This event report shows what a fearless approach to diversity can achieve, in a county some might think of as ‘white’.

Who came and why?
A hundred and sixty 10 and 11 year old pupils from 16 primary schools across the county took part in a multi-faith conference to learn about Hinduism, Judaism, Islam and Sikhism. The two-day event took place at Holmer CE Primary School, Hereford, and was five times over-subscribed.

The children met people from four different faith communities and learnt about their religions by getting involved in creative workshops including music, art, dance, storytelling and role-play of the way other people celebrate their faith.

What happened in the workshops?
Children were introduced to Hinduism through Rangoli pattern making and exploring daily worship at the home shrine; and Sikhism through the use of authentic artefacts and spiritual music to explore Sikh beliefs, morals and values.

Children had the opportunity to observe and participate in dance, singing, dreidle games and tasting traditional challah bread used on Shabbat in the Jewish home. They explored Islamic art through an Arabic calligraphy workshop. The day ended with a celebration and sharing of activities from the day — with children showing or telling others what they had enjoyed.

Who made it happen and why?
The conference was organised by a partnership between the Herefordshire Multi-faith Development Group members and Holmer Primary School, with grant funding from the Herefordshire Local Network Fund. Excellent and inspiring workshop leaders came from across the country: Razwan Ul-Haq, a Muslim teacher, artist and writer from Yorkshire; Butta Singh, a Sikh teacher from the West Midlands; Jane Silver Corren, a Jewish educator from Dorset; and Bharti Tailor, a Hindu workshop leader and chaplain from Bedfordshire.

What did the children think?
We asked children to tell us what they were surprised by, most interested in, inspired by, disappointed by, bored by.

This is a representative sample of what they said:

We were surprised by...
- The fact that the leaders were not more different! ‘More foreign’, especially Butta, whose appearance was so distinctive. Some of Butta’s beliefs — that he was ‘superman’.
- The length of Butta’s beard!
- Writing their own bit of scripture!
- The way Sikhs express their commitment through their clothes.

We were most interested in...
- Rangoli patterns [several].
- Jane and her descriptions of weddings including the dances.
- Islamic art, especially the calligraphy with the calligraphy pens!
- The impact commitment has on people’s everyday lives.

We were inspired by...
- Razwan, his fasting and prayers, and the way he made them all feel so involved.
- The Jewish practice of placing the Mezuzah on the door and being constantly aware of it.
- Islamic art.
- Music in the Sikh workshop.

We were disappointed by...
- Nothing.
- We wanted more time to explore Rangoli patterns.

We were bored by...
- Nothing.
- Sometimes felt they were sitting too long.

What did some of the adults think?
Councillor Jenny Hyde, Cabinet member for Children and Young People, said: ‘It is important that our children have the opportunity to explore other faiths and try new things so that they have an understanding of the world around them and can learn to respect and celebrate difference.’
Midge Ault, event organiser from the Baha’i Faith, said: ‘This is a wonderful opportunity to bring together children and adults of different faith backgrounds in a creative, positive and enjoyable way. I hope that this will be the first of many’.

Sue Morgan, Head of Ivington CE Primary School, said: ‘Herefordshire desperately needs more of these opportunities to meet with and get to know people from other faith traditions. The more you interact, the more you realise that all the major faith traditions are looking for the same thing – finding God. They are travelling on different journeys and different roads to get there.’

What made the event even better?

Judy Cecil, headteacher and event organiser, wanted as many children as possible to share in the day and used ICT to do this. Video conferencing was used to enable two other primary schools to share in aspects of the event. A film crew made up of Year 6 children from Holmer School, together with their teacher Aisha, captured the event and worked hard to put together ‘Photostories’. These were shown during the ‘Celebrate and share’ assembly at the end of the day, rounding off a wonderful day of singing, creating, questioning and meeting one another – and having fun.

What might we do differently another time?

Children really enjoyed the workshops that combined activities with spirituality. They were intrigued by the way calligraphy and Rangoli patterns are not just shapes and patterns, but how these express deeper beliefs. They were fascinated by the meaning of the traditional dress of a Sikh and enjoyed the reflective experience of Sikh music.

They noticed how belief in one God (the same God!) was central to the lives of all four faiths despite each person seeming very different on the surface. In future events it would be good to have more time to understand the things that matter most (the spirituality, values and beliefs) of the person representing each faith and give more time to children asking questions and thinking about their own responses.

How can you make an event like this happen?

1. If you want to make this happen, you can! Find someone else (another school/RE co-ordinator) and start planning.

2. Identify the following:
   - A venue to hold the event – ideally you will need a school with a supportive headteacher and a hall and 3–4 workshop rooms – available for the whole day.
   - A team of people to organise the event. In our case this was three faith community members from the local SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for RE), the RE adviser and the headteacher of the host school. The commitment of these people to the project are vital. They made it happen!
   - Funding – either contributions from each participating school or grant funding from an external source. Find out about funding available in your local area – your council may have someone who can advise you on this.
   - Expert faith community workshop leaders. Getting the right people who are experienced at working with children, are CRB checked and will develop engaging workshop activities are vital! Your RE adviser or SACRE may be able to help you identify these. We found our workshop leaders through headteacher and RE adviser recommendations, AREAIC (Association of RE Advisers, Inspectors and Consultants) and SACRE contacts.

Joyce Mackley, RE Today adviser

1 Commitment game can be found in the primary curriculum publication Exploring Codes for Living ed. J. Mackley (RE Today 2008). Contact sales@retoday.org.uk; game is available to download for RE Today subscribers from the curriculum books supplement area of their website www.retoday.org.uk.