

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

Barkway Church of England Voluntary Aided First School

High Street, Barkway, Royston, SG8 8EF

Current SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Diocese	St Albans
Previous SIAS inspection grade	Good
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Date of inspection	23 May 2017
Date of last inspection	13 June 2012
Type of school and unique reference number	Primary 117422
Acting Headteacher	Sharon Brown
Inspector's name and number	Judith Ruff 528

School context

Barkway Voluntary Aided School is considerably smaller than average with 32 pupils on roll. It is a first school, with pupils transferring to middle schools at the end of Year 4. Pupils are predominantly of a White British heritage. Currently there is a collaborative partnership with another local church school, which becomes a formal federation from September 2017. The current acting headteacher has been in post just over a year and has recently been appointed executive headteacher of the federation. Percentages of both special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those in receipt of free school meals are below national averages.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Barkway First as a Church of England school are good.

- Exemplary levels of care and nurture result in a strong, family orientated environment, rooted in Christian values of respect, love and an appreciation of the uniqueness of every individual as a precious child of God. This results in all feeling valued and cherished.
- Inspirational leadership provided by the rector has both uplifted and galvanised the whole school community to make this school into the best church school possible, serving and loving the community with humility and perseverance.
- The positive impact of the Godly Play approach, both in religious education (RE) and in collective worship develops pupils' spiritual awareness very successfully by thoughtful open ended questioning and the unfolding of Bible stories through the creation of story scenes.

Areas to improve

- Develop, articulate and promote a distinctive Christian vision lived out through explicit and embedded values within the life of the school. Ensure that these values are communicated effectively to all stakeholders through the website, newsletters and displays around the school. In this way all can be well-informed about how the school uses values to develop and enrich its Christian foundation.
- Raise standards in RE by agreeing assessment, tracking and marking procedures. Ensure that subject leader monitoring and evaluation is used effectively to address weaker areas, thereby improving practice and increasing teachers' confidence with the curriculum.
- Increase the ability of the whole governing body to understand and discuss outcomes from formal RE and collective worship monitoring visits by receiving and discussing these through regular, discrete time in meetings. Ensure also that training for church school distinctiveness is accessed by all.
- Develop pupils' understanding of Bible stories, so that they can more successfully link these to the chosen values of the school.

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

This school cherishes and values its Christian foundation. Parents interviewed spoke of their recognition that the school ethos, steeped in Christian values, appreciates and develops their children in a holistic and loving way. It offers a valuable grounding in the faith and practices of Christians who form part of the school community. In particular, the close working relationships with the rector and the church members enables pupils to recognise the church building as a special place, which is both spiritually uplifting and welcoming. Although Christian values shape the lives and actions of all within the school community, they are not currently sufficiently explicit or clearly expressed and communicated. This means that stakeholders are not being given the range of vocabulary with which to link these to specific Bible stories, and in particular, those from the Gospels. Pupils can retell a range of Bible stories, but are not able to talk about their meanings or link them to specific values. Pupils' academic achievements are undoubtedly raised through personalised programmes for vulnerable pupils and high levels of care and support, encouraging resilience and perseverance in tasks. As a result, outcomes at the end of Key Stage 1 are above national averages, although numbers in specific cohorts are small and this impacts on results year by year. Pupils' personal development is supported by the pupils' council, which encourages awareness of others' needs and leads to charitable giving, both locally and internationally. One pupil was moved by the plight of people across the world unable to access clean water. He set up a tuck shop within the school to fund raise for the charity, Water Aid. Attendance rates fluctuate, but are presently just below national averages. The school works hard with families where there is persistent absenteeism and offers a good range of support and advice, including the use of external agencies. There have been no exclusions. Spiritual development is good, enhanced by the Godly Play approach and the completion of an external reflection area. Behaviour overall is good and pupils generally listen well and are respectful. Moral development is supported through a set of golden rules and a 'Good Deeds' Feed' has successfully identified pupils who demonstrate the school values by deeds of kindness and thoughtfulness. Cultural development is well supported through a link with a large London school, whereby reciprocal visits offer opportunities to explore the culture and life-styles of a range of different ethnic groups, including different faiths. Pupils' understanding of Christianity as a multi-cultural world faith has been successfully developed looking at artists' work from a range of cultures and the way in which they interpret Bible stories and characters. Pupils' at present, have a limited understanding of different Christian denominations. RE makes a good contribution to pupils' knowledge and understanding of the impact of religion and belief on people's lives and how it shapes their actions and concerns. They also develop an understanding of how Christians, in particular, worship and practise their faith.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good

