

Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools Report

**Great Amwell St John the Baptist Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School
Hillside Lane, Great Amwell, Ware SG12 9SE**

Diocese of St Albans

LA: Hertfordshire
SIAS Inspection: 11th March 2011
Previous S23 Inspection: April 2008
URN: 117432
Headteacher: Susan Robinson
SIAS Inspector Name: Lyn Field
SIAS Inspector No: 151

School Context

This is a smaller than average primary school and the vast majority of pupils are of White British heritage. The proportions of pupils with special educational needs and those eligible for free school meals is below average. There has been a significant number of staff changes since the last inspection and a new classroom added in November 2010.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Great Amwell St John the Baptist as a Church of England school are good.

The partnership with the church lies at the core of this school's Christian character. Following a period of staff change, a new leadership team is established and is giving renewed energy to the school's development as a church school. Pupils are nurtured by Christian care and grow into compassionate and responsible young people with the confidence to share their personal views of faith and belief.

Established strengths

- Pupils' insight into spiritual issues and their understanding of key Christian beliefs
- The partnership with the church and the vicar's role in maintaining the Christian ethos of the school
- Pupils' genuine concern for others through the use they make of Christian values

Focus for development

- To ensure that assessment informs planning so that all pupils are challenged and make progress
- To establish a cycle of evaluation as a church school so that use is made of monitoring to inform planning for the future

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

Pupils constantly demonstrate Christian values in their personal conduct and the way they treat each other. They are extremely enthusiastic about their charity work and this is just one example of where pupils draw parallels between what happens in school and Biblical teaching. They explain that 'God wants everyone to live and be treated equally' so raising funds is 'our role in balancing things out'. Behaviour is consistently of a high standard in lessons, in worship and around the school. Pupils work well together and show a genuine interest in each other's contributions and achievements. The staff frequently go the extra mile in their care of pupils and this is enhanced by the help offered by church leaders. Families facing difficult moments in life often take up this extra source of support. Pupils are confident to discuss their faith openly. Respect shown in religious education lessons creates very positive attitudes to different cultures and a Hindu pupil volunteered to explain her faith to the Reception class. Pupils' ability to contemplate spiritual ideas is a strength of their learning. It is nurtured through the emphasis placed on faith in subjects other than RE. For example, in Year 3 parents work with their children to produce a biography of Jesus and the Year 6 curriculum includes a project where pupils plan and lead worship. There are displays throughout the building that reinforce the school's Christian ethos and keep it at the forefront of children's minds. However, these do not offer pupils resources or opportunities for reflection that they can access independently. The new prayer box is a positive introduction and has helped pupils understand the distinction between public and private prayer. The school acknowledges that it has not taken advantage of the extensive and beautiful grounds for pupils to experience worship and activities with a spiritual dimension.

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

The school's partnership with the church has a powerful impact on the very positive way in which pupils and their parents view worship. Services in church, such as the Crib service and Mothering Sunday, are extremely popular and mark the key points in the year. It is, however, the Welcome and the Leavers' services held in the first and last days of children's time in the school that make a lasting impression on families. Parents feel these occasions set the school apart as a church school. Pupils are familiar with the pattern of Anglican traditions and are confident to explain the meaning of Christian symbols and simple rituals. This is because of the high profile given to celebrating Christian festivals, especially on Wednesdays when the clergy team take the lead. Pupils make good use of these times to reflect on their own beliefs and feelings. The messages from worship filter home and are often the subject of family debate. Members of staff provide good role models which help maintain a balance between a quiet, reflective atmosphere and appropriate moments of fun and joyfulness. This is especially true of the Golden Assembly when a specific time for worship has a clear place in the celebration of good work and weekly awards. In other assemblies, although a wealth of Bible stories are told, the religious dimension is less consistent and not always recognised by pupils. In spite of the pupils' capacity to show considerable insight into spiritual issues, limited use is made of their skills to evaluate worship. Individual adults and children are sometimes invited to give feedback and the clergy find this helpful in adjusting their planning. However the numbers involved are small and the school does not have an up to date picture of how the school community as a whole benefits from worship in order to inform development planning.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good.

Pupils have a high regard for what they learn in religious education. Overall, they make good progress but it is not measured well enough to ensure they are sufficiently challenged to make the same progress as in other core subjects.

Throughout the school a significant number of pupils demonstrate an excellent knowledge of Christian beliefs and teaching. A group of Year 1 & 2 children, for example, had no hesitation in recalling stories from the life of Jesus to illustrate the symbols of the cross and the fish. Their unprompted recall was impressively accurate and detailed. Pupils have a sound knowledge of other faiths and how beliefs affect the way people live their daily lives. They argue strongly for the importance of RE but their enjoyment of lessons varies. They are more motivated when work is challenging and they are asked to interpret sacred texts through art or drama. This develops their skills in grappling with spiritual issues and leads Year 6 pupils, in particular, to achieve exceptionally high standards such as their creation of symbolic pictures to illustrate the 'I am...' statements of Jesus. This is a clear example of where standards in oral and practical work are not mirrored in pupils' written work because the lack of assessment means teachers have little information to inform their planning.

Where the starting point for lessons is aimed only at the general age of the class, activities do not always build accurately on what pupils may already know and understand. Hence, questioning may be too demanding or tasks too low in expectations and this slows progress. The deputy headteacher, in becoming the subject leader, has brought a systematic and rigorous approach to the scrutiny of RE. This was an essential step as no action had been taken to address the issue of assessment from the previous inspection. Good decisions were taken about where to make a start and the outcomes of monitoring have been acted upon to ensure there is better differentiation between what pupils of different abilities are expected to learn.

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

The school is emerging from a period of staff turnover and is regaining momentum as a church school. Throughout this period the partnership with the church and, in particular, the active role of the vicar has proved critical in supporting the headteacher in maintaining the Christian ethos. The governors know the school well and understand its needs. This has informed staff appointments and the new deputy headteacher is playing a full role in developing the school's Christian character. Since the last inspection the vicar has led an annual review in consultation with staff and governors. Initially this prompted training from the diocesan adviser and more recently a check that school policies reflect its Christian status. These activities and the role model of the headteacher and staff in demonstrating Christian values have maintained the strong ethos of the school. However, too little feedback has been sought on a regular basis from all groups involved with the school. This has left governors without sufficient information to inform their strategic planning. Parents value the Christian ethos of the school. They feel embraced by the church community, whatever their own faith positions, and are confident that their children leave the school with a clear moral and spiritual framework for their lives.