



CHURCH OF ENGLAND
ARCHBISHOPS' COUNCIL
EDUCATION DIVISION



The **Methodist Church** 

National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools Report

Welwyn St Mary's Church of England Primary School

London Road
Welwyn
AL6 9DJ

Diocese: St Albans

Local authority: Hertfordshire

Date of inspection: 22 January 2014

Date of last inspection: January 2009

School's unique reference number: 117490

Headteacher: Mary Westley

Inspector's name and number: Lyn Field 151

School context

This is a larger than average primary school with two parallel classes in each year group. The large majority of pupils are White British with the remainder from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. The proportion of pupils who trigger extra government funding is lower than usually found but the proportion with different levels of special education needs is either above or in line with the national average. It has been judged as outstanding for the previous two SIAS inspections.

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

- The school's Christian character makes a direct impact on pupils' high achievement and wellbeing
- The longstanding strengths in Christian leadership mean that Christian principles are deeply embedded and directly inform the work of all staff and governors
- Religious education lessons and acts of collective worship focus on challenging pupils to think for themselves. This leads to outstanding spiritual development and provides them with a moral and social compass for life.
- The church takes its responsibility for the school very seriously and plays an active role in its development
- Feedback from all groups in the school community is constantly used to make imaginative and telling improvements

Area to improve

- To refine the method for recording the school's self-evaluation as a church school in order to set clear benchmarks for future leaders

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

All members of staff constantly model Christian values and are confident in applying the teachings of Jesus in managing the day to day matters of teaching and learning. Consequently pupils learn in a safe and secure environment where they are taught to reflect on their own attitudes and conduct. They have the humility to listen to guidance, recognise their own shortcomings and understand what it is to forgive and be forgiven. This creates an extremely positive climate for learning that is the basis for their excellent academic progress and wellbeing. They are keen to learn so their behaviour and attendance is excellent. St Mary's pupils do not give the conventional answers that might be expected from pupils of their age. There is an impressive freshness and originality to what they say because they have learned to reason things out for themselves using the teachings of Jesus as their first principles. They draw parallels, for example, between their training as peer mediators and the way Jesus handled tensions by asking questions to help people come to solutions by themselves. Their confidence in using religious language and to discuss the big issues of life and death is a direct result of the way in which RE is taught.

Mutual respect is a key feature of the outstanding relationships. Pupils benefit from listening to the views of others, especially their friends from other faiths, so curiosity and respect for other religions is genuine and well established. They appreciate the global nature of Christianity and know stories of how it spread across continents and the different Christian denominations that have emerged.

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

Worship is 'collective' in the fullest sense, a 'coming together as a family'. Staff and pupils of all faith backgrounds are happy to be involved because they recognise the impact it makes on their personal lives. Great attention is paid to following the Anglican pattern of worship and pupils identify different elements that mean most to them as individuals. For example, some join in the final Trinitarian blessing used by the rector and explain 'it is about redeeming ourselves, it helps us start anew when we leave the hall'. The contributions of the choir and Y6 chamber choir hold pupils' attention and create an atmosphere conducive to worshipping. Pupils have 'loads' of opportunities to take active parts in worship, including as servers in church services, but their involvement in leading worship has been slower to develop. However, an Assembly Club, run by the rector, is growing in popularity and is responsible for worship on a fortnightly basis.

Pupils gain an impressive knowledge of key Christian beliefs from the richness of what they experience in worship. The rector's telling of Bible stories is particularly memorable because he is skilled in helping pupils understand them in the context of their own experiences and world events. The themes for worship expand on key Christian beliefs and the school's core values. They are always relevant and fresh as they are revised in the light of regular discussion and feedback from pupils, staff and parents. The popular 'Questions to God' theme, for example, arose from discussion with pupils. The questions this has prompted have been recorded in books as a resource for pupils and have been used in clergy training. They clearly demonstrate how pupils grow in spiritual understanding as they move through the school. Pupils are confident to use prayer formally in worship as well as for their own personal needs. This is because of the care the school has taken to distinguish between the two and put systems in place that are sensitive to pupils' needs. Time for silent reflection is taken very seriously as it 'makes you stop and think so you pray for what you really need and not just what you want'.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding.

Christianity is the core of the RE curriculum and is taught well. Parallels are constantly drawn with other religions even when these are not the current unit of work. Pupils' knowledge

deepens year by year because lessons build on what they have learned previously and Biblical teaching within collective worship constantly enriches this understanding. Teachers have worked hard to develop an enquiry based approach to RE. The combination of this and pupils' knowledge means they confidently offer ideas in answer to challenging questions such as 'Is Advent more important than Christmas?'

The quality of teaching is consistently good and frequently outstanding. Marking is highly personalised with teachers responding to pupils' work by adding questions to give pupils further food for thought. This practice is firmly established and pupils look for the questions and take time to reply to them. This represents a huge commitment by staff but is reaping rewards in terms of pupils' excellent thinking skills. Pupils follow this model and in lessons, they listen, observe and then raise pertinent issues that benefit the learning of the whole class and ensure everyone is an active rather than a passive learner.

The experienced RE co-ordinator is passionate about the subject. She has made wise decisions about exactly where to focus support and training for staff to make sure that pupils develop the specific skills they need to do well in RE. Systems for assessment have been completely revised to give teachers precise information in planning the pitch of lessons. This has addressed an action point from the previous inspection. Teachers' understanding of exactly how their pupils progress in their RE learning has grown and, consequently, pupils are making rapid progress throughout the school. From starting points that are broadly average for their age, the vast majority reach high standards in line with those in the core subjects. Lesson observations and checks on planning and pupils' work are managed well as part of the constant drive to improve. These monitoring exercises rightly focus on checking success in implementing new initiatives so strategic planning for RE keeps standards high.

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

Christian values form the spine of the school and are totally integrated into its daily life. They shape not just what is taught, but how and why. A high proportion of staff and governors are church worshippers so the school is unashamedly open about the central place of prayer and worship in the school that enables pupils to become inquisitive about God and his world. The headteacher leads with conviction and provides excellent spiritual direction for the school.

The partnership with St Mary's church continues to have a powerful impact on the school. The Church Council takes its role of nominating foundation governors from within the congregation very seriously. Consequently, the business of governance has been rooted in the Christian faith for 'generations of governors' and strategic decisions take account of the school's responsibility to the wider family of church schools. The Christian ethos is one of the key drivers in the current revision of the school's curriculum. Parents have a strong relationship with the school. They recognise how its Christian character develops spiritual and moral qualities in their children and support this from home.

Governors and senior leaders know their school well. However, the format used to record their monitoring and evaluation as a church school does not convey the massive impact that the Christian character of the school has on pupils' achievement and wellbeing. This is because it does not look beyond individual elements to see the overall picture. Feedback is regularly sought from pupils, staff and parents and the outcomes are interpreted by senior leaders with their characteristic insight. Actions taken are sharply focused on exactly what needs to improve. The same is true of any training undertaken and the benefits of diocesan courses are clearly visible. A typical example is the stunning art work by children that expresses the meaning of biblical texts linked to each of the school's aims. This hangs in the entrance and children as well as adults confidently explain the meaning of these as they do all aspects of the school's Christian character.