

Jehovah's Witnesses background information

(Information sheet courtesy of Diocese of Chichester)

Jehovah's Witnesses recognise the right of others to hold their own views and practices and schools should as a matter of course respond with the same degree of respect towards them. Therefore if a school is uncertain about anything concerning Jehovah's Witness children, their parents should be contacted at an early stage so that possible misunderstandings can be avoided.

Background Notes

- 1) The movement has been variously called the Russellite movement, Millennial Dawnists, The Bible students, the Watch Tower Society and, since 1931, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the name which is accepted world-wide. Though it can be viewed as a modern 'movement', Jehovah's Witnesses see themselves as sharing in a reawakening and re-emergence of the early Christian church.
- 2) The modern-day movement began in the early 1870s in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with Bible study classes involving persons from various Christian backgrounds. In 1879 Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916), formerly a Presbyterian of Scottish Irish descent, began publishing Zion's Watchtower and Herald of Christ's Return. Publication and distribution of Bible literature (which Jehovah's Witnesses see as fulfilling the preaching commission of Matthew 24:14) has remained a major objective throughout the twentieth century.
- 3) By 1880, there were scores of congregations (*ecclesias*) in nearby states, and the magazine, later to be called The Watchtower, was used to assist in the weekly Bible Class discussions.
- 4) By 1909, the headquarters had moved to Brooklyn, New York, and the Society, international and incorporated, was known as the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. The London Branch was opened in 1900 in Forest Gate, East London. The first representatives had been sent to Britain in 1881.
- 5) Russell was succeeded by Joseph Franklin ('Judge') Rutherford (1869-1941) under whom the organisation became far more centralised. The organisation and duties of modern Jehovah's Witnesses are as much the brain-child of Judge Rutherford as they are of Pastor Russell.

- 6) During World Wars I and II, many Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned in many countries (including Britain) because of their stand on Christian Neutrality. However, their persecution reached a peak during the 1930s and 40s with their refusal to participate in armed warfare and the giving of allegiance to national symbols (such as a flag). Many Jehovah's Witnesses died in Nazi concentration camps. Jehovah's Witnesses are still persecuted in some parts of the world.
- 7) Today, there are over six million Jehovah's Witnesses in 235 countries and territories. Nearly one million of these are in the USA. Numbers are increasing, particularly in Central and South America, Italy, Japan and Eastern Europe. There are 130,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in the United Kingdom.
- 8) The twice monthly circulation of the Watchtower (with its emphasis on Bible study) is over 23 million. It is translated into over 141 different languages. Its companion magazine, Awake (with its emphasis on family and community issues), has a circulation of almost 20 million in 86 languages.

Beliefs

- 1) Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jehovah God created the earth and will preserve it. Jehovah is God's personal name.
- 2) Jehovah's Witnesses have a belief in the accuracy of the Bible – that it is the Word of God, divinely inspired and historically accurate. They prefer to use their own translation of the Bible, the 'New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures' which was first published in 1961.
- 3) They believe in the existence of Satan as an active force in the world.
- 4) Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus is God's only-begotten son, his only direct creation. Jesus, they believe, suffered a sacrificial death. God, though, is greater: the traditional doctrine of the Trinity is totally rejected.
- 5) It is believed that the early Church fell away from its ideals and consequently apostasy developed in the second and third centuries. Witnesses believe that, since that time, there has always been a thin line of true Christian Worshipers but the great resurgence has been through the world-wide preaching of Jehovah's Witnesses in the twentieth century.

- 6) Witnesses believe that Christ came to rule in 'Kingdom Power' in the heavens in 1914, and soon, at the Battle of Armageddon, will extend that rule to include the whole earth. Jehovah's Witnesses therefore believe that they should attempt to lead blameless lives in preparation for the 1000 year rule of Christ after Armageddon (Revelation 20). They nevertheless recognise that their salvation is not by works but rather by Jehovah God's undeserved kindness 'through Christ Jesus'.

Practices

- 1) There are no paid clergy but some Jehovah's Witnesses are given distinct levels of responsibility – Congregation Presiding Overseers, Circuit Overseers, District Overseers. However, Jehovah's Witnesses believe that they are each ordained at baptism. As such, all Jehovah's Witnesses have the responsibility of sharing in the preaching and teaching work to the degree their varying circumstances permit. Jehovah's Witnesses are active propagators of the Faith. All Jehovah's Witnesses are 'kingdom publishers' in that they should engage in evangelising which includes the distribution of literature.
- 2) The place of worship is called a Kingdom Hall. There are five weekly meetings: usually on Tuesday evening (lasting one hour), two on Thursday evening (totalling one hour 45 minutes), and two on Sunday (each of an hour's duration). Attendance is encouraged but not recorded.
- 3) Baptism by total immersion is practised: that is, the person is totally submerged under water. Children of Witnesses are encouraged to serve and make a personal commitment before qualifying for baptism. There is no specific age when baptism takes place, though it would be unusual under the age of 13.
- 4) Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate traditional religious festivals such as Christmas and Easter. They believe that there is no scriptural justification for such celebrations which they believe are rooted in paganism. For the same reasons, secular occasions such as birthdays and Mother's Day are not celebrated.
- 5) Jehovah's Witnesses refuse blood transfusions on scriptural grounds (see Acts of the Apostles 15: 28-29) but also believe there are inherent medical dangers in this acceptance practice. An 'Advance Medical Directive/Release' card (see Appendix 1) is carried by Witnesses in order to acquaint and assist medical practitioners in cases of emergency.

