

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

Norton St Nicholas Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School

Norton Road, Letchworth, Hertfordshire, SG6 1AG

Current SIAMS inspection grade

Outstanding

Diocese

St Albans

Previous SIAMS inspection grade

Outstanding

Local authority

Hertfordshire

Date of inspection

12 October 2017

Date of last inspection

26 November 2012

Type of school and unique reference number

Voluntary Aided Primary 117442

Headteacher

Steve Cowdery

Inspector's name and number

Judith Ruff 528

School context

This school serves the north eastern side of Letchworth. Most pupils attend from the parish of Norton. The site includes nursery age accommodation. The school is of average size with 237 pupils on roll. Ethnicity within the school is 21% of pupils from a non-White British heritage, below national averages. Percentages of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and those for whom the school is in receipt of pupil premium monies are well below national averages. A changed senior leadership structure is in place since the previous inspection, with two assistant headteachers appointed. The vicar is new in post from July 2017. The churches of St George and St Nicholas are within walking distance.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Norton St Nicholas Primary as a Church of England school are outstanding

- The inspirational leadership of the headteacher is demonstrated through his faithful witness and commitment to the school as a community based on the Christian faith in action. This has deepened and made more explicit a clear vision based on the uniqueness and preciousness of all to God. It has led to explicit Christian values transforming pupils' life chances through key values such as love and hope.
- The clear vision strapline 'Live, learn and love in faith, respect and trust' describes the ethos of this very successful church school. Here pupils are taught their behaviour and attitudes to others are based on the example of Christ, to care for those who are less fortunate and who need help, both near and far. They have learned to do this through active fundraising, prayerful discussions and thoughtful classroom actions.
- The strong and effective partnership between the local church community and the school has resulted in pupils seeing first-hand the shared values and vision between the two. This has supported relationships built of trust and mutual understanding, enabling pupils to question, explore and debate faith issues with a high degree of confidence and genuine interest in deepening their levels of theological understanding.

Areas to improve

- Continue to develop pupils' understanding of diversity and difference within the world wide Christian community as well as within other faith communities, so that they appreciate and understand the importance of faith and worship practices amongst religious peoples.
- Develop and embed assessment practices in religious education (RE), so that pupils are supported well to improve their work and teachers plan tasks more fully to meet the ability range within classes.
- Introduce greater rigour into recording discussions around SIAMS related issues at full governor meetings (FGB) so that actions and development points arising can be effectively tracked and progressed.

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

'At Norton St Nicholas we are all unique and special, but together we are a masterpiece'. This quotation is clearly displayed in the school's entrance foyer and it sums up very aptly the findings of the inspector. This school really does live out its mission statement 'to inspire children to reach their full potential, enabling them to live caring and successful lives, guided by God's love'. Gospel values shine through the warmth of a child-centred nurturing approach to an inclusive and aspirational outlook. This is based on the belief in the uniqueness and preciousness of each individual to God and therefore to the whole school community. 'Values give our children the language to understand a moral code,' said one parent. Pupils know the importance of respecting people and property and developing a personal sense of responsibility for themselves and for others. The value of service is played out through pupil councillors, house captains, worship leaders and play pals. The school's strong sense of moral purpose, based on a commitment of success for all, impacts on pupils' levels of achievement. These are very high, above local authority and national outcomes. Disadvantaged pupils make strong progress through well targeted support and intervention. Attendance is above the national level. A 'managed move' pupil was supported very well, resulting in just four short fixed term exclusions in the previous school year. Spirituality is developed amongst the members of the school community in a myriad of ways. Pupils are encouraged to talk about their own personal faith or beliefs. They do this with confidence, secure in the knowledge that adults will respond thoughtfully, honestly and will share their own experiences to support understanding. This was evident in the recent questioning of candidates for the clergy vacancy at the local churches. All involved marvelled at the depth of understanding of the pupils as they sought to learn more about the backgrounds and personal faith of each applicant. Moral, social and cultural development are strong areas of foci. A recently produced policy for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC) successfully expresses the importance that the school community places on these aspects and is a useful guide to both new parents and staff. Pupils' behaviour is exemplary. They are kind, caring and thoughtful. Many of their charitable responses emanate from a Christian concern for the plight of others less fortunate. For example, the water project in Madagascar and the Bishop's Harvest Appeal, as well as the local food bank. Pupils are developing an understanding of Christianity as a multi-cultural world faith through imaginative topics such as 'religious buildings across the world'. However, this understanding is at an early stage of development. Links with the local Methodist church have successfully involved a children's youth worker in the school. A team of clergy and lay people from the two local Anglican churches are also actively involved. Despite this, pupils' understanding of diversity within the local Christian communities is under-developed. RE has a very high profile. Pupils have a deep understanding of the Christian faith and many speak about how their personal faith guides their lives and decisions.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

