



National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools Report

St Mary's Church of England Academy

Rook Tree Lane
Stotfold
Hitchin
SG5 4DL

Diocese: St Albans

Local authority:	Central Bedfordshire
Date of inspection:	10 June 2013
Date of last inspection:	25 November 2008
School's unique reference number:	109606
Headteacher:	Mr Colin Phelps
Inspector's name and number:	Mrs Lizzie McWhirter MA 244

School context

St Mary's Voluntary Controlled Lower School achieved Academy status in April 2013. It is popular and oversubscribed. Religious Education is delivered according to Bedfordshire and Luton Agreed Syllabus, together with diocesan guidance. Currently there are 242 pupils who are mainly from a White British background. The majority of pupils are Christian or of no specific faith. The headteacher has been in post for 24 years and will shortly retire. There are close links with St Mary's Church, which is within walking distance of the school.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Mary's as a Church of England Academy are outstanding.

This is an excellent church school, where the whole community is valued and involved. It is a place where Christian values make a difference and where all pupils are encouraged to achieve their best. It is a place of learning where there is a real sense of belonging. These young pupils are given the opportunities and experiences which support their Christian journey.

Established strengths

- The strong sense of family community, underpinned by Christian values
- Flourishing partnerships between church, school and village communities
- The importance of prayer in the life of the school, nurturing pupils' spiritual development
- The positive attitudes of the pupils who enjoy their learning and are encouraged to achieve their best

Focus for development

- Enhance the evaluation of collective worship, involving pupils and governors, to ensure worship is always improving in quality and integrity
- Embed a systematic method for governors to evaluate church school distinctiveness in order to continually improve pupils' learning and progress

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

St Mary's Academy sustains an excellent learning environment where pupils are proud to belong, feel valued and achieve highly. St Mary's sets and achieves ambitious targets for pupils' attainment derived from rigorous analysis of performance data and bench marking against national performance indicators. Data shows that all pupils are making good to outstanding progress. Systematic tracking of pupil progress by all leaders ensures that all pupils are effectively challenged and outstanding learning outcomes are maintained. The local cluster of schools moderates teaching and learning on a termly basis. Within this cohesive family, there is a very strong sense of what it means to be living in a Christian community in which church and school links are immensely important. Parents speak highly of the school's association with St Mary's Church, together with the teaching and office staff, 'who give the children such a good foundation'. Exemplary relationships and behaviour are rooted in Christian values. Parents also praise this 'close knit community; a happy, friendly, warm, caring environment where, most of the time, children achieve to the best of their ability, academically and socially'. Pupils speak of the importance in believing in Jesus and God and say, 'it feels quite special to be in the only church school around in Stotfold'. Attendance is very good, with children keen to attend well. This is supported by the Excellent Attendance Awards. Learning is aspirational, not just academic. St Mary's values a wide range of achievement, both in and out of school. Pupils say they value their teachers, their friends and the clubs they have the opportunity to participate in. Pupils thrive and feel able to make a positive contribution, especially through sport and musical activities, such as cricket or the school choir. These young pupils are inspired to succeed and achieve by the example of former pupil and Olympic gold medallist, Victoria Pendleton. The weekly lunchtime Jesus and Me [JAM] club run by members of the King's Baptist Church, provides an excellent opportunity for pupils' spiritual development to be nurtured. Pupils on the school council experience the Christian values of service and gratitude through organising coffee mornings for local senior citizens at which the school choir sings. Pupils' global awareness is developed through fundraising activities, such as Operation Christmas Child's shoebox appeal. Such events enable pupils to gain an understanding of their place in the community and their responsibility to others. Bright, prominent displays together with quiet prayer spaces in classrooms greatly enhance pupils' spiritual development. The school grounds which include the wildlife area, memory garden, and the purpose built Silver area for reflection all nurture pupils' spiritual development. Pupils say they enjoy RE, finding it 'exciting'. Their knowledge of Christianity is very good and they value learning about Christianity and other faiths, acknowledging the importance of worship and 'stories to help us learn about God'. RE lessons and creative days, such as the recent Barnabas RE day on 'Who is my neighbour?' challenge pupils to ask questions and reflect deeply.

