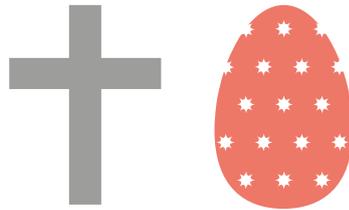


Young people spend a huge amount of time at school. How can we better support them while they're there? And what can we do to help schools?



What is Easter really all about?

Celebrating Easter is often trickier than celebrating Christmas. At Easter we remember Jesus' death and resurrection, which can be very difficult for young children (and some adults) to get their heads around. For kids we have the Easter bunny and chocolate eggs, which seem to have no significance in the story of Jesus dying and being brought back to life.

Even the name Easter is a strange one. Why is it called that? I was brought up in a churchgoing Christian home and it took me ages to realise that there isn't even a sniff of the word Easter in the Bible. So what's going on here, then? Well, in order to understand something better we need to consider how it came about and why there are so many different elements involved.

Long before the birth of Christianity, there were many stories of gods who died in violent and torturous circumstances who were later resurrected: Ishtar, a Sumerian goddess; Horus, an Egyptian god; and Dionysus, the Greek god of wine. The early Church had battles with the Cybele cult based on Vatican Hill about whose god was true, given that Cybele's lover Attis was born of a virgin, died and was reborn annually. This was marked by believers during a three-day festival beginning with Blood Friday or Black Friday, and coming to a frenzied climax on the Sunday as they celebrated the resurrection of Attis.



All the elements of our Easter celebrations have been taken from different cultures and traditions over the years

Wherever there were strong folklore tales of gods who died and came back to life, the early Church began to accommodate these traditions by pinning their own stories to recognisable, well-kept traditional celebrations or feast days. Is this cultural appropriation or a more positive form of assimilation? That's hard for us to judge through the eyes of 21st Century Western culture and is outside the remit of these pages. What is clear is that all the elements of our Easter celebrations have been taken from different cultures and traditions over the years, in much the same way as our Christmas celebrations have.

The Easter bunny actually started as a hare, the symbol of Eostre, the goddess of fertility. The exchange of eggs is an ancient practice. As Christianity became more widely followed, the eggs were used to celebrate the end of the period of fasting. Then Mr Cadbury hit upon the idea of making chocolate eggs and BOOM!

Cadbury's Creme Eggs (and subsequently the many hundreds of Easter eggs we now have) were invented.

Hot cross buns and Simnel cake are also ancient symbols. It is reported that the early Church's leaders tried to prevent the making of sacred cakes but, unable to stop devout people following a custom that was so ingrained in their lives, they blessed the practice instead. Even the timing of Easter, which is based on the phases of the moon, comes down to the assimilation of other religious practices that were already rife at the time when the First Council of Nicaea was meeting during the 4th Century.

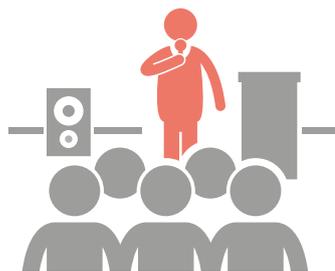
Throughout history, different faiths and religious practices have celebrated the idea of 'darkness to light'. It is an attractive concept to the human psyche, and never more so than in the northern hemisphere at springtime! However you celebrate, Easter is an important time to remember the triumph of light over darkness. Acknowledging that there were dark forces at work in the world during Jesus' day, just as there are right now, is crucial to our children and young people's well-being. As counter-intuitive as this sounds, understanding that internal chaos is reflected externally can bring relief and a sense of identification that gives hope.

The telling of Jesus' story of suffering and betrayal, the remembering of it via different rituals and practices, the explaining of the traditions our children and young people are likely to be aware of – Shrove Tuesday, Ash Wednesday, Lent, Good Friday and Easter Sunday – as well as some they might be less aware of – Holy Week and Palm Sunday – is all important for us, for the children and young people we serve, for our families and for the wider community.

There are some church communities in the UK and in Europe that celebrate Easter with much formal ritual and tradition. If you are part of one of these, share those stories. If you are not, find out about them. Maybe find a video or presentation you can show your groups. Others celebrate informally but no less meaningfully. One story I heard was of a pizza evening followed by an Easter egg hunt. The church, keen to build links with the local community, put on a pizza-making evening at the church, being careful to build trust and meaningful relationships with people in the area. Then they invited children and families to their Easter egg hunt. There are many creative ways to engage children and young people around the story of Easter, so embrace them and use them to your advantage.

JENNI OSBORN

is head of further education studies at CYM.



The impact of Easter ministry

What kind of work can you do in schools at Easter? And what impact might this work have? Here are a few stories to inspire you.

Easter presentations

Wayne Dixon has been working in schools in Windsor, Slough and Maidenhead for many years. Although he is a secondary schools' worker, Wayne has also been involved in the delivery of Easter presentations at various primary schools.

"This has been the most significant thing I have been involved with in over 30 years as a schools' worker," says Wayne. "One reason is that it is very transferable. In recent years it has spread to over 50 locations from Gravesend to Glasgow."

