



National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools Report

St Mary the Virgin Church of England Primary School

Pheasant Way
Shaftesbury Road
Gillingham
SP8 4LP

Diocese: Salisbury

Local authority: Dorset

Dates of inspection: 1 July 2014

Date of last inspection: June 2009

School's unique reference number: 134020

Headteacher: Amanda Christopher

Inspector's name and number: Lyn Field NS 151

School context

The school opened in 2004 with 41 pupils. It now has 209 children, 34 staff and a governor managed nursery. There is no church building in the new housing development so, once a month, the school is used. There are plans to appoint a new member of the ministry team based at the school. The vast majority of pupils are White British. A higher number of pupils than usual leave and arrive during the school year and an increasing number trigger extra funding for the school to support them. The school holds a number of awards including level 2 of the UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools. The headteacher is leaving to take up a post with the Diocese.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Mary the Virgin as a Church of England school are outstanding

- The visionary leadership of the headteacher has established the school as a vibrant Christian presence in the community, in partnership with the Church.
- Christian values are inextricably linked with all initiatives to raise standards in learning, teaching and pupils' wellbeing.
- The school has an impact on the spiritual development of the whole community because it involves everyone in activities to understand this better.
- Everyone can explain the impact of the Christian ethos because it is clearly communicated in collective worship, in relationships and on the website.
- The outstanding quality of collective worship and religious education (RE) enables children to grow into compassionate and responsible young people with a deep appreciation of religious faith.

Areas to improve

- To expand the place of prayer at the core of school life

- To enhance the school grounds as a facility for the school community's spiritual development

The school, through its distinctive Christian character, is outstanding at meeting the needs of all learners

A picture of a red bus hangs by the entrance and this defines the Christian ethos of the school in a way that even the youngest pupils can explain. Different parts of the bus symbolise the school's core Christian values and the United Nations Rights of the Child. Pupils quote from the Articles and from all parts of the Bible with impressive ease to explain what the bus means for them as individuals. They have clearly gained a sense of being part of something far bigger than their local community and understand that Christianity is known world wide. This motivates them to get involved in raising money for charity. One pupil explained the parable of the wedding feast as being about 'looking after those who don't have anything but God loves them so that's why we do it'. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness is highly developed. What stands out most is that no-one, adult or child, is simply handed the answer to a question. Instead they are helped to work this out from first principles that are rooted in Gospel teaching. RE leads the way in developing very positive attitudes to diversity and difference. Pupils know that any form of prejudice is unacceptable. They combine their knowledge of different faiths with their understanding of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child and Christian values to argue passionately for justice and fairness. This leads to very responsible behaviour. Pupils' attitudes to learning are excellent so their achievement is better than in schools nationally and attendance is consistently high. The school has clear systems to plan and monitor pupils' spiritual development and these go well beyond what was required by the previous inspection. All staff have undertaken training including what spirituality means for them. As a result, they are skilled in prompting pupils to reflect more deeply on the issues that arise in lessons. Class journals contain a rich source of evidence for how pupils can express their thoughts and feelings using a variety of methods. Relationships across the whole community are exemplary because everyone understands the benchmarks set by Christian values. Words such as trust and responsibility are part of the everyday language of the school.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

Pupils have an excellent understanding of worship because they use the familiar structure of Anglican worship every day and because they have a say in whether or not the worship is good enough. Worship is a joyful and inspiring occasion where adults and children of all faith backgrounds are fully involved. Christian values such as compassion and koinonia are explicitly taught and this makes a clear impact on the life of the school. Recently, pupils spontaneously arranged an event to raise money for cancer research when the father of one of their teachers died. Worship is also challenging. Pupils say 'it embarrasses you, but in a good way 'cos it makes you wonder if you are doing enough'. All teachers attend worship and all staff on Thursdays. This affirms the Christian character of this community and ensures that biblical teaching shapes the life of the school because everyone hears the same message. The importance of creating a sacred space for worship is been taken very seriously. A vast stained glass window and the creation of a sanctuary as a focus for worship help pupils to understand Christian symbolism. As a result, they talk confidently about key Christian beliefs such as God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Paired talk is used regularly to engage everyone in worship including when clergy lead worship. This is an example of where the recommendations of the worship committee have been implemented. The pupil members of the committee analysed the results of a pupil questionnaire and produced guidance on 'What makes an excellent collective worship?' Pupils work alongside governors and clergy and this brings insights into worship that enrich what everyone experiences. Prayer is well established in the life of the school and pupils are confident to write and read prayers as well as volunteering to lead spontaneous prayer. However, pupils themselves have realised that, although there are opportunities both in the hall and in classrooms to write personal prayers, this does not always address the need for private prayer. The grounds of the school are comparatively underused in providing opportunities for personal reflection. The headteacher and governors have already identified that there is more to do in integrating prayer more deeply into school life.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding

