



CHURCH OF ENGLAND
ARCHBISHOPS' COUNCIL
EDUCATION DIVISION



The **Methodist Church** 

National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools Report

St Helen's Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School

Brewhouse Hill
Wheathampstead
AL4 8AN

Previous SIAMS grade: Outstanding

Current inspection grade: Outstanding

Diocese: St Albans

Local authority: Hertfordshire

Dates of inspection: 9 October 2015

Date of last inspection: 29 June 2010

School's unique reference number: 117462

Headteacher: Jamie Brown

Inspector's name and number: Lindsay Fraser 107

School context

St Helen's Church of England Primary School is a larger than average primary school. The number of pupils on roll has increased significantly since the last inspection. A new headteacher was appointed in January 2015 and the leadership structure changed in September 2014 from one deputy headteacher to two assistant headteachers, one of whom is part-time. Considerable building work has taken place since January 2014. The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs is average. The proportion of pupils for whom pupil premium (additional government funding) provides support is below average. Nearly all pupils are from white British backgrounds.

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

- The inspiring Christian leadership of the headteacher, supported by the senior leadership team and governing body, has ensured that the major changes in the school have led to stronger relationships at all levels and improved outcomes for pupils, especially those with disabilities and special educational needs.
- The strong Christian vision of the headteacher, senior leadership team and governing body ensures that policy making is firmly rooted in Christian theology.
- The Christian values education programme introduced in September 2014 is having a significant impact on every aspect of school life.
- The very strong partnership between the school and the church benefits both the school and church communities.
- The quality of collective worship contributes significantly to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development.

Areas to improve

- Increase the amount of outstanding the teaching of religious education (RE) through rigorous monitoring, training and the sharing of outstanding good practice.
- Raise standards in RE for the more able pupils by challenging and extending their thinking.

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

The school strapline, 'Loving Learning, Loving God, Loving Your Neighbour' underpins and impacts upon every aspect of pupils' experience within the school. Because the Christian character of the school is explicit, pupils can apply Christian values to their lives both in and out of school. Values are all based on Biblical texts and applied in practical ways throughout the school. For example, the eco-warriors club has been set up based on a verse in Genesis in which God gave humankind responsibility for care of the earth. As a result, pupils understand that, 'If you are given a present you want to look after it'. Parents speak passionately about their children's understanding of each value. As part of the values-based home learning, pupils are encouraged to learn a memory verse from the Bible on a fortnightly basis. Many parents speak of the positive impact this is having in the home and beyond. During Lent, in a joint venture with the church, the school participated in the 'Do Lent generously' initiative. A cupcake competition was held and all cakes were distributed freely amongst local residents. One young pupil was so inspired by this that he insisted his family should take similar action with their own neighbours. Behaviour is excellent throughout the school. One pupil stated that, 'I have noticed that I get on better with my friends now', whilst another pupil commented, 'Sometimes you feel mad, angry and sad, but forgiveness makes me feel better'. Although Christian beliefs and values lie at the heart of the school, other faiths are valued and recognised. RE and collective worship make a significant contribution to pupils' SMSC development and ensure that they have a good understanding of different cultures and beliefs. Pupils state that this has been achieved because of RE lessons and visits from members of other faiths including Judaism, Islam and Hinduism. It is clear that pupils have enjoyed and valued these visits. One parent, who spoke on behalf of many, remarked that her child could discuss the beliefs and non-beliefs of others in a mature manner. Pupils are very reflective and are able to talk clearly and confidently about their thoughts and beliefs. Attendance and academic progress are both good as the Christian caring, nurturing environment helps them to do their best. Pupils who are disabled or who have special educational needs make particularly good progress because governors and senior leaders have ensured there are effective strategies to address their wide-ranging needs. The staff work tirelessly to ensure that they explore every means possible to support pupils. Those for whom an outside lunchtime break is daunting may participate in activities in the library. They feel well supported and valued. Pupil exclusions, which had been very high, have now been substantially reduced because appropriate nurturing and caring provision is in place.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

