The English Parish Church
Primary Schools Pack

RE Lesson C: What hidden messages can be found in a church building?
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Schools Pack developed by Chris Hudson for the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture
RE Lessons and Worksheets

Lesson C: What hidden messages can be found in a church building?

Aims:
To discover how art, architecture and other artefacts can provide symbolic and overt clues to the key beliefs of Christians.

Objectives:
• Each child will create a set of questions about an artefact, and explore possible answers about its key messages.
• Each child will use these ideas to create a modern design for a similar artefact serving a similar purpose for Christians today, using symbols, design motifs and images found in research.

Resources Provided:
• DVD Rom: images of historical and current examples of church designs and developments, artwork, statues, stained glass, prayer books, etc. with explanatory text and supporting materials.
• Worksheet- What’s the big Idea? 1 and 2

Additional resources required:
• Large, strong box
• Art and craft materials

Key teaching points for the lesson
Church buildings are full of signs and symbols that use a hidden language to say important things both about people, and about God.

These signs and symbols are there to help people worship and pray

Through history, these signs and symbols sometimes change because the message changes, or it is seen in a new way.
• The whole building and its furniture can also be a sign and a symbol of people’s relationship both with each other, and with God.
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Background Information for teachers

This lesson could run and run! Consider the aptitude of your class, and timetable appropriately – perhaps using the ‘design’ elements for Art and Design Technology lessons afterwards. Connecting this lesson with a planned visit to a local parish church will provide you with lots of 3D stimuli as well.

The DVD-ROM has many articles about the development of Church Art and Architecture through the centuries. It might be helpful to begin by picking the time period related to the foundation of a church you are studying, to then find out more about its ‘story’. Otherwise, a good starting point is Section 1 ▶ The Early Centuries ▶ Church Art and Architecture.

Lesson Introduction:

Display a picture of a church building, eg:

(Above: St Andrew’s Evangelical Church, York. The grey stonework is from a medieval church. The bricks show where windows and doors have been moved or filled in, and the modern roof dates from the early 20th century when it was reused for worship. Today it hosts a small but active congregation. Image © Charlotte Stanford)

Explain: “Christians believe that God is everywhere, but many like to have a special place to either come together for worship, or make a personal visit to pray at other times. The whole layout of the building is intended to make that possible… but the buildings can look very different – because people often want different things
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when they come to worship!”

Discuss this as a group, listing ideas on display as they come. “In this country, if 100 people wanted to gather together to celebrate their faith with prayer, singing and learning more about God, then what would they need to make it happen?” (ideas might include: a large covered space, chairs, lighting and heating, toilets, disabled access, somewhere to make the coffee and wash up...?)

Ask – “Would you need a special church building to do this?” (Not necessarily – some churches meet in schools or libraries or even pubs.)

“In the past, Christians often wanted a special place for worship – which led to churches being built across the country just as soon as there were enough Christians in a place to want one. Sometimes, it became the main meeting place for a village. Over the years, these buildings have got bigger and changed as the people wanted the buildings to do different things, and also as building techniques changed.”

Show the DVD animation from the Resources Gallery on the English Parish Church DVD-Rom, which lasts for 5 minutes. Stop it at different points to ask how the building is changing. (Which changes do you like / dislike, and why?)

Point out …

• The building getting bigger and higher
• How there’s nowhere to sit until quite late on – people might bring their own stools, sit on the floor, or simply stand.
• The decoration becoming more ornate.
• Increasing memorials for benefactors – rich people who make cash donations to pay for new parts of the building to be built or redecorated.

Explain that when we see a local parish church, it’s easy to forget that, unless it’s a new building, it’s probably changed quite a lot over the centuries. If you know what to look for, you can spot the older and newer parts.
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(Above: St Denys Church, York. This is what remains of a much larger medieval church, itself built over a Saxon church (c.800) and possibly a Roman temple. The doorway at the far left is Norman (c.1154). The current church is only the chancel of the earlier medieval church, the rest having collapsed. The tower used to have a spire, but this collapsed after being hit by both lightning and cannon fire in the 17th and 18th centuries. Image © Charlotte Stanford)

(Below: St Gregory’s, Fledborough, Notts. This church has a very old tower (c.1100) on the left, while on the right the rest of the church is c.1325. It was rebuilt several times in 1764, 1890 and 1912, the last two rebuildings adding the larger windows seen on the lower right hand side. Today it is redundant, Grade I listed and maintained by the Churches Conservation Trust. Image © Charlotte Stanford)
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Class Activity 1: Creating a ‘special’ Church treasure box

Create a specially decorated box labelled as representing ‘the Church’, then distribute among the children a collection of pictures or objects representing items or events associated with church life.