In exactly the same way as for collective worship, there is an ambitious vision for RE and a clear rationale for how it is delivered. The subject leader is passionate about her work and has applied her own experience of study and research to achieve the highest standards for teaching and learning. Network Research Lesson Study is a training tool used in RE by pairs of teachers to refine their teaching skills with specific groups of pupils. The trial of 'What if' teaching materials in Y3 comes under this umbrella. As in all staff training, teaching assistants take part on an equal footing with teachers and this ensures complete consistency in what pupils experience. Where lesson plans refer to 'Windows, mirrors and doors', for example, everyone knows how to use this. The culture, therefore, in which pupils learn, leads to the highest levels of achievement and spiritual and moral understanding. RE in Nursery and Reception gets pupils off to a flying start. It is totally in tune with the investigative nature of RE across the school but equally mirrors the characteristics of good early years practice. By Y6, pupils are grappling with complex ideas such as the place of rules in the religious practice of Buddhists and Christians. Hands shoot up to support or disagree with the views of others and adults challenge them further with questions such as 'Do rules always have to be influenced by religion?' Marking in books maintains the momentum of learning in lessons. A system of 'blue bubbles' is used for further dialogue between pupils and teachers. The individual nature of this is hugely time consuming but well worth it in terms of the impact on learning. Wise decisions have been made about where to enhance the core syllabus with material from other schemes. As a result of inspiring and excellent teaching, all pupils reach national expectations often from very low starting points. In addition, half of pupils make rapid progress and attain levels well above national so progress overall is outstanding. Even more striking is the achievement of pupils with special educational needs and those for whom the school receives extra funding. These pupils make better than expected progress and so there is virtually no gap with the rest of the cohort. This is typical of achievement over the last three years and is an impressive picture.

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the school as a church school is outstanding

The school has maintained its ambitious drive to improve since the last inspection because it continues to aspire to the highest levels of distinctiveness and effectiveness as a church school. An impressive range of initiatives have been introduced over time. They have been selected to address any shortcomings that leaders have identified as well as to drive standards higher. Training that includes all staff is school policy. It has financial implications but has led to high standards in pupils' achievement and wellbeing. Several members of staff have external roles in schools across the Diocese and the local authority that enhance their work as leaders of a church school. The school's success is a direct result of the vision of the headteacher. Her inspirational leadership has won the total support of everyone involved in the school community. The close working relationship with clergy and governors means this vision now embraces a wider vision for the school at the heart of the Church's mission. The partnership with the church is of mutual benefit. Members of the church who lead 'Open the Book' assemblies or support the 'Experience Easter' activity feel they have grown spiritually themselves. The Christian character of the school is safe and secure because the systems in place make sure that the quality of strategic planning continues when leaders change. (The school has added its own aspirational grade of 'innovative' as a step beyond 'outstanding'.) Collective worship and RE have a central place in the curriculum that defines the Christian character of the school. Policies, particularly for collective worship and RE, have clear aims but also set out clear expectations for how these are achieved in practice. Self-evaluation as a church school is managed efficiently, but also very creatively, through the use of journals that convey progress in very visual ways. Every stakeholder has a say in how the school moves forward. Pupils have a formal role as school improvement partners and this has led to changes in teaching and the delivery of worship.