

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

John Donne Church of England Lower School

High Street, Blunham, Bedford, MK44 3NL

Current SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Diocese	St Albans
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Local authority	Central Bedfordshire
Name of multi-academy trust / federation [delete as appropriate]	N/A
Date of inspection	23 March 2017
Date of last inspection	27 March 2012
Type of school and unique reference number	Voluntary Aided 109615
Headteacher	Judi Johnson-Clarke
Inspector's name and number	Mel Adams NS 58

School context

This is a small, rural lower school and nursery, with 80 pupils on role. At the end of Year 4, pupils go on to middle school. Due to local re-organisation, the school is becoming a primary school from September. The majority of pupils are of White British heritage. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs, along with those who are disadvantaged, is below national average. Since the previous SIAMS inspection, there is a new religious education [RE] leader. Some class teachers are temporary and with no experience of working in a Church of England school. At the time of the inspection the vicar was on leave.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of John Donne as a Church of England school are good.

- The commitment and passion of the headteacher, working with the RE leader, is ensuring that the Christian character and distinctiveness of the school are maintained and developed during a period of change.
- On-going evaluation, resulting in staff training and resource development, is leading to improvements in RE and collective worship.
- The relationship between the understanding gained in RE, and the experience of daily worship, linked closely to Christian values, enables pupils to use the understanding gained in their own lives.
- Prayer is an integral part of worship which is highly valued by staff and pupils as a time to pray together, and to be able to offer their own prayers.

Areas to improve

- Improve learning and progress for all pupils by developing systematic self-evaluation of church school effectiveness, involving both school leaders and governors, steered by the school vision and Christian values.
- Deepen the experience of daily worship by developing understanding of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.
- Extend understanding of the worldwide Christian Church to develop spiritual and cultural knowledge and understanding.
- Extend pupils' learning in religious education [RE] by consistently providing learning tasks which provide challenge for all pupils, and which enable them to express their understanding of religious concepts.

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

All members of the school community live out the school vision, 'To provide excellence and enjoyment for everyone within a happy safe and Christian environment', day by day. Without reservation pupils, staff, parents, and governors speak of how the school's Christian character supports pupils, helping them to feel secure and happy and to learn and achieve well. Christian values which are taken from the Bible, underpin the vision and parents describe how their children 'bring them home, they want to do them'. This was illustrated by one parent who explained how her child had overcome worries about swimming through talking of perseverance which was the theme of worship during Epiphany. The values are celebrated in school where children can be awarded a leaf describing how they have used the value. These form an attractive display in the hall where the school worships together.

One of the leaves describes how a toy had been broken and how the pupil 'forgave and figured out how to make another one'. Newsletters inform families about the value being considered in worship. Parents can reward their children through the values leaves which are made available on the website. Pupils are also able to affirm each other by awarding values leaves. Pupils understand that those of different faiths or none can use the values and one pupil explained how they used them in their own religion.

Caring and sensitive relationships throughout the school are exemplified in the management of behaviour, where staff help pupils to sort out their difficulties by encouraging them to reflect on the values. One parent reported, 'the staff live the values, they model them through their lives'. Pupils describe how without them 'we just wouldn't have respect'. The values contribute strongly to good behaviour throughout the school. RE supports the Christian distinctiveness through making links to the school values. A pupil described how the story of the widow's gift inspires generosity which the widow had shown by giving everything she had, just as 'Jesus gave everything for us.' Through the wider curriculum, pupils grow in their spiritual understanding. An example of this is the way the rural setting is used for walks from which pupils learn about the seasons, life cycles, the wonder of nature and awe of God's wonderful creation. Pupils do not understand that Christianity is a multi-cultural, worldwide faith. However, they have some appreciation of different expressions of Christian worship through visiting a local Baptist Church and the Bedford faith tour. As a result of these experiences, the school creates an ethos in which pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural [SMSC] development is well supported.

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

The impetus for developing the Christian character of the school is the daily collective worship, where the school community learn about the Christian faith and the Christian values that underpin the daily life of the school. The recently developed framework of 'welcome, learn, reflect and respond' begins with pupils preparing the welcome by setting up the table, candle, flowers, the cross and songs. In an atmosphere of respect and reverence, pupils feel confident to interact with the leader, taking risks in their responses, knowing that everyone will respect them even if they make a mistake. This ethos also enables pupils to offer to pray spontaneously about the theme or anything else they wish to pray about. Some of their prayers are compiled into prayer books which are used in subsequent acts of worship. Pupils describe how, during prayers in worship, they will pray quietly for those who may be ill or with other needs. Pupils are attentive during worship. One pupil expressed how they think about God and Jesus, and how stories such as turning water into wine makes them question, 'How did Jesus do it?' Staff describe how they are able to sit and reflect, especially during the prayers. One related how one pupil's prayer for those who are sad had helped them to think about their own recent experiences. Prayer surrounds the day, with prayers at lunchtime and at the end of the day. Pupils understand the importance of the Bible and stories about Jesus and that the values are inspired by His life and teaching. They know that Jesus is God's Son, but do not understand about the person and work of the Holy Spirit or the concept of the Holy Trinity. They join together singing a range of hymns and Christian worship songs and saying the Lord's prayer which features regularly in worship.