Collective worship at St Helen's underpins all aspects of the school ethos. Based on its strong Christian message, collective worship is a significant time at the end of the day for all pupils. As one pupil stated, 'at the end of the day it is a time when I can forget my worries and just sit and listen to stories which can help me'. Pupils enjoy learning the verses from the Bible and hearing the stories because, as some pupils commented, this is not something which they would do at home. Parents interviewed agreed with this view, valuing the impact it has on their children's lives. The RE subject leader prepares a very cohesive plan for collective worship which is based on the half termly values and the fortnightly memory verses. Her excellent subject knowledge ensures that content is relevant and enjoyable. Worship focuses on the centrality of Jesus Christ and ensures that pupils have an understanding of the Trinity and all Christian festivals. Pupils describe the Holy Spirit as a 'gift from God to help us in our life now'. Pupils say that all leaders of collective worship make it fun and ensure that everyone becomes involved. A worship group, Think Box, meets weekly to plan and deliver the Monday worship. Collective worship begins with the sharing of the Peace. Pupils explain that this is an important aspect of friendship and during the inspection the sharing of the Peace was conducted enthusiastically, joyfully and maturely, even by the youngest pupils. The memory verse from Proverbs, comparing friendship to pleasant fragrances, was rehearsed with eager participation by all pupils. The headteacher used an exciting and engaging activity to develop pupils' understanding of the verse. Pupils clearly understood the relevance to their own lives, their comments being recorded by Think Box as part of their monitoring and evaluation for future development. Pupils use a song version of the Lord's Prayer which was sung with a deep sense of spirituality. Volunteers lead the prayers with spontaneity and an excellent understanding of the meaning of prayer. Prayer is generally of significance to many pupils. They are keen to write prayers for the school prayer box which are subsequently taken by the incumbent to the church to be blessed in the Sunday service. Many prayers reflect the pupils' reflections of the school value and its relevance to their

own lives. Pupils feel that, despite collective worship being Christian, 'even people of other faiths or do not have a belief can benefit'. The school attends the local church at least termly for worship, to which parents are also invited. Pupils speak enthusiastically about these times and parents speak of feeling uplifted.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good

RE has a high profile in the school. A wide range of teaching strategies are used in the teaching and learning of RE. Pupils have a good knowledge and understanding of both Christian beliefs and practice and those of other faiths. Pupils in the Year 4/5 class observed were able to identify where there are similarities and where beliefs and practices differ. Challenging questions encourage children to think deeply. Pupils who were interviewed were extremely positive about RE because they see the relevance of Christianity to their own lives and understand the importance of learning about other faiths. One pupil shared her view that, 'In life you will meet a lot of different people and you don't want to offend them by not understanding their beliefs'. Planning is of a high standard with clear steps to build on pupils' knowledge. Pupils are given ample opportunity to express their own views and ask questions as well as learning about beliefs and practices. The subject leader for RE has made substantial improvements since the previous inspection in extending the range of contacts with members of other faiths; this has had a very positive impact upon pupils' understanding. Younger pupils have been observed using elements of this teaching in their play both in school and at home. Assessment processes were strengthened following the previous inspection and have now been revised and substantially improved to reflect national changes in assessment. Pupils' work shows that standards are good, but time is not always given for pupils to respond to teachers' suggestions to develop their thinking. The subject leader has been rigorous in monitoring pupils' work and teachers' planning, enabling her to advise and support staff.

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

The vision and enthusiasm of the headteacher, ably supported by the senior leadership team and incumbent, have had a significant impact on all aspects of the school. This is because they have ensured that the Christian character underpins pupils' academic achievements, SMSC development and the well-being of the whole school community. The commitment of the leadership team is an inspiration for all staff who aspire to church school leadership. Governors have enthusiastically supported the school's new strapline 'Loving Learning, Loving God, Loving Your Neighbour' and now ensure that all school policies are based on Christian theology. New and revised policies are based on a Biblical text as the foundation for governors' discussions. Consequently, pupils of all abilities and backgrounds are achieving well and relationships at all levels in the school community are excellent. The changes in senior leadership, changes in the structure and personnel of the governing body, building work and increased pupil numbers have added extra pressure for the whole community. However, guided by this vision and enthusiasm, the changes have been managed extremely well. Governors have taken steps to support the staff through surveys and meetings in order to know and address their concerns. A 'happiness team' has been established who receive a half termly budget to ensure that the well-being of the staff is addressed, especially during these times of change. As a result staff feel very well supported. Likewise a half termly parent forum has been established which has taken into account the views of parents and actions have been taken as a result. There is an excellent relationship between the school and the church. Pupils from the school benefit substantially from a range of workshops provided by the church including the sacred earth project, the Lord's Prayer project and Christmas and Easter experiences. The incumbent is able to give support in such areas as developing pupils' use of prayer and subject support for teaching staff. Songs taught in the school are now also used in the church thus enabling pupils to have the consistency if attending the church. Likewise the church has also benefited from the willingness of the senior leadership team to accommodate church services within the school during the temporary closure of the church. The school enthusiastically promotes children's activities in the local church and group of churches. Governors have a very strong presence within the school and, because they are well informed, they are very knowledgeable about standards and practice throughout the school. The subject leader for RE now has been given the opportunity to observe lessons on a more regular basis, an area the school has identified as the next step towards outstanding teaching and learning in RE.

SIAMS report October 2015 St Helen's CE VA Primary School, Wheathampstead AL4 8AN