however, stimulated by last week's TES to **dispel a myth which is still peddled** in the media; to read the media you would think that to be religious means that you are not a tax payer as they cry out in horror that.....”tax payers are footing the bill for faith schools “! In fact not only are we, people of faith, tax payers but we save government and other tax payers money! We pay towards the capital costs of VA schools, that would otherwise have to be fully paid for by Government, and at the same time we educate many who are not of the school's faith; in Catholic schools, for example, this is nearly 30% of the pupil cohort – so we are subsidising public education.

4. Our society, of which we are all citizens whatever our faith tradition, is fortunate to have schools with a religious character - they have a long and noble history of service and are as relevant and much needed- if not more needed -today as they were when such schools were set up in medieval times and beyond.
5. Some of you may not be very familiar with the size of the faith school sector so let me rehearse some of the key figures: **33%** of maintained schools in England have a religious character. **Until 1997** these were **predominantly Christian** but since then we have welcomed the sector becoming more diverse to include eg, more Jewish schools, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu schools as well as more of different Christian denominations. Between us we educate **2 million pupils** in schools with a religious character.
6. **So what is it that these schools do?** In essence what schools with a religious character do is to enable children and young people to **achieve highly** whilst simultaneously **learning about and from their own faith**, and learning to **respect the faith and values of others**. The **benefits** of this are felt not just by the pupils and their families but also **further afield** as pupils are formed to be good citizens who will have a commitment to service in the broader society.
7. It is also important to remember that through faith schools we continue to meet the requirements of Article 2, of Protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human rights (ECHR); that is to respect the rights of parents to choose education in conformity with their own religious convictions. We should **never under-estimate the buy in of** parents that this can choice can bring about. For parents to feel, particularly immigrants and those from disadvantaged circumstances, that the importance of their faith is acknowledged in the very real terms of the availability of a school of their faith (or one where they know their faith will be respected) is a very **powerful force for building trust and partnership**. In this way schools with a religious character are a tangible and **positive response to communities and their needs**.
8. Just as significantly, faith schools are an integral part of the **public education system**, playing a strategic role in delivering national policy in education, for example, in providing choice and diversity and in helping to deliver the 5 outcomes of **Every Child Matters**. In short we do **all that is asked of any maintained school but we do it through the lens of our faith traditions**, eg, pupils will learn about promoting community and social cohesion from the values of the faith tradition and then arrangements will be made to apply this in practical ways.
9. We don't work in a bubble! Those of us who are providers of faith schools value the important working relationships that we have with our colleagues in government and local authorities. We always aim to try to support their policies mindful that they are elected government but we know that there will be times of creative tension and we

do challenge when necessary because we have a responsibility to sustain our vision of education and to maintain the distinctiveness of our schools. We look, for example, in emerging policy for evidence that the social, moral, spiritual and cultural aspects of education retain their rightful place; we look to see that partnerships are to be built on willingness to do so, and we look to see respect for families and practical acknowledgement of parents as the first educators of their children.

10. Earlier I made reference to the hundreds of years of schools with a religious character but not all the faith traditions have been part of this history of provision, nor have all had that same time to build up productive working relationships with Government and their agencies. In the two years since FiS we have been pleased that government has facilitated our working together as faith school providers to share our contacts, expertise and experience with one another. Learning about the role of the Local Authority (LA) has been one such important example. This, of course, is a two way street and LAs may need guidance to better know and appreciate the statutory rights and ways of working of schools with a religious character. I am very pleased, therefore, that one of the outcomes of Keeping faith in The system will be the publication of a guide to working with maintained schools with a religious character, and you will hear more about this during the day.
11. In the two years that we have been working towards *Keeping Faith In The system* we have enjoyed far ranging discussions on such matters as how we promote community cohesion and work collaboratively with other schools; how we teach respect for difference; and dealing with succession planning so that we have the head teachers that we need. Today some of this work is shared and translated into workshops. We also have the opportunity to hear at first hand from some of the many inspirational head teachers who lead our schools with a religious character, and the DVD which we will also see shares the views of parents and others.
12. Finally, I hope that you enjoy the experience of today and that you leave feeling affirmed in your role. *Keeping Faith in The System* isn't an end point but it is a milestone on a continuum of collaboration. Working together from within our traditions and beyond we can ensure that Schools with a religious character remain faithful, high achieving and of service to the community.

Thank you.

Oona Stannard
Chief Executive and Director, CESEW