Spiritual and moral development is well supported, as illustrated by the way pupils fundraise for a range of charities such as the local Bechar Harvest. One pupil explained how this is service because, they were learning in RE that, 'Jesus is a servant, not a normal king. Washing His disciples' feet He showed us how to be servants, how to serve.' This illustrates the close relationship between the understanding gained in RE and their experience of worship which, in turn, has an impact on pupils' lives. Through celebration of a number of Christian festivals, some of which may be through worship in church, pupils have a growing understanding of Christian belief and practice. Monthly school services in the parish church are usually led by the vicar or, during her absence, other church members, and are also attended by parents. Through these visits, pupils gain understanding of aspects of Anglican faith and practice, appreciating the church environment of worship, including the altar and the font. The headteacher and RE leader carry out ongoing evaluation, identifying actions for improvement. Recently this has resulted in the adoption of a new resource for extending values based worship and the indications are that this is enriching both Bible knowledge and understanding of Christian values. Governors are made aware of these developments in the school through

reports from the headteacher and are appreciative of their visits to assemblies where they can see the response of the pupils. However, governors are at the early stages of monitoring and evaluation. A regular visitor from the Bible Society is greatly appreciated by pupils who enjoy the story telling which supports their understanding of God and Jesus, and the values they learn from staff. There is no leadership by members of other Christian traditions.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good.

Through learning in RE pupils develop good knowledge and understanding of Christianity and other faiths. The locally agreed syllabus forms the basis for planning. Recent staff training is resulting in the development of the school scheme of work which is leading to improvements in teaching and learning. The impact is beginning to be evident for the younger pupils who constructed the story of Palm Sunday with wooden bricks. One pupil explained, 'The palms are on the floor. Jesus is too special to walk on mud. He healed people. He saved the world.' Where teaching provides a framework to develop religious concepts, pupils gain a depth of understanding which results in good attainment and progress. Where tasks lack challenge, such as writing a recount, the development of religious understanding is restricted and progress is limited. Assessments are carried out termly giving the RE leader the opportunity to provide further support for planning lessons. This has been a particular challenge during a period with temporary staff but the RE leader is using the information to support improvements. Standards in the school, as recently affirmed by Ofsted, are good. Standards in RE are in line with core subjects for the majority of pupils, measured against the age-related expectations in the syllabus.

The status of RE is considered as important as core subjects. It supports SMSC development as pupils enjoy learning in RE, developing understanding of the importance of Christianity and different faiths. They say they need to learn about different religions so that they can respect that 'people have different ways of worshipping'. They are able to reflect on their learning and understand how this can link to worship as illustrated by one pupil in worship asking why Good Friday is called good. Through these experiences, pupils gain a good understanding of Christianity. Monitoring is carried out by the RE leader and headteacher who are both very aware of the challenge to maintain standards. Through their evaluations, they have identified areas for development, such as creating opportunities for children to reflect and question. They have plans in place to secure improvements in teaching and learning. The governing body receive reports on some developments but not on standards in RE. However, the recently appointed foundation governor is monitoring RE lessons and working with school leaders to support their actions.

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

The headteacher's commitment to sustain the school's vision during a period of change is ensuring that the Christian character continues to develop. Along with the RE leader, she is ensuring that all staff new to the school are fully aware of their responsibility in supporting the Christian ethos. As a result, all staff have a clear understanding of Christian values and how, as described by the headteacher, 'they are bigger than a word, they are a way of life'. Parents are impressed with the way in which staff 'live out the values, they model them to the children'. The values contribute to good SMSC development and good behaviour throughout the school.

School leaders have regular discussions with staff about RE. This leads to professional development through team teaching or joint lesson planning. The discussions also support formative evaluations from which short term or longer term actions are planned, for example, the headteacher and RE leader teach RE to some classes pending permanent staff appointments. Because of these interventions, the quality of teaching and learning in RE is being maintained.

Governor visits to the school focus on a range of areas of school life including attending worship and visiting RE lessons. Areas for development from the previous denominational inspection in RE and collective worship have been addressed. However, formal procedures to inform foundation governors in their monitoring of the Christian character of the school have not been fully implemented. Governors are not systematically involved with school leaders in church school self-evaluation and school improvement planning. There is a good relationship with the local parish church of St Edmund and St James. During the long-term absence of the vicar, this has been maintained with the support of a foundation governor. This is ensuring that school is continuing its regular pattern of monthly worship, along with other school services in church. Parents and governors appreciate attending church services with one parent describing feeling moved by hearing children singing and praying. Events such as the Rose Queen Fete and a fundraising summer fair with the church demonstrate good local community links. Through visits to different places of worship, pupils extend understanding of a range of cultures and faith communities, however, there are currently no wider national or global links. School leaders regularly attend diocesan training and invite challenge and support from the diocese to develop as a church school. This has led to improvements including staff training for Understanding Christianity, a new national RE curriculum resource. The headteacher and RE leader plan for collective worship. They support staff to lead their classes or the whole school. As a result staff say they have gained confidence in leading worship.

