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I need to start from scratch

It may be not quite as bad as you first day at a new school as a student, but facing the challenge of making contact with a schools as a youth worker is still pretty intimidating. This guide is about how to start out in a school from scratch, including how to make contact, deciding what you're going to do and, of course, how to make a real and lasting impact.

▶ Where do you begin?

So you're looking at a school, perhaps somewhere near the church you're linked with, and wondering how on earth you make contact and offer some input. Where do you start?

There are two different issues here: one is making contact: how you go about introducing yourself, and the second is thinking about what kind of input you'll be offering: which might depend on your aims, experience, qualifications or interests. This second question is a vital one and is dealt with in another guide '**I need to develop a strategy**', so we won't be exploring it here. Instead, we'll assume you have a clear idea of what to offer and have thought through why you might want to work in a school at all. That leaves the question of how to make contact and start doing something useful!

▶ First steps

Before you make contact with a school, you should know as much as possible about it. That's not just where it fits into the education system, but also it's local context. This background knowledge will help you adopt an appropriate approach and make sure you don't trip up at the first step. It's no good, for example, offering to help with assemblies if the school doesn't have any, or putting yourself forward as a cricket coach if the PE department doesn't play it.

So these basic questions are our starting point. Finding the answers might involve talking to students (perhaps those who attend your church), teachers, contacting the Local Education Authority, looking at the school brochure or finding information via the internet.

❖ What age group of students does it cater for?

Primary, secondary or perhaps it's a middle school. Does it have a 6th form? If it's a primary school, does it cover all ages, including Foundation Stage? Does it also run courses or qualifications for other age groups: for example, adult classes in the evenings?

❖ What type of school is it?

Is it a Community School, run by the Local Authority, a Foundation School, run by the Governing Body, or

Voluntary Aided, as many faith schools often are? There are also now over 100 Academies open in England and Wales, with 100 more planned over the next 3 years. Alternatively, it could be a private fee-paying school. The type of school will not only impact the ethos - a school run by the Anglican or Catholic Church may be very different to other schools in the area - but also what subjects are compulsory. Remember that some schools, like the new Academies, do not have to follow the National Curriculum and have much more freedom to innovate. You may want to refer to the schoolswork.co.uk guide '**I want to understand the UK education system**' for more details about different types of schools.

❖ **Where do students come from?**

Does the school draw pupils from a small local area or from a much wider catchment. Are some pupils brought in by bus? This might affect how easy it is to run activities outside the school day, like a 'breakfast club' or 'after-school Christian Union'. It may also give some idea of the socio-economic background of the students.

❖ **How is the school rated by OFSTED?**

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) is the non-ministerial government department of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools In England (HMCI). It is responsible for inspecting the standards of schools. The Education and Training Inspectorate in Northern Ireland, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland, and Estyn in Wales perform similar functions within their education systems. You can access and read a school's most recent OFSTED report online at <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/>. This will also tell you if the school is in 'special measures', when a poor report is given. Schools placed into special measures receive intensive support from local authorities, additional funding and resourcing, and frequent reappraisal from Ofsted until the school is no longer deemed to be failing. Again this may impact how you approach the school and what kind of input is most relevant.

❖ **What is the content of the local RE curriculum?**

RE is an unusual subject in schools in that, although it is compulsory, there is no national curriculum dictating what must be taught, unlike in many other subjects. Instead, local authorities are responsible for developing their own curriculum, usually through a committee called the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE). You should be able to get hold of a copy of the local curriculum from your council or download it from their website. More recently, the government has produced a National Framework for RE which, although it is non-binding for local authorities, may encourage a more common approach.

In addition to these general questions, it's also worth finding out what kind of links already exist between the local churches and the school.

❖ **Is there any Christian schools work already being done in the school?**

This might range from local ministers and church leaders taking the occasional assembly, to churches being used for special services and events (Christmas, for example), or church youth workers regularly visiting the school. There may also be Christian schools work organisations giving input: remember that some projects cover a wide area and so may not be based in the locality of the school. Finding out what's already happening not only prevents duplication, but may also provide crucial links for you to make contact with. For example, if a local church minister hosts a Christmas service for the school each Christmas, do they know the Head Teacher? If so, they may be able to provide an introduction for you.

❖ **Are there Christian members of staff in the school?**

It's very likely that at least a few members of staff will attend churches: although sometimes staff live some distance from the school and it may be harder to track down these links. But start with the churches in the area and find out whether there are teachers, senior management, non-teaching staff or perhaps the Head Teacher themselves in the congregation! These contacts are probably the most crucial step in starting to work in a school so be prepared to do some digging and find them.

❏ Are there Christian members of the Governing Body?

Although Governors may be one step removed from the every day life of the school, they can provide useful links towards meeting staff or making contact for the first time. Again, you'll need to research local churches to find out if any members of the congregations are governors. It's not uncommon for church ministers to be invited to become a school governor by virtue of their role in the local community.

