

The *Follow Me* Religious Education programme: An Introduction



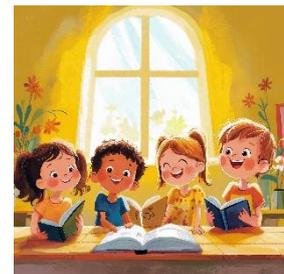
The Primary Curriculum Framework was launched in May 2023 and sets out the purpose, structure and content of a redeveloped primary school curriculum. The curriculum is presented in five broad curriculum areas: Language, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Education, Wellbeing, Arts Education, and Social and Environmental Education. 'In addition to the five areas, school patrons have a legal right to design their own programme in accordance with the ethos of their school. This programme forms part of children's learning experience in primary and special schools' (NCCA, 2023, p. 14). This is known as the Patron's Programme.

The Patron's Programme is developed by a school's patron with the aim of contributing to children's holistic development, particularly from the religious and/or ethical perspective, and underpins and supports the characteristic spirit of the school. There are a number of patrons' programmes in the Irish primary school system, reflecting the diversity of patronage. Some are denominational or religious, emphasising the place of children's faith, spiritual, and moral development in their lives. Some are ethical or multi-belief and values-based, and emphasise children's understanding of ethics and values and their application in the life of the child. All patrons' programmes contribute to children's development and sense of identity and support their connection to their community and to wider society (NCCA, 2023, p.19).

In schools under the patronage of the Church of Ireland, Methodist and Presbyterian churches, the Patron's Programme is *Follow Me*, which was developed by the Church of Ireland together with the Methodist and Presbyterian Boards of Education. Follow Me has been shown to support the seven key competencies of the primary curriculum framework (Wilkinson et al., 2023)

There are four aims in the *Follow Me* programme:

1. To enable children to develop a knowledge and understanding of the beliefs, worship and witness of the Christian faith, and in particular of the Church of Ireland and other principal reformed traditions.
2. To enable children to explore the biblical witness to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
3. To enable children to develop their own religious beliefs, values and practices through a process of personal search and discovery.
4. To enable children to develop an awareness of and a sensitivity towards those of other faiths and none.



There are seven strands in the *Follow Me* programme:

1. Celebrations, festivals, ceremonies and customs;
2. Sacred writings, stories and key figures;
3. Beliefs;
4. Sacred places, worship and symbols;
5. Moral values and attitudes;
6. Personal search;
7. Awareness of those of other faiths and none.

Follow Me employs a spiral approach, where the child revisits stories, concepts and religious questions throughout their school lives. The programme also links in with the seasons of the Church Year, covering the key festivals of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost and other

seasonal topics such as Harvest. The programme is designed to be adaptable for all class situations and teachers may use a variety of teaching and learning methodologies to suit the needs of the class. There are pupils' textbooks and teachers' manuals for each class and a supporting website www.followme.ie.

The central teaching methodology found in *Follow Me* is story and more than one story is included in each week's theme. Many of these stories are Bible stories, read to the children in adapted versions in infant and junior classes and read by the pupils themselves in senior classes. The Bible is recognised as the word of God and is read in the light of the traditional understanding of it as interpreted by the Church, as well as with the benefit of contemporary knowledge and experience. The programme also includes specially commissioned fiction and poetry.



In engaging with Bible stories and other material, the lesson structure is that the teacher begins with what the children know themselves, their own life experiences; then moves to exploring the stories and concepts with tools and skills that are learned and are appropriate for the age of the children. The pupils are then encouraged to apply what they have learned in written work, oral discussion, art, drama, music

or prayer. The options for creative responses are extensive and are aligned to the key competencies of 'being creative', 'being a good communicator' and 'being an active learner'. As children progress through primary school, they are encouraged to reflect on the core Christian beliefs and to grow in their understanding of the viewpoints of those with other faiths and none. They also consider faith and ethical issues through the lens of Christianity. Prayer is a key component of the Religious Education lesson, these prayers vary from formal prayers as may be heard in church, to class or individually composed prayers. A book *Praying Together* (Wilkinson, 2020) supports the programme and is widely used in school assemblies. Other aspects of the programme include music, church visits, visits of the parish clergy to the classroom and some exploration of church services and worship.



As RE is a core element of the ethos of the school, school assemblies and parish school links are encouraged and the *Follow Me* programme provides many opportunities for these links to be strengthened. Many schools have weekly whole school Assemblies using prayers, songs and stories.



When pupils leave sixth class it is hoped that they will have enjoyed Religious Education and that the activities, exploration and questioning that are so much part of the subject will increase their knowledge and understanding of the Christian faith.