

An Amazing Journey into a Holy Space

“I have never seen such high quality RE and SMSC going on” quote from a Muslim OFSTED Inspector following a visit to The Amazing Advent Journey in a West Yorkshire primary school.

This journey was presented by Hand to Mouth who had been working in schools since 1998 leading collective worship and assemblies using puppetry. They then branched out into the classroom leading Godly Play sessions and giving classroom support in RE.

Five years ago one of our trustee's who worked in the local school put together a workshop based on Advent to allow Y2 children to think a bit deeper into the real meaning of Christmas and I was asked if I could go in and help. There was an atmosphere of peace and calm as the children visited tables one at a time taking part in simple structured activities.

Having been involved in Godly Play I had seen that given the freedom to explore, children can engage spiritually at a deep level. So with this in mind Hand to Mouth took the decision to develop this idea and An Amazing Journey into a Holy Space emerged.

Ruth, who had been a trustee, left her job and came to work for Hand to Mouth. Together we have worked and developed seven journeys to date which are, Advent, Lent, My Own, The Wider World, Moving On, Creation and Journey into Prayer based on The Lords Prayer.

The Diocese of Wakefield asked us to develop a Journey for staff, this we have called Inspire. This Journey is becoming increasingly popular and often used for Inset days with moving stories emerging.

A quiet room in school is transformed. We use coloured table cloths with contrasting backdrops and fairy lights giving the room a magical look. Calming music plays in the background; each station having a set of instructions and a fitting activity i.e. *writing down regrets and/ or hurts and feeding them through a shredder.*

Often as the children enter the Journey there is a gasp as their eyes adjust to the lighting and they take in the transformation of the classroom. During a journey the children get the opportunity to think,

reflect, question and pray. Time on their own, a rare treat for many of them.

Over the past five years we have been stunned by the responses there have been from children to the Journeys. The first time we took My Own Amazing Journey into a school it was to work with a class of Y5 children. There was a girl in the class who was elective mute and she had never been heard to speak in school. She came to a part of the Journey where she was invited to look at her reflection in a mirror and as part of the instructions read a quote from the Bible saying "It doesn't matter what you look like or what you sound like God loves you just as you are" the girl picked up a smiley face and held it in her hand. After a while this girl hadn't moved on to the next station so one of our volunteer helpers who hadn't realised this girl didn't speak went and asked if she was okay to which she replied "Yes I'm fine thank you" she went on to speak twice more to the helper. When the classroom staff realised what had happened they were stunned.

Another girl who had a birth mark on her face told one of our staff that she had been crying because of the blemish but having done My Own Journey now said it doesn't matter does it, I am me and that is what matters. Then in the last month another child said "I realise I don't have to look amazing or sound amazing to be amazing".

During that same journey a child wrote "I have realised I have an inner passion for God" these are Y5 children I think we often underestimate the depth of their thinking.

We have a Journey into Prayer and this is based on the Lords Prayer. At the first station the children are encouraged to think about how they use God's name, it can be used like a swear word. It has been an eye opener for the children to realise this. One child told us that he and his mum have a pot each and they put 50p into it every time they say oh my God, he went on to say he had 50p in his pot but mums contained £2.50.

At the end of each Journey we give the opportunity for children to write what they have enjoyed about the journey, how it made them feel. So many children say how they have enjoyed the calmness, the opportunity to write prayers to God. We have had children tell us that they didn't think God was real when they went into the Journey but now they think he is. One Y6 boy told us that Jesus walked around the Journey with him.

Others tell us they feel they get the opportunity to say sorry for the things they might have done wrong or to forgive people who have hurt or upset them.

So I go back to the beginning of our story and the non church primary school in West Yorkshire and the Ofsted inspector who was herself a head teacher in a predominantly Muslim school in the Midlands. After she looked around the Advent journey she said how it enabled children of other faiths to have an understanding of Christianity and look at the similarity with their own faiths. She went on to say how she would welcome us to take our Journeys to her school. Sadly it was a bit too far for us to travel. However this has brought us to the next part of our journey and we have developed Journey in a Box which is everything that is required to set up any of our Journeys and all of the resources for the Amazing Journey into Prayer. You can learn more about this on our web sites www.journeyinabox.co.uk and www.handtomouth.org.uk

Margaret Redfearn (Manager of Hand to Mouth)