'High quality, prayerful and meaningful worship is at the heart of this community, inspiring the school day and permeating all school life and practice' said the school self-evaluation. The inspection findings are that this is indeed the reality. Pupils value worship as 'a way that we can get to know God better and to be in His presence'. They really enjoy the interactive opportunities provided and these stay in their minds and imaginations. For example, the wrapping of toilet tissue around a person as each time a lie was told, so the bindings became increasingly hard to break out of. Staff appreciate the integrity of a clearly designated worship time, which has a biblical focus. They point out how powerful it is for both adults and children to be worshipping together. Bible stories linked to the current focused value are recalled well by pupils. They show a clear empathy with characters such as Esther, St Paul and the Good Samaritan as they try to make right decisions, both for themselves and others. Innovative initiatives such as 'The Bible's Got Talent' encourage pupils to explore the personalities and actions of Bible characters in order to decide if one was more important than others. As one parent said, 'This has inspired my child to formulate judgements and weigh up evidence in order to be able to vote'. Prayer is deeply valued across the school, supported by a designated prayer tree, class reflection areas and opportunities to write prayers in responses to church festivals and world events. Through the excellent Easter 'prayer spaces' event both parents and children experience and explore the different purposes of prayer. Pupils appreciate the opportunities that they are given to 'go into God's house, where we can be quiet and show respect'. The outdoor willow chapel, blessed by the local bishop, has been used at parents' request for simple memorial services for departed loved ones. It provides a very beautiful and distinct place for thanksgiving, reflection and stillness. Pupils have an age-appropriate understanding of the Trinity, supported by the lighting of the 'Trinity candle' during worship and the collective saying of Trinitarian prayers. They can talk about the importance of the dove at Jesus' baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Pupil worship leaders are increasingly taking an active part in planning and leading worship. They help to decide themes as well as preparing materials, such as PowerPoint presentations for use in worship. They regularly canvas pupils' views on worship saying, 'We can get other children's views more easily. They will talk to us and tell us what they like'. A range of adult worship leaders offer pupils a rich experience of worship, including the four leaders who lead weekly worship. Monitoring and evaluation activities have led to a much deeper and equal partnership between

adults and children in planning and participating in worship. The local churches are used well for festivals such as Christmas, Easter and events such as the 'Leavers' Service'.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good

Standards of attainment in RE for the large majority of pupils are in line with those expected within the locally agreed syllabus. Orally, pupils show a depth of knowledge and understanding of particularly the Christian faith, which is not always reflected in their written work. Pupils do make good progress from their starting points and this is demonstrated by the high proportions that are judged to be working at greater depth within the RE curriculum. Pupils display very positive attitudes to RE. They are keen to engage with the range of exciting and innovative approaches that their teachers have designed. The school has put a considerable emphasis on encouraging teachers to be bold and imaginative in their approaches to RE and this is having a good impact on pupils' levels of engagement and involvement. Pupils are encouraged to ask deep questions such as, 'When was the world made?' and 'How did God make the sky?' Older pupils were enthralled to listen to a scientist from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) explaining her Christian faith in the context of her research. Pupils enjoy researching, analysing and reflecting on evidence provided. They are confident learners who are supported by good quality teaching, which encourages an enquiry based approach to debating and discussing evidence provided. For example, pupils in Year 5 were using a 'diamond 10' exercise to decide in what order of importance the 10 Commandments should be placed. This provoked considerable discussion, with the introduction to the group of an 'envoy' whose role it was to tempt them to change their minds. Assessment procedures are not yet fully in place for either the new Hertfordshire agreed syllabus or for the 'Understanding Christianity' materials. Teachers' planning for different ability levels is limited by the lack of guidance currently in place regarding assessment. This results in very few task adjustments, with the majority of pupils showing their responses through differences in outcomes. Pupils have a secure knowledge of Christianity, but apart from a Year 4 pupils' visit to a local gurdwara and the five major world faiths being taught within RE, their knowledge and understanding of other faiths is much more limited. RE is very well led by both the headteacher and a member of the support staff. Together they have carried out thorough monitoring and evaluation through learning walks, book scrutinies and observations of teaching. Outcomes from this monitoring identified the need for more creative and engaging approaches to teaching RE. Leaders ensure that RE continues to be high profile within the school and that teachers are supported through good quality training opportunities to strengthen their curriculum knowledge and understanding. Staff recently received training for the 'Understanding Christianity' materials. RE provision and outcomes have been communicated to members of the governor standards' committee, but these did not get discussed at a FGB and no written report was submitted.

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

The school vision is encapsulated in the strapline, 'Live, learn and love in faith, respect and trust'. This is well communicated through the website, newsletters and through displays around the school. All senior leaders, including governors, are fully committed to the church foundation and their responsibility to share the life and teachings of Christ amongst the members of the school family. Key values, such as love, forgiveness, compassion and hope have a high profile in school documentation, including the behaviour policy. These are modelled on a daily basis, particularly by the headteacher, whose inspirational leadership is demonstrated through his faithful witness and commitment to the school's foundation, demonstrating Christian faith in action. His example and unswerving belief that all are unique and precious in the sight of God, therefore deserving a dignity and respect worthy of this, is shown through his own approach and attitude to all members of the school community. Self-evaluation is thoughtful, thorough and accurate. It is not based on complacency, but on a desire for the school to provide the very best education possible, set within a Christian context. Parents are delighted with the way in which the school canvases their views and opinions. 'I feel that the relationship between home and school is perceived as important. I really feel that I can play a full part in this community and that the Christian faith is valued and owned by staff, including the headteacher with his own personal faith, which is also embodied within the governing body.' Partnerships with the local churches are strong and add significantly to pupils' understanding of the Christian faith in practice. Diocesan links are valued, including visits to the St Alban's cathedral. Visits by one of the RE leaders to five outstanding church schools supported very well a broadening of understanding of RE work. Succession planning for church school leaders is in early stages of development. Both leadership of RE and collective worship are high priority within the school. Highly effective practice is becoming embedded. Governors do discuss and debate SIAMS related issues, although there is a tendency for main discussions to take place at the standards' committee, which then does not transfer across to the FGB. Current minutes of the FGB do not fully reflect the quality of debate and discussions which arise in terms of SIAMS action points, by being formally recorded. As a result there is no evidence trail in the minutes which demonstrates that actions are being effectively tracked and progressed over time.