(If possible, use photos from your local parish church if you are going to be visiting it.)

Examples might be stained glass windows, a crucifix, a Bible, a banner, a lectern, a pulpit, a font, chalice, paten, communion bread, candles, books, the organ (or other instrument), other artwork - you could also include photos of events taking place in a church such as a wedding or a christening.

Explain that all of these things represent precious treasures for many people, because they celebrate something important.

Set the task: ask each child to

• Create a label for a few of these special objects or events, writing its name.
• Explain what’s special about it
• Add patterns, images and other decoration (stick-on jewels?) to make the labels look ‘special’.

Afterwards, receive and discuss pupil contributions for inclusion in the Church treasure box.
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Class Activity 2: Responding to what we see (Worksheets 1 & 2)

Give out copies of worksheets 1 and 2. Set pupils the tasks of working in pairs to study the pictures and their labels for clues – what interesting questions can they generate about the images – and what do they think are the key messages of the images about people, and about God?

Afterwards, set pupils the task of selecting one image (from the Ten Commandments, the font, the squint or the statue of Good defeating Evil) – and creating their own version of it, using a range of media.

Class Activity 3: Creating a pupil-led ‘trail’ in a church building

If visiting a local church, children could create an interactive ‘label’ for artefacts there, comprising questions, thoughts about an object’s key message – and a pupil reflection about its message and meaning.

These could then go on display in the church for the week – perhaps as some sort of ‘trail’ for visitors to follow. An explanatory notice would be necessary to give context and explain the parameters of the project.

If you want to do this, first negotiate it thoroughly with the local church representatives who will have to host the display and establish any boundaries or sensitivities.

An extension to this would be for your class to publish their own highly-individual ‘guidebook’ to the church that makes up with personal reflection and illustrations what it might lack in historical detail!
Worksheet 1  TEACHER’S COPY

Study the following pictures and their labels for clues – what interesting questions can you ask about it? They are all found inside or outside churches. What do you think is each one’s key message about people, or God? (What is it encouraging people to remember or do?)

My Questions / Key Messages?

Most parish churches have a copy of the Ten Commandments on display. Find them in the Bible at Exodus 20.1-17

Why does a religious object have non-religious pictures on it? (possibly because they paid for it, but also because it reminds people seeing the font who rules the land)

Key messages: Instead of the font having an image about baptism, God or the Bible on it, it instead has a political picture about who rules the land.

This church font has the badge of the royal family on it - the Tudor rose. It also has the shield-crest of a local ruling family.

My Questions / Key Messages?

Who are the two men? (The two men are Moses and his brother Aaron. Aaron was the first High Priest in the Bible. The clouds and radiant light at the top are meant to represent God.)

Key messages: The Ten Commandments come down to us from God via Moses, and Aaron, the first High Priest of the Jews.

My Questions / Key Messages?

Why does a religious object have non-religious pictures on it? (possibly because they paid for it, but also because it reminds people seeing the font who rules the land)

Key messages: Instead of the font having an image about baptism, God or the Bible on it, it instead has a political picture about who rules the land.
Worksheet 2 TEACHER’S COPY

Study the following pictures and their labels for clues – what interesting questions can you ask about it? They are all found inside or outside churches. What do you think is each one’s key message about people, or God? (What is it encouraging people to remember or do?)

A statue of the head angel Michael defeating and binding the Devil. (Read about it in the Bible at Revelation 12.7-9)

My Questions / Key Messages?

Why weren’t lepers allowed inside? (people were afraid of being infected)
Why is the hole so small? (it was only thought necessary to focus on the priest lifting up the communion bread and wine at the moment of consecration - the most important part of the service)
Key messages: The Church in the Middle Ages wanted everyone to have the chance to witness the most meaningful part of the church service, even if they were suffering from a disease that made everyone else scared to be near them.

