

## Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

### St Swithun's Voluntary Controlled Lower School

Ivel Road, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 1AX	
<b>Current SIAMS inspection grade</b>	<b>Outstanding</b>
<b>Diocese</b>	<b>St Albans</b>
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Local authority	Central Bedfordshire
Date of inspection	23 June 2017
Date of last inspection	3 May 2012
Type of school and unique reference number	Voluntary controlled primary 109604
Headteacher	Anita Whitehurst
Inspector's name and number	Liz Youngman 465

#### School context

The school is smaller than average for a primary school being a one form entry lower school for 183 pupils aged 3-9 years. This includes 40 children in the nursery. The headteacher has been in post for 5 years and the deputy was new in September 2016. The vast majority of pupils are White British with up to 20% from disadvantaged backgrounds, entitled to pupil premium funding. There are small numbers of children from Traveller backgrounds and 2% who have English as an additional language. The school has an excellent local reputation for the inclusion of pupils with additional needs, having a specialist unit for up to 8 children with autistic spectrum condition. It is expanding to cover the full primary age range over the next 2 academic years.

#### The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Swithun's VC Lower School as a Church of England school are outstanding

- Christian values and the distinctive Christian character of the school have a major impact on the lives and progress of all learners, including those with complex needs.
- Religious education (RE) has a central place in the school curriculum as a core subject and makes an excellent contribution to the school's Christian character.
- Learners show an exemplary respect for diversity and difference which is modelled for them by the very effective leadership of the school and staff at all levels.
- All members of the school community place great value on collective worship ensuring it is at the heartbeat of school life. This is extremely well supported by close links with the local church.

#### Areas to improve

- Develop an interpretation of spirituality, distinctive to the school and shared by the school community, to enhance learners' personal spiritual development and provision across the curriculum.
- Ensure appropriate professional development for staff, to further enhance RE teaching throughout the whole school as it expands to cover the full primary age range.

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

The Christian faith is at the heart of the headteacher's vision for the development of this remarkable church school. The mission statement 'Building the foundation for the future', though not immediately explicitly Christian, is known by staff as referring to the wise builder in Matthew's gospel building foundations on the rock of Jesus's teaching. The Christian values, such as thankfulness, trust, service and truthfulness that flow from this are the firm basis for the work of the school. They are not, however, immediately evident on the website. They are used by the headteacher for the exemplary collective worship planning and teaching ideas booklet forming a 2-year cycle to cover all 12 values. These are well known by the whole school community including learners, staff and governors. Inspection evidence supports parents' view that the Christian values taught in school are behind the good academic progress of their children, including those with complex additional needs. Teachers and other staff are approachable and really 'live' the values, ensuring the wellbeing and development of all. The school's Christian character influences very strongly its approach to issues of inclusion of all pupils and their good attendance. Hence exclusion is very rarely used.

The Christian character of the school is evident in the calm and harmonious learning environment. The children are complimented frequently by their teachers when they exhibit one of the school's Christian values such as friendship and respect to each other, saying, 'Well done you've really showed our Christian values today'. Throughout the school building colourful displays remind the children of Bible stories and reinforce the Christian values. For example, one display made from children's handprints is entitled 'hold your hand up for truthfulness,' also showing the school's focus on moral development. Interactive reflection areas support children's spiritual and social development as they are used, as one Year 3 child explained, as a space 'where we can go to calm down and say prayers'. Outside the children also have the benefit of the school's extensive spiritual garden. This has been developed over time by a dedicated member of staff working with groups of children. The many artefacts in the large garden, made by the children, are testament to all the creative activities that support their spiritual, emotional and mental wellbeing so well.

RE is at the heart of the curriculum in this church school, making an excellent contribution to its Christian character. It is timetabled weekly as a core subject but is also integrated into cross-curricular topics for all the children. For example, children in the specialist unit had a design technology challenge to build a moving donkey for a Palm Sunday display. Children show great respect for diverse communities especially in their enthusiasm for studying different faiths in RE. For example, Year 4 pupils being keen to explain the 5 Ks as part of their work on Sikhism, one child saying, 'I just love RE'. Special curriculum events such as 'International Week' ensure that learners have a strong understanding of Christianity as a multi-cultural world faith appropriate to their age. They are also incredibly supportive of each other, valuing difference within their own school community.

