



Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools Report

**St Nicholas Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School
Church Green, Harpenden, St Albans AL5 2TP**

Diocese of St Albans

LA: Hertfordshire
SIAS Inspection: 9 November 2007
Previous S23 Inspection:
URN: 117434
Headteacher: Mrs Ruth Mattison
SIAS Inspector Name: Mrs Mel Adams
SIAS Inspector No: 58

School Context

The school is a small primary school located alongside St Nicholas church in Harpenden. Five classes are taught in mixed year groups. Standards are high. The majority of pupils are admitted on church criteria which includes St Nicholas and a number of other churches in Harpenden. Almost all the children are from white British backgrounds and have English as a first language. There have been significant changes in leadership and staffing in recent years, but this is now more stable.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Nicholas CE VA primary school as a Church of England school are outstanding.

Through its agreed mission statement, aims and values which permeate all areas of school life, the school has an outstanding impact on the social, moral, spiritual, cultural and academic experience of all learners.

Established strengths

- The leadership of the Headteacher and Governing Body in driving forward the vision for the school as a distinctive and effective Church of England school.
- The accuracy of Church school self evaluation
- The Christian ethos of the school, which creates an environment in which children can grow and flourish.
- The leadership of the RE co-ordinator, whose commitment and subject knowledge ensures rich learning opportunities for all children.

Focus for development

- To further develop systematic evaluation of collective worship
- To ensure that children's recording tasks in Religious Education provide consistent opportunities for expressing both learning about and learning from religion.
- To further develop learning and teaching about different faiths

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

Children speak very highly of their school and are proud to belong to it. In discussion about what was the best thing, the reply was, 'Everything'. Children feel safe and affirmed as individuals. The three rules provide them with a clear framework for behaviour and they believe they are treated fairly by staff. Excellent behaviour allows them to exercise high levels of independence and a real commitment to learning. Motivation is linked to core values which they learn in Collective Worship and Religious Education, and throughout the school day. These values, as expressed by one child, help them to 'make good choices, respect people and be helpful'. They also recognise that they are values which will continue to help them as they grow up and in adult life. Forgiveness was identified by children as the most important value because, 'God forgives us, it's behind us, and we can forgive our friends'. Social, moral, spiritual and cultural development is therefore very strong and clearly evident. Able to show how they relate understanding of faith to decisions, a child described how helping a friend on the playground is like being a good Samaritan. Another child eloquently said, 'We learn about Christianity, we take it and we do it'. There are very good relationships throughout. Following a number of staffing changes, Governors linked up with individual members of staff to support them. The staff have rapidly become a strong team, work very well together, and are mutually supportive. The ethos of the school is clearly underpinned by Christian values, and as one child said, 'Without values, we wouldn't be a church school'. The accommodation in the school is well used with attractive displays to celebrate and support learning. The mission statement in the entrance as the Headteacher describes, 'proudly proclaims' the ethos and values. Religious Education displays in all classrooms and communal areas along with banners telling the lives of the saints, crosses, photographs of the Ugandan school supported by the school all communicate the Christian ethos.

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

Organised around a half termly value and church values, Collective Worship is led by the Headteacher or Deputy, and in church each week by the Ministry team. Festivals are celebrated in church and these are well supported by parents. All staff attend. The assembly observed during the inspection was impressively organised and led by two year 6 children who led groups from each of the other classes, celebrating and affirming aspects of their learning from the previous week. Children are well behaved and attentive, and the quality of their singing, very ably led from the piano, is outstanding. Planned to encourage interaction, high levels of participation lead to the development of religious understanding. Opportunities to pray and reflect, expressed by one child, 'help us to think about and reflect: when we go out, we keep assembly in our head'. From this, children are able to articulate the character of God as kind, loving, forgiving: God is everything. Through this understanding they speak of following the example of Jesus as they make choices. Children are able to apply good knowledge and understanding developed in Religious Education in worship. Anglican faith and practice are understood through celebration of festivals, greetings and responses and well known prayers. The close working between the church and school provide rich opportunities described by the Rector: 'the children are ready to think about faith and use Christian resources to find the answers'.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding

Children's responses in lessons and in aspects of their recorded work show very high standards. Teaching is organised to provide rich opportunities for learning about and learning from religion. Expectations for recorded work are high and some children are able to record effectively both their knowledge and understanding. Where this does not happen, the recording does not do justice to their levels of understanding. Learning objectives are suitably challenging and children respond well to this. Observed during the inspection, the foundation stage and year one children, through identification with God's work in creation by drawing on their own experiences, were well prepared for beginning to understand the concept of rest and the Jewish Sabbath. Entering into the awe and mystery of the visit of the Magi to Jesus, through skilfully managed role play, a child said, 'people don't usually give gifts like that to a baby'. The older children, able to discuss the difference between the sacred and the secular, were able to reflect on their own attitudes and beliefs about Christmas. Subject knowledge of staff is very good. Children are well focussed and attentive in lessons and are confident to take risks in offering their opinions and ideas. The highly effective approaches to teaching and learning provide a setting in which children gain deep insights and religious understanding, enriching Social, Moral, Spiritual and Cultural understanding. Beyond lessons, children describe how, having heard the stories, they apply them to their own lives and decisions. Visits to a number of places of worship are enhancing understanding of other faiths. These have inspired children to want to find out more about other religions and cultures, and they recognise that developing understanding, as one child commented, will help not to cause offence. Religious Education is well led by a committed co-ordinator who is skilful in supporting planning for teaching and learning, and ensuring that it is well resourced. She has a clear overview of progress, and monitors developments well. Religious Education is very important in the life of the school and the skill of the staff is demonstrated in their capacity to create a learning environment in which children are confident to take risks and ask big questions, helping them to find answers, or providing mature strategies for coping with unanswered questions: 'It's like maths, you may not understand yet, but as you learn, you will'.

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

The Headteacher and Governors passionately promote the distinctive Christian vision of the school. This is epitomised in the mission statement, which is very evident in practice. Parents are highly supportive, and one parent described the school as, 'at the heart of a very close and supportive Christian community'. The Headteacher and Governors appropriately challenge each other, based on agreed Christian values as a result of which the vision has been significantly driven forward in recent years. Church school self evaluation is very thorough and accurate. Evaluations of Collective Worship though as yet largely informal, have led to some developments such as younger children attending church. Governors are involved in both evaluation and development planning, ensuring that the Christian vision is translated into support for each child's Social, Moral, Spiritual and Cultural and academic development. The Rector, as link governor for Religious Education, supports learning and teaching, and describes how one teacher found his leading of a church assembly particularly helpful to her class. Staff are very well supported in putting the vision into practice by Headteacher, Deputy, RE co-ordinator and governors. The working relationship between the school and church is very powerful, the church supporting both practically and in prayer. Good links exist with other local churches. There is fund raising and support for local charities and for a Christian school in Uganda. Parents are very supportive of the school as a worshipping community.