Easter presentations (often called Easter Cracked) are simple to put on but tick a lot of boxes for schools in terms of RE and SMSC (spiritual, moral, social and cultural development). Schools are invited to come to a church where they can explore the Easter story through upfront presentation, small-group work and extension work for the classroom when the children go back to school.

Wayne and the team work with Year 6 children in the schools they visit, delivering Christmas Unwrapped in December, Easter Cracked in March or April, and a transition session based on *It's Your Move* in June or July. This sustained contact with a single year group builds good relationships with the children involved and gives the children a touchpoint when they go to secondary school, as they are also likely to see Wayne there!

Easter assemblies

Steve Whyatt works for GenR8, a schools' work trust based in Cambridgeshire and north Hertfordshire. GenR8 teams deliver Easter assemblies in more than 150 primary schools across the area.

These assemblies contain sketches, puppets, songs, mimes and poems, though not necessarily all in one go! There is much fun and interaction as well as times for reflection, including a prayer the children are invited to say "Amen" to at the end.

"I would say the impact is significant because of the memorable style and fun that is part of our assemblies," says Steve.

The aim is to help children start to link things together and to build a relationship with schools. And the impact is not restricted to Easter: "We go to most schools three times each year, and have been doing assemblies for many years in the local area, so for many children GenR8 is part of their primary school experience. Here are a couple of staff comments from the GenR8 Christmas tour:

"The children, across the age ranges (and adults), enjoyed the fast pace, interactivity, humour and characterisation the actors employed to remind us to take the time to remember 'the true meaning of Christmas'."

"It was clear from the response from the children during the assembly, and just watching their faces, how much they enjoyed it. I teach Year 5 and Year 6, and asked them after the assembly what they thought. The overriding comment was how much fun it was and that it made them stop and think about what Christmas is really about."

“

Easter presentations are simple to put on but tick a lot of boxes for schools

What work have you done in schools at Easter time?
Let us know on Facebook or Twitter @ycwmag.

Easter ideas

Festive is a charity that works across the UK supporting Christian students, chaplains and those in sixth-form colleges and further education through prayer, advice, resources and training. It has a wealth of resources, ideas and advice on its website: festive.org.uk.

Here are some of Festive's ideas to help young people and Christian Unions (CUs) reach out to their fellow students at Easter time.

An Easter giveaway

- Buy a large number of Easter eggs or wrapped Easter sweets
- Stick an 'Easter-themed' Bible verse on each egg (eg John 3:16 or 1 Corinthians 15:3b-4)
- Give them away from a popular spot at your college or sixth form
- Tell everyone they are an Easter gift from the CU

An Easter stall

If you have permission, this is probably one of the best ways to create an atmosphere and get talking with fellow students about Easter. So what do you need?

A stall: Jazz up a table in a popular place, and make sure you include edibles!

The 'pull factor': Make it interactive by having a board where people can stick Post-it notes with their answers to some thought-provoking questions. You could try "What do you want to be remembered for?" or "Who or what has had the biggest impact on your life?" Or how about doing an Easter Survey and giving away hot-cross buns to anyone who takes part? (You can find a sample survey at festive.org.uk/archive.)

Giveaway goodies: Gather a fair supply of sugary treats to give away – for example chocolate eggs, hot cross buns or Easter cakes – but don't stop there! Make sure you have a supply of leaflets that briefly share the Christian message, Gospels, Easter postcards or books that you could give away to anyone who wants to know more.

An Easter talk

- Get permission in advance for an outside speaker to come in and do an Easter talk. Make sure you find a suitable space to hold the event
- Produce some flyers and posters to promote the talk. Encourage members of your group to invite their friends to come
- Ask a volunteer from the Christian Union to welcome everyone from the front and introduce the speaker
- At the end of the talk, leave time for questions and invite everyone to take a leaflet, Easter postcard or Gospel to find out more

An 'Easter Unwrapped' week

Could you run a week of events as a CU to help students unwrap the message of Easter?

- Go to festive.org.uk/outreachideas/4 for advice on running a Christian Awareness Week
- Use this as a guide to put together a week of events at Easter. Could you host a few talks on hot topics? What about an Easter giveaway? Could you run some surveys? What about an Easter craft event with someone from the CU giving their testimony?
- For advice and prayer, email info@festive.org.uk

You can also contact Festive to get hold of Easter postcards, Gospels and other resources to use in further education settings at Easter time. Check out its guidelines for running an event, *The Seven Ps for Every Event*, at festive.org.uk/outreach.

Telling the story

While it's valuable to be able to explain the background to what may seem to be a mish-mash of traditions, most of which have very little real relevance to the Christian faith, the most critical thing is to ensure that we share the Jesus story with children and young people in the run-up to the remembrance of a core Christian belief. This is not to deny other cultural practices, but rather to share our own faith story and traditions around this time of year. Let's hold back the darkness that surrounds us by being bringers of hope and light in dark places. After all, this is an essential part of our role in schools, and the lead-up to Easter is a fantastic time to be able to do it.

- How do you currently tell the Easter story in schools?

- How might you rethink what you do?

- What new opportunities are open to you this year, and how can you make the most of these opportunities?

- How can you follow on from the Easter story in May, June or July?