❏ Summarising your research

Now you have some basic information, you should have a much clearer idea about the school you'd like to begin working in. Let's take an example of what you might have found:

Harlington Upper

- It's a secondary school with 980 students. Unlike most of the other schools in the area, it also has a 6th form with 80 students.
- It's a Foundation School, meaning it's funding comes directly from national government, and it is run by the governing body rather than the LEA.
- It's subject to the requirements of the National Curriculum.
- It has specialist status as an Arts College and receives extra funding for drama and art.
- It's a popular school and draws from a wide catchment area. A lot of pupils come from outside the immediate area around the school.
- It's successful and has received excellent OFSTED reports, although the most recent report noted that it was failing to meet the requirements for a daily act of worship for all pupils.
- The school had a visit from a Christian drama group a couple of years ago, but apart from that there is no know Christian input from outside visitors. None of the local ministers take assemblies.
- Seven local church members work at the school, including a Deputy Head and the Head of Year 10.
- The local Catholic priest has been a school governor for the last three years.

❏ Developing a more detailed picture

By now you may be wondering if you'll ever get beyond all this research, but this kind of basic ground work is vital if you're going to make the right approach. And there's one more stage to go.

Although the information you've got is important, it's not the kind of first hand picture that those involved in the school will have. To get this, you'll need to speak to some of the teachers or other staff you've discovered are already linked with local churches. If they're willing, it's worth sitting down with as many as possible and finding out about what the school is really like and what kind of input from you might be most beneficial. It is often helpful to contact them and ask if they would be willing to advise you, as a potential visitor, about what kind of help and input would be most useful to the school. Even if they teach a subject that may not be directly relevant to you - like Modern Foreign Languages - they will still have valuable insights about the school. Listen carefully and be prepared to shape your strategy and aims to what seem to be the most useful areas.

There are also some practical questions you could ask that will make contacting the school easier:

- Who's in charge of RE in the school? Do they seem open to Christian input or do they hold very strong opposing views? What about others who teach RE?
- What is the Head Teacher like? Are they open to outside visitors? Do they have strong opposing views on religious input in schools?
- Who's in charge of other relevant area of the curriculum like Citizenship and PHSE?
- How do assemblies work in the school? Do Year Groups have their own assembly or is there some other arrangement? Are assemblies weekly? What time of day do they happen?

➤ Is there a Christian club or group in the school, run by students themselves or a teacher?

▶ **Next steps and your first input**

Now you have a clear idea of what the school is like, it's time to get in contact and get going. This is always a bit of a minefield: schools are - and should be - wary of strangers who call and want to invite themselves into the school community! If you want to avoid creating suspicion or simply sounding a little weird, you'll need to think carefully about where to start.

You'll also need to think about what you can offer the school. Generally, small steps are the best way to begin. It's not often wise to introduce yourself to a school for the first time and ask if you can take a series of ten lessons in RE across every Year Group! Often a single lesson or assembly is a good starting point. Assemblies are especially useful as a context where the school can see you in action and get a sense of what you're like: Are you relevant and engaging to pupils? Do you seem to have a fair idea of protocol and what's expected of you? Are you someone 'safe' and 'appropriate' for visiting a school? Assemblies may only last ten minutes, but it's surprising how much they can reveal about you and you'll find staff will quickly form an impression of whether they'd like you to do more.

So how to you make contact? Generally cold calling a school and asking to speak to someone you don't know is unlikely to be successful. Likewise, writing to a school is also problematic: Head Teachers receive a huge amount of post each day and are quite likely to ignore your letter or simply write you off as a weirdo!

A much better starting point is personal contact with a member of staff:

- If you have already met a teacher from a local church who is responsible, for example, for school assemblies, you could ask them if it's possible for you to come and take an initial assembly.
- If you have met a teacher from a non-relevant area, you could ask them to make an introduction for you. This might be by inviting you in, by arrangement, to meet the relevant staff member during a break. Or simply talking to the relevant staff member about you and agreeing that it's appropriate for you to make direct contact by phone or email.
- If neither of these are possible, the next most preferable approach would be to write to a member of staff introducing yourself. It's better to write to a teacher directly responsible for the area you'd like to offer your services to, rather than the Head or other senior management (you can always introduce yourself to them at a later date). Letters may be best if they're short, and request a chance to meet to outline what you have to offer, rather than long and detailed. Follow them up with a phone call a week or so later if you haven't heard anything. You could also ask a local minister to include a short letter of commendation: even if the teacher doesn't know the minister, the fact that they have written to confirm you are working for the church, and may be able to offer something useful, may be worthwhile and add credibility.

▶ **Developing relationships**

If you've been able to make contact with a member of staff at the school, sooner or later you should find yourself with the opportunity to meet them in person and introduce yourself. That, in turn, raises a number of important issues.

⊗ **Producing publicity and brochures**

Many Christians starting work in school think about producing some kind of printed information about themselves and what they're offering. This is easier if you're representing an organisation that is offering a wide range of input, and more difficult if you're a solo church youth worker, when they may be much less information to include. Having some publicity is a good idea, though it's by no means necessary: your impact as a person and the relationships you build in the school will count for much more in opening up doors.

