



Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools Report

St Helen's Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School
Brewhouse Hill, Wheathampstead AL4 8AN



Diocese of St Albans

LA: Hertfordshire
SIAS Inspection: 29th June 2010
Previous S23 Inspection: 24th January 2007
URN: 117462
Headteacher: Mr Andrew Emeny
SIAS Inspector Name: Catherine Large
SIAS Inspector No: 482

School Context

St Helen's Church of England Primary School draws most of its pupils from the large village in which it is located. It is an average sized primary school. Nearly all of its pupils come from white British backgrounds. The number of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and with an entitlement to free school meals is below average. Some pupils in Years 1-4 are taught in mixed age classes. There have been recent improvements to the building and its facilities.

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

St Helen's Primary School has a tangible Christian ethos which has an excellent impact on all aspects of pupils' development.

Established strengths

- The explicit commitment to Christian values exemplified and practised by the headteacher and supported by governors and staff;
- The very strong sense of community within the school and the positive impact of relationships with the local church and wider Christian community;
- The outstanding quality and range of worship opportunities offered to pupils;
- The contribution of religious education to the spiritual development of pupils.

Focus for development

- Strengthen assessment in religious education so that teachers and pupils are clear about standards;
- Build on existing links with diverse cultural groups and extend the range of contacts with members of other faiths.

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

Pupils are very positive about their school experience. As one pupil said. 'I love my school'. They feel safe and well taught. They have high levels of self-esteem because the school promotes positive behaviour and achievement very well. Parents appreciate the strong sense of community, of which they feel a part, and also comment on the way pupils from different year groups care for each other. One child's response to a survey was to identify his behaviour as poor but added, 'But the school cares about me.' Pastoral care is excellent. Pupils make good progress as they move through the school and the needs of all different groups, such as those who are gifted and talented or who have special educational needs, are well met. The curriculum offers an extensive range of experiences, including educational visits and extra-curricular activities. Relationships are excellent. The School Council is very active and effective. Pupils and the wider community respond exceptionally well to charity fund raising both locally and globally, for example, in the overwhelming financial support for a pupil's medical care overseas and for a Bosnian community. Programmes such as SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning and PHSE (Personal, Social and Health Education) are well integrated and applied for the benefit of pupils' personal development. Because the Christian ethos is embedded in all aspects of school life, pupils from the earliest years talk comfortably about their beliefs (and questions) about God and what they feel about the world around them. Their spiritual and moral development is therefore very strong. Links with a predominantly Muslim school in Luton are enabling pupils to understand cultures and faiths other than their own and they speak very positively about their experiences in this partnership, one which the school is planning to widen. Prayers written by the oldest pupils in preparation for their Leavers' Service powerfully demonstrate the impact the Christian ethos has had upon their lives and education.

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

There is a clear policy for worship and a plan which enables pupils to experience an excellent range of worship styles, contexts and leadership. When the whole school meets together, there is a real sense that worship is at the heart of school life and pupils confirm this view. They enjoy the participative nature of worship, commenting on the fun way Bible stories are explored and the visits of local Christian leaders who engage their interest well. They respond respectfully to opportunities for prayer and reflection. The focal points and use of audio-visual material enhance the impact of worship. Strong links with the church ensure that they are familiar with some Anglican practice, including the communion service. They experience worship in the context of the church, particularly when celebrating the major Christian festivals. The school hopes to strengthen these experiences for groups of pupils at special times in their school life, as, for example, happens with the Leavers' Service which is planned and led by them. Parents, clergy and members of the wider community attend worship at times, such as class worship and the Open Air services held in the school grounds. These are significant times in the worship plan and feature in the parish diary, indicating the bonds which exist between the school and the church. The school's plan for worship is appropriate, based on Diocesan guidelines but also including reference to some major festival times in other faiths. There is a shared commitment to the importance of collective worship and staff participate and often lead. Although there is much informal feedback and discussion about worship, the school recognises that planned evaluation of its delivery and impact would benefit both staff and pupils.

The effectiveness of religious education is outstanding.

The overall quality of teaching and learning in religious education is outstanding because lessons are well structured and use a stimulating range of approaches, including music, art and artefacts. Pupils are engaged and motivated as a result. Relationships are excellent and pupils feel confident when expressing their own ideas, beliefs and feelings and this enhances their spiritual development. The challenge in lessons leads to pupils acquiring high levels of skill in, for example, interpreting and evaluating beliefs about creation stories. In all classes, pupils are beginning to be aware of the mysteries and questions about human experience and some religious answers to them. The standards are set in the earliest years where pupils, fascinated by the intricacies of design in a collection of shells, start to ask questions about the nature of God and creation. Teachers ensure work is matched to need, so pupils of all abilities make good progress as they move through the school. Standards are well above average in relation to pupils' knowledge and understanding of Christian faith and practice. They are not quite as secure in relation to other world faiths where sometimes the work is less stimulating and there are limits to first hand experience or encounters with people of other faiths. The leadership and management of the subject are excellent. The subject leader is introducing new schemes of work to reflect developments in the subject and is well trained and supportive of other staff. There are some effective strategies in place to monitor teaching and learning in the subject. Teachers assess pupils' progress regularly but are not always clear about expectations in the subject.

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

The leadership and management of the school are clearly committed to living out Christian values in the day to day life of the school and this has a very positive impact on pupils. The headteacher leads by example, with Christian faith described as being 'at the core of his being'. The governing body and staff share the same vision for the school. The school's church status is made explicit in signs, pictures and documentation and this status is acknowledged by all parents and pupils. Staff have good opportunities for general professional development, including religious education, and their well being is a high priority. Links with the local church and wider Christian community are very strong, a factor which is of major benefit to the school and which pupils appreciate. The school also benefits from involvement with the general local community. Parents play an active role in the life of the school and both they and the pupils are regularly surveyed as the school seeks to develop. The support of the 'Friends' group has been of great significance, funding many improvements to the building and its equipment to enhance the learning of the pupils. Links with other local schools and support agencies are also very good. The school works closely with the Diocese, the headteacher contributing to training. The school is not complacent and looks for opportunities to improve further. Foundation governors, for example, welcoming an opportunity to attend Diocesan training on their role. The school has responded to areas for development from the last inspection.