This is a squint. During communion, people with diseases like leprosy weren’t allowed into church - but could see it happening through a hole like this in an outside wall

(This statue represents the archangel Michael defeating and binding the Devil. Michael is often depicted as slaying the Devil, where here he is shown standing triumphantly. The statue is on the modern Coventry Cathedral (dedicated to St Michael, the former cathedral being destroyed in a WWII bombing raid.
Key messages: God is more powerful than Satan / Good triumphs over Evil / Evil is punished by God.)
What’s the Big Idea? Worksheet 1

Study the following pictures and their labels for clues – what interesting questions can you ask about it? They are all found inside or outside churches. What do you think is each one’s key message about people, or God? (What is it encouraging people to remember or do?)

Most parish churches have a copy of the Ten Commandments on display. Find them in the Bible at Exodus 20.1-17

My Questions / Key Messages?

This church font has the badge of the royal family on it - the Tudor rose. It also has the shield-crest of a local ruling family.

My Questions / Key Messages?
What’s the Big Idea? Worksheet 2

Study the following pictures and their labels for clues – what interesting questions can you ask about it? They are all found inside or outside churches. What do you think is each one’s key message about people, or God? (What is it encouraging people to remember or do?)

A statue of the head angel Michael defeating and binding the Devil. (Read about it in the Bible at Revelation 12.7-9)

This is a squint. During communion, people with diseases like leprosy weren’t allowed into church - but could see it happening through a hole like this in an outside wall.
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Class Activity 4 – Designing a Doom picture (Worksheet 3)

Does God reward the good people, and punish the bad by sending them to a place of punishment? It’s not a theme we cover much in primary school, but children will be developing their own strong ideas about what’s Right and Wrong in the world, and Christianity has always placed as much emphasis on God’s sense of Justice as his sense of Compassion. Jesus certainly embodied both in his life and teaching (See Matthew 25.1-46).

With your class,

• Discuss what they think is unfair or wrong about life or our world. If they were God, what would they do, to make it better, and fairer?
• Read aloud the parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25.31-46) and explain that Jesus is talking about a time when he believed the world would be put right.
• Many artists have wondered what this might look like: show a few examples from the

English Parish Church DVD ROM or others such as John Martyn’s The Last Judgement.
• Use Worksheet 3 to develop this discussion of what constitutes ‘right’ and ‘wrong’.
• Challenge them to include one ‘positive’ for every ‘negative’.
• Ask how these actions could be shown in graphic form. If drawing people is too hard (even simple stick-men…) then draw simple faces or symbols – such as a small brick wall covered in graffiti for ‘vandlism’.

Set the task:

• Using the ideas discussed, create your own Doom picture that shows the sorts of behaviour (3-5 examples) you want to either celebrate or do away with. (Focus on dealing with the behaviour, not the people.)

Ideas for further development:

• More Able pupils could develop this by sourcing images in ICT, but they will first need to have a clear list of the ideas they’re illustrating before they start.
Worksheet 3 – Doom Pictures!

Christians believe that one day, Jesus will come back as a king to judge the world and make everything right. This is called The Last Judgment, and there are many paintings about it. The old word for judgment, or learning your fate, was ‘doom’: some parish churches have ‘Doom’ pictures showing this.

1) Read Jesus’ words in the Bible at Matthew 25.32

2) Find online other pictures of ‘The Last Judgment’ by different artists such as John Martyn, or Michaelangelo. Copy and paste one of these on to a Word document, then label the following features: Jesus the Judge, the throne, angels, the Good, the Bad, devils, Heaven, Hell – and anything else you find interesting. What do you think is the key message of the painting, in about 10 words?

3) Design your own Doom painting (in pencil) of the Last Judgment, showing the ‘Good’ being rewarded by Jesus and the ‘Bad’ being punished. What sorts of behaviour would you put in either of the groups? How would you show this in the painting?

4) Having made the design, plan out the steps to making your finished artwork, using computer graphics, collage, or any other technique that will help you do it well.
hunting through Google Images (or similar). Ensure their list of behaviours is complete before they start hunting.

• A shared ‘Doom’ mural could also be created for the classroom wall. (John Martyn’s The Last Judgement used this technique, with separate images created elsewhere, assembled, and then stuck on a larger canvas.)

Class activity 5 - Designing a ‘special place’ outdoors.

Many schools are developing outdoor areas in their grounds for quiet meditation and reflection – an idea popular with Christians (and other faiths) for centuries.

Pupils could investigate the design of labyrinths, perhaps design their own, then work together to plan and lay out a labyrinth in the playground, or perhaps in an environmental area or quiet place elsewhere in the school grounds. Artwork, poetry and prayers (suitably laminated for protection against the elements) could be added at various points as prompts.

