



National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools Report

Ashton CE VA Middle School

High Street, Dunstable LU6 1NH

Previous Inspection grade: Satisfactory

Current SIAMS grade: Good

Diocese: St Albans

Local authority: Central Bedfordshire

Dates of inspection: 19 June 2015

Date of last inspection: 23-24 March 2011

School's unique reference number: 109714

Headteacher: Shirley Hollis

Inspector's name and number: Kathryn Wright 436

School context

Ashton is a smaller than average Middle (9-13) school. Its roll has dropped significantly since the last inspection due to its planned closure in summer 2016 due to reorganisation. From September 2015 there will only be three classes remaining. Following a time of upheaval, the current headteacher was appointed first as acting (May 2014), then made substantive headteacher in May 2015. A high proportion of staff will be leaving the school in July 2015. The number of pupils with pupil premium and special educational needs has grown proportionally as the number on roll has declined.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Ashton CE VA Middle School as a Church of England school are good.

- The Christian vision which is upheld and promoted by the leadership team is supporting the school community through challenging circumstances
- A focus on the Christian values of forgiveness and compassion has contributed to improvements in behaviour, attendance and standards
- The importance placed on religious education (RE) by the whole school community is leading to good achievement and progress in the subject

Areas to improve

- To explore and evaluate creative ways of engaging pupils with worship to ensure maximum impact on their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development
- To embed consistent and effective ways of assessing pupils in religious education (RE) so that they have a better understanding of how to make progress
- To explicitly promote the Christian values which lie at the heart of the community so that during its final year as a school the foundation is celebrated widely and openly.

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

Ashton is a compassionate and caring school where worship and learning are at the heart. One pupil described the school as her 'second home'. Every person in the school community is valued as a child of God, and there is exceptional support for vulnerable pupils and their families. The well-being of the entire community has been at the centre of the recent upheaval as the school moves towards closure. This is rooted in Christian love, hope and perseverance and a desire to nurture each family individually. The impact of the school's Christian distinctiveness is evident in the improved behaviour of pupils which is based on forgiveness and restorative justice. In addition, the focus on personalised learning experiences and building relationships has contributed to improved attainment and attendance in the last 12 months. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is threaded through the entire school curriculum and very good examples were seen through English, history and geography. Pupils benefit from a memorial garden, designed by them, which provides space for the community to be quiet and reflect. The Chapel Club is valued by younger pupils, nurturing their spiritual development through creative expressions of faith and belief. Democracy and pupil voice are a strength of the school, pupils feel listened to and know they can contribute to school improvement. The pupil representatives on the new ethos committee have a good understanding of their role, and the impact of this is seen in the growing understanding of and explicit reference to the school mission statement by the wider community. Religious education (RE) makes a good contribution to the Christian ethos of the school, supporting pupils' understanding of the biblical teachings which underpin values. Pupils' understanding of Christianity as a worldwide faith was less secure, although some pupils were able to talk about local Christian leaders and visits to St Albans Abbey.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good.

Collective worship has a central place within the life of the school. It is well planned, based consistently on Christian values. The emphasis on biblical teachings is a strength of provision, and pupils talk about the impact of this on their actions and behaviour in daily life. For example, pupils talked about the bible teaching on the body of Christ and the importance of teamwork. In addition, they value worship as a time to reflect on and think about the school day. The act of worship observed was good. Pupils understood the reverence of the occasion, and respected one another. Pupils engaged well with a creative and visual presentation on the concept of Jesus providing rest for all who are weary and have burdens. Pupils value the focus on being a good citizen and the weekly award associated with this. They feel this motivates them to serve and support other. This contributes well to pupils' moral development, although opportunities for spiritual development are not utilised fully. For example, pupils have a basic understanding of prayer. However, the introduction of a prayer collection book and the opportunity to write prayers on a 'peg a prayer' board are contributing to an improved understanding and more extemporary prayer. Anglican faith and practice is celebrated through the use of appropriate liturgy and pupils have a good understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. Clergy from different denominations regularly lead worship and pupils are involved in planning and leading regularly. The whole school community values the acts of worship which take place at the local church during the school year. In particular, the carol service was described by many as a moving occasion, where they felt closer to God. Although a variety of styles and approaches to worship are used, the school is exploring new ways of engaging pupils in worship, including through small discussion groups and more practical activities. Monitoring and evaluation of worship takes place regularly and has led to changes in how the theme is organised, although foundation governors play a limited role in this at the current time.

The effectiveness of religious education is good.

Religious education is highly valued by the entire school community. The subject is well led by a dedicated co-ordinator, who has passion and enthusiasm for the subject which has a positive impact on pupil attitudes. Pupils talk about the importance of the subject in terms of learning about and understanding beliefs and practice. The curriculum is well constructed to provide pupils with a systematic understanding of Christianity, as well as learning about other faith and belief traditions. Pupils have the opportunity to discuss and debate philosophical questions such as 'What does it mean to be human?' which contribute well to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Progress and attainment are good across both key stages, and pupils are prepared well for transition. Monitoring has led to targeted interventions leading to successful outcomes for all pupils, although the most able could be challenged further. The majority of teaching is good or better. In lessons observed, pupils interpreted and analysed biblical text, demonstrating higher order thinking skills. Good opportunities were provided to support literacy across the curriculum through exploration of language and use of specific vocabulary. The teacher challenges pupils to think deeply and is skilled in her questioning. Pupils have good biblical knowledge and are able to apply Christian teachings in different contexts. Creative approaches to teaching, including a 'sensory walk' as part of a scheme of learning on Hinduism, support pupils' engagement with the subject. As the school moves to an assessment system without levels, this is reflected in uncertainty among pupils about how well they are doing in RE. Pupils undertake self and peer assessment, but next steps for learning are not identified and pupils are unsure how to make progress. Opportunities for pupils to take part in trips is limited, and some resources require updating to ensure accurate portrayal of faith traditions.

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

The Christian vision of the school is lived out by the leadership team. The headteacher models this through exceptional sacrificial and servant leadership. She has managed the school through extremely challenging circumstances with integrity, honesty and openness. The drive to promote the Christian ethos until the closure of the school has led to renewed focus on the foundation of the school. The school is seizing the opportunity to explore new and creative ways of promoting Christian values more explicitly and developing collective worship as numbers on roll fall. The new ethos committee which includes staff, governors and pupils, is driving this re-establishment of the Christian ethos as central to the life of the school. The key issues from the last inspection have been met, and the school's self-evaluation is accurate and insightful. The governors provide robust and challenging support and are continuing to review their role as circumstances change. Monitoring has led to interventions to improve standards, but also in terms of raising the profile of the ethos. Continuing professional development has impacted on both the improvements within religious education, but also on the understanding of the Christian foundation. With significant staff changes taking place, careful succession planning has ensured that a balanced curriculum is appropriately taught whilst the well-being of all has been a priority. Parents are well informed of the Christian values through conventional and social media. They feel well supported during the closure process and spoke of the calmness and resilience of the staff. Prayer underpins much of school life. Regular staff prayer meetings are held, and governors meetings begin with a time of prayer. The local clergy and Diocese provide effective pastoral support which has been appreciated by staff when dealing with complex issues such as redundancy and during times of bereavement.

SIAMS report June 2015 Ashton CE VA Middle School, High Street, Dunstable, LU6 1NH