### **The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding**

Learners and adults engage very well with collective worship that makes a big difference to life in this Christian school. Staff members, children, governors and parents alike describe moving acts of worship that have touched them personally. These include some held in St Swithun's Church at special times including Christmas and Easter. Collective worship is distinctively Christian, setting the school's values in a Christian context. The very well-organised weekly worship plan is predominantly Biblically based with very popular 'Open the book' worship every week. In addition, there is monthly worship led by the curate from the parish church and weekly Christian values worship led by learners and school staff. This ensures that learners develop a good understanding of the person of Jesus. For example, Year 2 children explained, 'Jesus is the Son of God,' 'he's loving and loves all his people,' and 'he can't die because he died on the cross but came back to life'. They have an age appropriate understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, naming the 3 candles lit to remember this in worship. Another child added 'we light candles to show God we love him.' Collective worship develops personal spirituality through a range of experiences including a focus on prayer. For example, two children discussed praying to God and Jesus. One insisted 'God's older!' whilst the other asserted 'God is Jesus... Jesus is in heaven.' However, celebrations held at the end of each week miss the opportunity to spend time in reflection about the week and give thanks in prayer. There is competition amongst the children to apply and get a place on the 'Worship Team' for the term. The team is then responsible for planning, leading and evaluating acts of worship alongside a senior member of staff. The coordinator and governors also monitor the worship and this is fed back to staff and the worship team, enhancing the experience for all.

There are many opportunities for children to develop spiritually throughout the school day. Prayers are used before lunch and at the end of the day using class prayer books and prayers learned by heart. Reflection areas in

classes and joint-use spaces are well used. Some of these have prayers written by children themselves. The amazing spiritual garden has obviously been well used throughout the school year with many personal responses being recorded there. However, the school does not have a clear interpretation of spirituality that is understood by adults, to ensure spiritual development experiences are identified across the curriculum.

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

The headteacher is highly effective and articulates an explicit Christian vision for the school. This is 'inclusive so everybody reaches their full potential' with 'Christianity running through everything we do'. She emphasises the importance of inclusion of all children including those who find school extremely difficult or have additional needs. This vision and the Christian values of compassion, friendship and perseverance impact well on standards of behaviour and achievement for all children, developing the 'avid learners' described by governors. Staff are correct when they describe the school as somewhere where every child matters and children are 'happy, safe and nurtured'. The school has benefitted from training from the diocese that has supported their drive to raise standards for children achieving at greater depth.

The distinctive Christian character of the school is seen in strategic leadership decisions. These include decisions to work with parents in structured conversations regarding their children with additional needs, to ensure every child achieves their very best. Another example is the employment of a very effective family support worker to support good relationships with parents who also supports wellbeing in the school community. Partnerships with parents are strong with 100% attendance of parents invited to a structured conversation about their child. These two-way discussions have led to innovations such as the teacher-run homework club. School leaders, including governors, secure the impact of their vision through evaluation and monitoring, frequently seeing 'enthusiastic learners excited by learning'.

There are very effective partnerships with the local church with the rector being a governor, the curate leading monthly worship and regular services being held in church at the end of each term. This is a mutually beneficial partnership with learners, parents and some staff choosing to attend church events after being there at school services. Clergy are also involved in RE lessons, for example during Holy Week, and the school choir joins charity concerts and other community events held in church.

Statutory requirements for collective worship and RE are met. The foci for development identified at the previous inspection have been very well addressed and the developments sustained. Leaders prepare for the future leadership across church schools by giving professional development a high priority. This is training within school, in partnership with local schools (Pinnacle Trust) and with the diocese. This has led to senior teachers expressing the desire to be a future leader of a church school. The attendance of two teachers at 'Understanding Christianity' training is beginning to impact on RE teaching across the school. The strength of the whole leadership team at St Swithun's assures the continued development of this exceptional church school.

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