Collective worship occupies a central and important place in the life of the school. Staff members speak of the 'feeling of belonging, of gathering to learn about morals and values together'. This results in a desire in both pupils and staff to change behaviours and attitudes 'to be more like Jesus'. The leadership of the rector is greatly appreciated, in that the messages she delivers are clear and easily understood by all present at worship. In addition, the way in which she adopts such an inclusive and celebratory approach encourages and reassures the participants. Staff and parents are frequently moved by the themes, 'That really touched me'. Because of the small pupil numbers, worship is a very intimate and special occasion. There is a clear structure to the pattern of worship, with good attention given to the setting of the atmosphere for worship. Pupils sing beautifully songs such as 'Today is the day we have been given' and 'Our Father who art in heaven', which inspire them to think about the words and spontaneously burst into song later in the school day. Pupils' understanding of the Trinity is enhanced by the Godly Play methods, where pictorial images moved on a background act as a strong visual image. Commencing with the pupils' own experiences of saying 'goodbye', pupils are able to empathise with Jesus' disciples as he ascended into heaven. The central message that 'Jesus brings us messages of hope and love, in that he is always with us' reassures pupils and helps them feel secure. Pupils enjoy the opportunities to plan church worship with the rector, using role play and writing prayers. They have a developing understanding of the purposes of prayer and the outdoor reflection area offers pupils a quiet space to think and pray at breaktimes which is greatly appreciated, as evidenced by their comments on the audio buttons in a corridor display. A variety of prayers are used at lunchtime and at the end of the school day. Planning of collective worship is well done, involving the rector, headteacher and RE leader. Pupils are familiar with Anglican responses and these start and conclude the worship. Staff lead worship and the rector has a regular weekly slot. Pupils enjoy the variety of leaders and the way that each has an individual style of leading worship and involving them through hymns, prayers and readings. At present, there are no other representatives from different Christian traditions leading worship, although this did happen in the past. The church is used very well for festivals. Parents, in particular like the 'special, positive atmosphere that it provides'. Foundation governor representatives have monitored worship on a regular basis. However, impact from these visits in terms of improving provision is difficult to ascertain. Monitoring reports are not currently shared and discussed at governor meetings. This results in those who have not participated in the school visits having little idea of the monitoring outcomes. In addition, they are unable to participate in discussions on what future improvements to provision should be made.

The effectiveness of the religious education is satisfactory

Standards of attainment in RE at the end of Year 4 are judged to be below those expected in the locally agreed syllabus. Presentation is too frequently poor and work is marked often with a literacy focus or insufficiently clearly for pupils to understand what their next steps are in order to successfully progress their knowledge and understanding. Pupils' recorded work does not match their oral skills in explaining religious ideas and concepts. Pupils do show an interest and an engagement with the themes covered. In the Reception class, children's outcomes are thoroughly and well recorded and progress is easier to track across the year. Pupil outcomes in Key Stage 1 show better standards, with the majority of pupils broadly in line with those expected. Assessment procedures are in transition, but at present there is little evidence of pupils' progress being tracked systematically and outcomes recorded. This means that the school is unable to confidently and accurately report on this aspect to either parents or governors. The quality of RE teaching is too variable across the school, with less effective teaching impacting directly on pupils' outcomes and slowing their progress rates. Pupils enjoy learning about religion first-hand, either by visiting the local church or on a recent visit to London, which incorporated a visit to a Hindu temple. Their ability to recall and think through these experiences shows how significant this learning has been, enabling them to draw comparisons and to ask searching questions about believers' faith and actions emerging from that. Units from the 'Understanding Christianity' resource are being introduced into the RE curriculum, with the active support and advice from the rector. Joint training attended by both the rector and RE leader has supported the development of a common vision for the implementation of the resource across the school. The RE leader has recently attended training on 'Active and Engaging RE'. This has been successfully cascaded to other staff in the school and governor visits have picked up on the increasing variety of different ways in which RE is taught. A very successful initiative is the use of 'Godly Play', again supported by the rector, which enables pupils to look and listen as the Bible story unfolds through the use of changing story scenes. Reception children were fascinated by the Creation story and wanted to recreate the tableaux after their teacher-led RE lesson had finished. Insufficient use is made of the school's Christian values in religious education and planning does not currently highlight opportunities where links might be made. Spiritual awareness is developed well through RE. The use of the 'I wonder?' questions encourages pupils to think and reflect, although on occasions, they are not given enough time to respond, or teachers do not probe and prompt sufficiently to challenge pupils' thinking and understanding. The RE leader is effective in her role of supporting staff with resources and ideas. She has recently been given subject monitoring time to observe teaching and look through books to judge RE outcomes. Her feedback is thorough, but overly optimistic, particularly around standards and progress at the end of Year 4. She keeps RE high profile throughout the school and her productive partnership with the rector enables her to share ideas and thoughts, particularly around the teaching of the more challenging theological concepts and language used in the 'Understanding Christianity' resource.

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

Both governors and senior leaders greatly value the Christian foundation of the school. During the recent appointment of the executive headteacher, care was taken to select a leader who would show commitment and drive to further develop the school's Christian distinctiveness. The Christian vision is to be revisited following the decision to formally federate in September. Christian values form the bedrock of the school, shaping leaders' decisions, policies and day to day working. Relationships are built on recognising each individual as precious and made in God's image. This firm belief results in exceptionally high levels of care and nurture, which impacts on both academic and personal development based on kindness and thoughtfulness. Disadvantaged pupils achieve in line with their peers and thrive in the school's supportive and encouraging ethos. SIAMS self-evaluation is broadly accurate, but areas recognised as requiring improvement are not included in specific improvement or action plans. This makes tracking progress more difficult, particularly for governors. Both RE and collective worship are given high profile within the school, with statutory requirements met. Outstanding support and advice on theological aspects from the rector has galvanised both staff and governors, raising levels of confidence and understanding of the importance of both these aspects in a church school. The leadership of RE is good, enhanced by the attendance at good quality training events and cascaded to staff. The RE subject leader is a good role model. She is a reflective practitioner, evaluating her teaching approaches and practice carefully. She has, in partnership with the rector, made a good start on the implementation of the 'Understanding Christianity' units. Parents are very supportive of the school, but as yet have not been asked their views on how the church school distinctiveness can be further improved. The parental interviews during the inspection showed that they had thoughtful suggestions to make to further strengthen partnerships between school and church. The school values its links with the diocese and buys into the service level agreement. This has enabled the RE leader and the rector to access training. The acting headteacher has accessed leadership training also. However, the governing body has not received training on church school distinctiveness or leadership. Governors are carrying out their monitoring duties, but since these reports are not discussed at governor meetings, the impact on planning future developments is not visible.