**Diversity Day could be modeled in other schools**

Hundreds of pupils from local primary schools gathered at Steyning Grammar school last month to take part in a Racial Justice and Diversity Day. The day was so successful that there are now plans to see similar events in other schools across Sussex.

The day was jointly organised by Mr Tom Leighton, Deputy Head, Demi and Billy, the Junior Ambassadors for Racial Justice at the school, who were both commissioned by Bishop Martin last year, Bola-Alysia Ayonrinde (National Education Lead for Racial Justice, Church of England Education Office) and Hannah Persaud (Growing Faith Networks Lead, Church of England) and Martha and Godfrey, the Racial Justice Officers of the diocese.

Tom Leighton, who welcomed the children and introduced the days programme and leader said, “The events of the day were immensely productive and the outcome exceeded our expectations. Certainly, this kind of event is worth being held in other schools and possibly in churches and other organisations too.”

Revd Neill Stannard, chaplain at the school and the local parish priest led the opening prayer and shared a thought. He reminded everyone of the question which was asked to a teenage child – “What do you want to be when you are older?” The child replied, “I want to be kind.”

Tom said, “We were reminded to be kind to people who look like us but also to those who look differently to us. This gave a terrific start to the day’s carefully crafted and packed programme.”

Around 500 children of Year 5 from six different schools in and around Steyning arrived and looked excited to be part of the day.

The first session was led by Bola-Alysia and Hannah of the National Church Team. They skilfully prompted the children to think about what makes their identity.

The first question asked was, “What makes you who you are?” Is it race, ethnicity, gender, age, language, religious beliefs, nationality, abilities, friends circle, family structure, hobbies, all of these or none of these or anything else.?

The children understood that these are superficial matters with which we sometimes divide people. There is something more in us – a common humanity – or for people who believe in God – the Spirit of God who lives in us is the same. That which unites humanity is far stronger and deeper than trivial matters that divide us. The children looked very keen to learn this truth. It was heartening to observe that they imbibed this valuable lesson.

Bola-Alysia and Hannah also encouraged the children to reflect on the questions, “How does God see me?” and “How does God see others?”

Following the initial session, the children went into three groups under the leadership of the Junior Ambassadors for Racial Justice. The three groups met at different halls within the school premises.

The first group was skilfully led by Mrs Jeanette Masters, Head of Year 10 at the school. Jeanette instilled in the children the logical truth that discriminating anyone based on something that the individual did not choose or cannot change is not only illegal but also absurd. The session was themed “Protected Characteristics”. Janet had pre-prepared different card sets under the topics of age, colour, appearance, gender and sexual orientation. The children were asked to do an activity of matching different cards with the different protected characteristics. The children worked in teams and relished the activity. Obviously, Jeanette had a fun way of making children learn. The children learned that ethnicity, appearance and other characteristics cannot be changed and so should not become a cause for hatred or discrimination. Children were also reminded of the privileges we have in this country. For example, girls are not allowed to go to school and colleges in Afghanistan. We should use our privileges to celebrate and give thanks for diversity and not to discriminate anyone based on race, gender or anything else.

Mr David Fox, a science teacher at the school meticulously coached the second group. He taught the children to view people through the lens of love. Using a skeleton, which he had brought with him, he helped children to see that at the core of being a human we are all the same. David played video clips of skeletons dancing and asked children to guess whose skeletons they were. The children were surprised when they were able to see the real person whose skeleton they watched on the screen. There were people of different races, genders, religions and ages but all their skeletons looked the same. David explained that love transcends gender, race, disability, religion, age or any other label. Love is love. People are not to be discriminated against but to be loved was the challenging lesson the children were persuaded to learn.

The third group was led by Tom, the deputy head and an expert in languages. He said, “We often listen to reply rather than to hear.”

Using an engaging activity of “Chinese Whispers”, Tom explained that so much of our communication is lost in translation and interpretation. With a non-stop “medical” cough.

Tom deliberately and enthusiastically interrupted the children’s whispers. He did this to teach the children the problem of interruption when they communicate.

The children were told to be cautious about the different interruptions they face while listening to others. He reiterated that diversity is a blessing; language is the key to understand each other better – both in spoken and non-audible forms.

The children also enjoyed creating their diversity badge in different languages and colours. The three groups of children took turns to attend the three different sessions so that no one missed out on any session.

The children came together in the huge dining hall for the closing session. A video of a black schoolgirl being beaten by white children for no reason other than her skin colour was watched by all. This reduced everyone to tears. It was a moving act of empathy. Godfrey spoke about the importance of seeing people beneath their skin colour. He cut open different coloured m&m sweets to make the point that they were all the same inside.

Similarly, he said that we are all the same inside. Martha led the children to sing the song – We will, we will rock it. Celebrating diversity and giving thanks for it, is the way to rock the world, she said.

Reflecting on the day. Tom thanked everyone for attending, supporting and participating in the Diversity Day. He said: I think we were unanimous in our praise of how well-behaved and engaged the primary students were and I have shared the extremely positive feedback with the primary schools. It was exciting to briefly discuss next steps and how this model could be replicated across the county; the Holy Spirit was palpably present today and guided our faith with works.”

Following the day, it was not surprising that the children’s feedback was extremely positive. They were asked to mark from one – ten on the following statements. 1, I enjoyed the diversity day. 2, the activities helped me learn about diversity. 3, I feel more confident about discussing diversity and 4, I will recommend the diversity day conference to anyone. All of them gave either a 10 or 9 to all those points.

They also commented that the teachers and helpers were lovely and encouraged them to do the activities. One commented that “the teachers were all welcoming and I felt like I could talk to them about anything” and another one said “I will talk about this day with my friends at school and what we learned.”

No doubt the children had a memorable day and the profound impact on them in the formative years of childhood will stay with them for many years if not till the end. What a child learns in childhood lasts a lifetime. This event is worth repeating in other schools across the diocese as it is sure to facilitate bringing about a cultural change for peaceful and godly living in our diverse world.

**This report was made possible with thanks to Rev Martha Mutikani and Rev Dr Godfrey Kesari**

**If your school is interested in hosting a diversity day or would like to know more about our Racial Justice ambassador programme for young people then please contact…….**