- 6) Jehovah's Witnesses advocate moderation in drinking alcohol.
- 7) Jehovah's Witnesses do not take part in state political activities such as voting. They also refuse to take part in activities such as saluting a national flag or standing up during a national anthem because, they believe, such honour should be paid only to God.

School-related Q&A

What is the Jehovah's Witness stance regarding religious education in school? How might the school respond to this?

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that religious education is the responsibility of the child's home and family. They are aware that parents have an absolute right to withdraw their child from religious education (and collective worship), in whole or in part.

Where there is uncertainty about a particular lesson or activity, Jehovah's Witness parents would appreciate discussion with the school in advance: it may be that they are happy for their child to be involved.

What is the Jehovah's Witness stance towards assembly and collective worship in school? How might the school respond to this?

Jehovah's Witnesses have no objection to their children attending 'assembly' (as an administrative meeting) but would not want them to attend 'collective worship' (as a religious activity).

In general, Jehovah's Witness parents would appreciate early discussion with a headteacher or senior teacher about the nature of assembly and collective worship in particular.

When a number of Jehovah's Witness children have been withdrawn, some parents have been happy to organise a rota for their supervision.

Given the Jehovah's Witness attitude towards birthdays, how might a school best respond? What about the reading of stories about birthdays and parties?

Parents would not want their children to participate in birthday celebrations. It would be insensitive, for example, to require a Jehovah's Witness child to participate in the singing of 'Happy Birthday'.

They recognise, however, that incidental references to birthdays cannot be avoided and would not wish schools to become anxious about this. In the same spirit, there would generally be no objection to the reading of stories where the birthday is incidental. Parents would object, however, if the story seemed to be advocating the celebrating of birthdays.

Given the stance of Jehovah's Witness towards Christmas and Easter, how would they want their children treated when others at school are involved in activities related to these festivals?

Where lessons and activities are specifically targeted at these festivals, Jehovah's Witness parents would not want their children to participate. However, children could take part if these festivals were being treated in a more 'academic' sense – for example, during an art lesson where a series of paintings (including ones depicting Christmas scenes) was being studied. By contrast, parents would not wish their children to take part in a Nativity Play or to make Christmas cards or Christmas trees. In the latter circumstances, they could (for example) be asked to paint a snow scene.

Would Jehovah's Witness parents want their children involved in activities relating to non-Christian Festivals such as Hindu Diwali or Jewish Hanukkah?

Jehovah's Witness parents view such festivals in the same light as Christmas and Easter. The approach suggested above for dealing with these is equally valid.

Most schools involve pupils in charity-related events such as sponsored walks and Children in Need. What is the Jehovah's Witness stance on this?

There would probably be no difficulty in Jehovah's Witness children participating in such school or child-related activities. However, they would not want them to participate in religious charities. If there were uncertainty, it would be best for the school to check with the parents.

As Jehovah's Witnesses believe that charity should be given without show, parents would not want their children to wear tokens such as a red poppy or lifeboat appeal

flag. In the same spirit, they would not want their child rewarded or singled out for their efforts – e.g. by being brought to the front.

What is the Jehovah's Witness view on the provision of sex education within the school curriculum?

Jehovah's Witness parents would not have any objection to those aspects which are including in National Curriculum science. As the law permits, however, they would want to withdraw their children from other aspects of sex education. They consider that sex education is a matter for the family. They would want the home to deal with issues like contraception (which Witnesses do not object to within marriage, though they do reject abortion).

However, they accept that incidental references to matters such as contraception are unavoidable and would not want the school to become over-anxious about this. Individual families will vary in their particular approach to such matters and it is best to check with the parents.

Are there any other aspects of school life which might cause embarrassment to Jehovah's Witnesses? If so, how might the school respond?

Jehovah's Witnesses would be embarrassed by the expectation that they or their children stand up during the national anthem.

They would be happy for their children to wear something like a prefect badge as this indicates a position of responsibility (as opposed to something used for outward show).

They would generally be happy for their children to join in with games and activities which were of a co-operative, team nature but would be uneasy if the element of competition was dominant. Though the response of Jehovah's Witnesses families will differ, many would not for this reason encourage their children to participate in an activity like a borough athletics competition.

If a Jehovah's Witness child is withdrawn from a lesson or activity, how can this be conducted sensitively so as to avoid embarrassment or a feeling of isolation?

Embarrassment could be kept to a minimum by early consultation with the child and the parents who should have the responsibility for explaining to the child the reasons for the withdrawal. In the case where the child is withdrawn from the activity but remains physically present, another activity can be provided. In the case of actual

withdrawal the school will need to consider issues relating to health, safety and supervision.

Care should be taken to treat the child with respect and to avoid drawing undue attention to what is happening.

What should a school bear in mind if a Jehovah's Witness child is involved in a medical emergency? What if parents are uncontactable and hospital treatment is required?

Jehovah's Witness children should have in their possession at all times an Advance Medical Directive/Release card (Appendix 1) which bears the name of two people close to them for contact purposes. Hospitals are aware of the existence of such cards.

School records should be updated and marked clearly – as it is in the case of those children with diabetes for example. Schools are encouraged to request a copy of the Advance Medical Directive/Release card to keep in the pupil's file.

Are there any food or drink regulations which apply to Jehovah's Witnesses?

Jehovah's Witnesses are not permitted to eat foods containing blood, such as black pudding. Otherwise, there are no religiously-imposed food or drink regulations.