If you do decide to produce a leaflet or brochure, here are some suggestions for content:

‣ A brief introduction giving the overall aim of what you're doing. For example:

"Atherton Baptist Church is committed to serving the needs of the local community. Alongside our support for young mums and our 'HomeBase' project for those with practical needs, we also want to support local schools through input from our full time youth worker, Keith Richards.

Our aim is to make a positive contribution to schools, expressing our Christian belief that churches can play an valuable role in the local community. We offer a range of input from a Christian perspective, that are child-centred and appropriate for students from all faiths and backgrounds."

‣ A brief biography of the youth worker or others who will be offering support, including any experience in education or other work with young people

‣ A list of services you are offering. For example:

*"- School assemblies on a range of topics including self worth, forgiveness, bullying, spiritual life, and special occasions such as Easter, Christmas and Remembrance Day.
- Mentoring pupils, especially providing support and encouragement to pupils who have been the victims of bullying.
- A 6 week anger management group programme, adapted from the nationally acclaimed 'Calm' project (our staff have been specifically trained and accredited to deliver this curriculum)."*

‣ Confirmation that those involved are regularly subject to an Enhanced Criminal Records Disclosure.

‣ A short paragraph underlining that you are aware of the importance of working within the school rules and protocols, and that you have the appropriate public liability insurance.

‣ Some commendations from relevant sources. For example:

'As a member of Atherton Baptist, I have been impressed by Keith's sensitivity and creativity in working with young people. He is not only accomplished at communicating both in public and on a one to one basis, but also has a genuine concern that young people develop to their full potential. I have no hesitation in recommending him as a valuable resource for local schools. Mike Brent, Social Worker, Atherton Social Services.'

‣ Contact details.

📌 **Appropriate dress code**

There are a wide range of opinions about the best way to dress when working in a school. Some argue that adopting a casual approach makes it easier to work with young people and distinguishes you from the 'school establishment'. Others make the point that staff may not take you seriously unless you are dressed reasonably smartly. You will need to make your own decision about what will work best for you, though it's worth remembering that the smarter option is less likely to create problems, especially when you are starting out in a school.

▶ **Meeting different staff in schools**

It's worth noting that meetings with staff in schools may have different emphases depending on the role of the staff concerned. When you meet a teacher or other member of staff, you should think carefully about what topics are important to cover in detail, and what can be left out or simply referred to.

➤ Head Teachers may be concerned with the bigger issues rather than details about specific curriculum content. They will often be asking themselves: 'Is this person safe to have in my school?', 'Can I trust this person?' or 'Will this help our school?', so your presentation and conversation should emphasise these areas.

➤ Subject teachers will be much more concerned with how your input will resource and support their work, so they will often be asking themselves 'Does this fit with our curriculum and current scheme of work'. They'll want to know that you can engage the students, keep control and deliver some effective teaching and learning. Again, keep your presentation and conversation to these areas.

➤ Pastoral staff may want to know about your experience in working with young people, and whether you are able to cope with difficult or unruly pupils. They may also want to know that you are 'safe' and have received appropriate training and a CRB disclosure.

▶ **What next?**

If you've successfully made contact with a school and been able to do some kind of input, however small, you're ready to take things on to the next stage. Schools will vary widely in the opportunities they present and you may need to be prepared for the long haul to gain their trust and acceptance. Others may be incredibly open and offer all kinds of ways for you to input with almost no hesitation. You'll have little choice over which of these two you face, however genuinely good input is rarely turned down by schools.

The best step to take after giving some input in school is to meet back with the relevant staff member and review what you did together. Were they happy with what you did? Were there any issues or comments you should hear? This opens the door to asking for further opportunities: either of the same kind or something more involved. For example, having taken an assembly, you may be able to offer your services to the RE department to help with lessons. If the teacher you've already worked with is not the person who organises this new area, ask them for an introduction to the relevant staff member. In this way you're able to meet new staff in a 'safe' context of being introduced by another teacher.

In some cases schools will simply not want outside input, especially from Christians. Although this is rare, it does happen, and is often related to a bad experience in the past or a strong disapproval of religion and faith from the Head Teacher. There are few practical ways round these obstacles and you may have to accept that the school will be closed to you, although you may be able to support it in other ways.

▶ **A summary of steps to starting from scratch**

- Be clear about your aims in wanting to work in a school.
- Do some basic research about the school from general sources.
- Make contact with church members who work at the school and ask for their advice and help.
- Try to meet a relevant teacher or staff member in person, through an introduction from a church contact.
- Offer a small initial input, perhaps an assembly, so that the school can get an impression of you and what you can offer.
- Produce a simple brochure about your work to back up your input.
- Meet back with the relevant staff member after your input and review it together. Ask for further opportunities to work in the school.

➤ If you're intending to work in another area of school life, ask your existing contacts for a personal introduction to the relevant staff member.

This guide has concentrated on the practical steps to beginning work in a school, but of course prayer is a vital component to all that's been outlined. Encourage your church to pray with you as you make contact with a school and continue to ask God for guidance and wisdom.

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