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

The attitude of pupils to collective worship is excellent because the worship offered to them involves them and greatly supports their spiritual development. Prayerful and meaningful worship, with its focus on values linked to Jesus' teaching in The Bible, as well as celebrating the church year, begins every school day which pupils say 'joins us all together'. Pupils greatly appreciate coming together as a whole school for worship when they can 'all pray together'. These young pupils demonstrate a good level of theological literacy, explaining a Christian belief such as incarnation as 'God is a spirit and so is Jesus but he sent him down to earth as a human'. They explain salvation as entering heaven 'if you ask for forgiveness'. There is great support from the vicar of St Mary's who is a welcome and regular visitor to school. Members of the local Baptist and Methodist churches and the Salvation Army as well as the parish church of St Mary's take 'Open the Book' to the school six times a term when children 'play a part in the story telling from The Bible'. Major Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter are celebrated in church, enabling pupils to develop a sense of being part of The Anglican Communion, the role of the church and their part in it. Pupils value worship in church saying, 'it is really good to pray in a special holy place' where 'it feels like we are talking to God more'. They also enjoy worship outdoors in the Silver area. Prayer is very much a part of school life and pupils enjoy writing and sharing their own prayers, both in class and with the whole school community. An excellent example is The School Prayer which pupils and vicar wrote together. JAM club also provided every child in the school with teaspoon prayers, inviting them to say thank you, sorry and please prayers. Currently, pupil evaluation of worship is gathered from pupils dining on the weekly Golden Table, showing how the school has progressed from the last inspection. In addition, pupils have the opportunity to comment on 'Open the Book' worship, reflecting on what they learn, such as 'you can always trust God to help you'. Pupils welcome writing their thoughts down as a way of sharing them with teachers and governors, such as the desire to be involved more and take on ownership of worship. JAM club has modelled this by creating and leading whole school worship twice, since it began eighteen months ago, with pupils reflecting that it gave them 'the courage to speak out' and share what they experience. Pupils say they like 'hearing the Bible stories and learning about God'. As a result, they are encouraged to 'be brave and step out and trust God and our friends'. Governors too are keen to act upon Pupil Voice. In all these ways, worship is improving in integrity and quality.

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

St Mary's Christian foundation is effectively promoted by the headteacher, clergy, governors and staff so that the Academy's Church of England foundation is celebrated. There is a real sense of belonging, identity and involvement with church and school working closely together. Good relationships show the key role that Christian values play in the life of the school. Parents speak of how 'every child matters and is respected equally'. They also praise 'the headteacher who is very approachable and the teachers are very accessible and accommodating'. They acknowledge that all needs are identified and every need is addressed in this school where 'every child matters and is respected equally'. Exclusions are rare. Foundation governors are committed to the school and open to new ways of fulfilling their role. They appoint effective teachers and provide them with leadership opportunities. Currently, RE is reported through the curriculum committee which feeds directly into termly governor body meetings. The school has identified areas for development to support prayer and reflection, such as providing weatherproof materials to enable interactive prayer activities outdoors. Key priorities, rightly identified, are to recruit, appoint and induct a new headteacher and to review the vision statement and future direction of the Academy. Foundation governors recognise the need for church school distinctiveness to be a standing item on every governing body agenda so that its profile, action and progression, in order to enhance pupils' learning and progress, is constantly, regularly and robustly raised with the whole governing body. Pupils have a voice through the school council. The school regularly features in the Stotfold village magazine, playing a significant role in the annual Stotfold Festival Week as well as the Stotfold Mill weekend. This includes a community concert which involves every child. The Strict Baptist Church provides all leavers with a Bible, showing the good partnerships which exist in this village community. St Mary's values support from the diocese, providing INSET for staff and governor development.

SIAMS report St Mary's Church of England Academy, Stotfold, Hitchin SG5 4DL