Ask other classes to try it out, to see whether and how it might help people to think. For further ideas on this topic, see

http://www.reep.org/
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Class Activity 6 – Creating a helpful place to do some hard thinking

Worksheet 4 sets the More Able challenge of asking hard questions about life problems, and suggesting possible solutions or ‘ways through’ to something better. What alternative ‘uplifting’ designs, images or messages could help people in these situations? The task could be made easier by providing pupils with hypothetical situations such as:

• A child is being bullied, and doesn’t know what to do.
• A young person is finding their school work really difficult.
• A woman has real problems with debt. She keeps spending more money than she ever earns, then borrows more. She now owes more than she can repay, and is about to lose her house because she cannot pay the rent.
• A man is addicted to drinking alcohol, and finds it very hard to stop. His drink problem is affecting his wife and family.

Explain:
In situations like this, Christians believe that the best thing to do is be totally honest with yourself and with God, and often talk to a trusted person about it. If someone is feeling confused or frightened, then prayer can be part of the answer. If somebody has done something wrong, Christians believe that people can ‘repent’ (say sorry and change direction) and ask God (through Jesus) for help to make a fresh start.

How could this be best explained using words and artwork?

Plenary – Discussion questions

How does what we see, affect what we think or do? (eg advertising.)

When does an image or a symbol speak more powerfully to us than words? (eg: A birthday cake with candles.)

What do you think is the most important image or symbol for Christians – and why?
A Labyrinth:

The labyrinth is not a ‘maze’: there is a single path through it, although it twists and turns. This represents the difficulty of living a ‘good’ moral existence in the face of the world’s temptations. It also suggests that being ‘good’ and staying on the path gets you to your destination, even if that takes longer than straying.

• What big life choices might you face over the next few years?
• What do you think are the best questions that young people need to think about?

Design your own labyrinth or penitential seat, using 5 questions (and signs or symbols) placed at different points to get people thinking about what might need changing in their lives. (What do you think are the best questions people need to hear?)

The Lord’s Prayer Modern Version:

Our Father in heaven
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

For us our sins
As we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer is the central prayer of the Christian Church. It approaches God as a loving father who should be honoured and obeyed and looked to for the provision of daily needs, forgiveness and guidance. The Lord’s Prayer was often painted on walls of churches, as in this example from the sixteenth century, to remind people that churches are places for prayer and to show them how to pray.
Worksheet 4 – Helping People to Pray

Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

This prayer (called the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ because Jesus taught it to his followers) encourages people to talk to God about the problems they face, or the mistakes they’ve made - and about how things can be put right.

Why do you think this prayer was often painted on the walls of churches?

These people are walking through a labyrinth, a special path laid out on the ground. As they walk the path, it prepares them to speak their secret thoughts to God – and listen too. Afterwards, they walk out in the other direction. Some labyrinths are indoors, and some are outdoors.

- What big life choices might you face over the next few years?
- What do you think are the best questions that young people need to think about?

Design your own labyrinth or penitential seat, using 5 questions (and signs or symbols) placed at different points to get people thinking about what might need changing in their lives. (What do you think are the best questions people need to hear?)
Acknowledgments and further information

The English Parish Church Primary Schools Pack has been created for the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture at the University of York by Chris Hudson (Barnabas for Children team member, Bible Reading Fellowship). Chris is an experienced primary teacher, subject leader and educational author.

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The Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture:

The Centre was founded in 1999 to support teaching and research through books and international conferences, and the provision of cultural tools to help students engage with literature, history, art, architecture and music significantly influenced by Christian thought and spirituality.

The Centre has produced a range of resources, including two CD-ROMS (Images of Salvation: the Story of the Bible through Medieval Art’ and ‘Pilgrims and Pilgrimage: journey, spirituality and daily life through the centuries’) as well as ‘The English Parish Church through the Centuries: daily life & spirituality, art & architecture, literature & music’. Grant funding means that these resources can be made available at very affordable prices. The books and interactive resources created by Christianity and Culture are now used worldwide in universities and schools and by a general audience.

Christianity and Culture also works with important historic churches to bring recent research to life through interpretation schemes which will help people of all ages and backgrounds understand and enjoy these remarkable buildings and the stories which they hold.

We welcome your feedback on this Schools Pack and would like to create a forum where teaching approaches, experiences and projects can be shared online.
Barnabas for Children exists to support teaching and learning about Christianity, Spirituality and the Bible in primary schools, and to support children's work both in the Church and the home.

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