



Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools Report



St Michael's Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School
St Michael's Street, St Albans AL3 4SJ

Diocese of St Albans

LA: Hertfordshire
SIAS Inspection: 21st April 2010
Previous S48 Inspection: January 2007
URN: 117451
Headteacher: Sarah Hinchliffe
SIAS Inspector Name: Lyn Field
SIAS Inspector No: 151

School Context

This smaller than average primary school is on two sites about three hundred metres apart. It is adjacent to St Michael's church and the site of Roman Verulamium on the edge of St Albans. Most pupils are White British and the proportion with special educational needs and/or disabilities is lower than in most schools. There is now a stable staff team following a period of considerable change.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Michael's as a Church of England school are good.

The distinctive Christian character of the school has not wavered in the recent period of instability and is valued by parents and the local community. It is a blueprint that is now being used by the new leadership team to nurture and challenge pupils in their development as compassionate and responsible individuals.

Established strengths

- The enthusiasm and drive of the headteacher, deputy and clergy team to improve as a church school
- The importance placed on prayer in school life
- Pupils' positive attitudes to exploring spiritual and religious ideas
- The use made of the church and local environment

Focus for development

- To improve the quality of learning in religious education by:
 - challenging pupils to think, evaluate, reflect and express a personal response in their understanding of religion and spiritual issues
 - ensure schemes of work promote an understanding of the school's stated Christian values.
- To implement systems for evaluation as a church school where feedback from all groups in the school community is reflected upon and used to set priorities

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

The headteacher has refocused the school on the spiritual dimension to childrens' learning. Although this has yet to feel the full impact of the school's planning for a more creative curriculum, Christian values are making an explicit impact in lessons and in the good choice of activities that enrich learning. A significant change is the way the environment both in and out of doors is used by pupils to think more reflectively and engage with religious ideas. Displays around the school show how pupils are challenged to make a spiritual response to their learning. For example, the spiritual trail that involved pupils in preparing drama cameos to follow the Stations of the Cross left a deep impression on them. They draw on what they have learned in religious education(RE) lessons and acts of worship to pose questions about some of the moral issues that face society. However, although pupils make good use of the displays where they can raise these subjects, such as 'Big questions for God', the questions are not always followed up and this limits their impact. The school rightly feels this aspect of learning is not yet embedded consistently across the school.

Pupils use prayer as a source of personal support. It is clear from the prayer books they create that this is often an avenue through which they express their feelings about difficult and sensitive subjects. They are keen to write their own prayers and this has prompted some to compile their own books at home. Class prayer books show pupils' growing confidence in using religious language and expressing their own thoughts about poverty, disability and their own sense of responsibility to their families and the community. This is reflected in their good behaviour and the caring attitudes they consistently show to others. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is therefore good.

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

The regular pattern of daily worship, especially Wednesday morning services in church, has played a pivotal role in sustaining the Christian ethos over the last two years. In recent months this has strengthened, revitalised by the new headteacher's focus on children's spiritual development and the new vicar's imaginative approach. They have brought fresh eyes to engaging pupils more fully in worship that is relevant to their own experience. Innovations such as the celebration of Easter in the paddock and harvest in the barn of a local resident, have successfully involved parents and parishioners and left a lasting impression on the whole community. The planning of themes has been revised to avoid repetition and create more links with what pupils learn in lessons. This is improving their ability to discuss moral and ethical issues but sometimes blurs the edges between learning and worship. Pupils are left unclear about how worship can take a less formal and reflective style because their attention is not consistently drawn to the significance of the simple Anglican rituals and symbolism that is used. However, pupils enjoy the wealth of Bible stories they are told. They feel these always have something to offer about real life and build up a good knowledge of Christian beliefs as a basis for their RE lessons. Pupils are increasingly taking responsibility for the prayer life of the school. They have gained confidence in leading spontaneous prayer at times other than worship and feel they have the skills to develop a greater role as leaders. The school agrees with this and as a first step, pupils are now asked to reflect on what they have gained from worship.

The effectiveness of the religious education is satisfactory.

Religious education has a high profile in the curriculum but until very recently there were no systems in place to ensure that pupils were achieving as well as they might. This has changed with the arrival of the new deputy headteacher. She has used her expertise to make a rapid and accurate appraisal of teaching and learning in RE. Steps have already been taken to address significant gaps in the systems for assessment and planning. Although these have yet to be embedded in practice throughout the school, good progress has been made. The current attainment of every child has been assessed and initial training provided for all staff. As a result, the tasks set for pupils have improved and challenge them to reflect more on the implications of beliefs for everyday life although they lack experience in articulating Christian values. The school has already identified that there is more to be done in matching activities more closely to pupils' stages of development and in promoting their thinking skills. Results show that pupils are currently making satisfactory and occasionally good progress. Standards are broadly in line with those in the core subjects. Pupils are unanimous in their views on the importance of RE. They make insightful comments about how it will enable them to make choices as adults and help them to work collaboratively with colleagues from diverse backgrounds. They are more ambivalent about their enjoyment of lessons but have noted some recent changes with approval.

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

The Christian character of the school has remained strong throughout the period of significant staff change. Many in the community claim that the physical presence of the church building next to the school was a constant reminder of the partnership but, unsurprisingly, the rate of progress slowed and the issues from the previous inspection received little attention. This situation has now reversed and the school has regained its momentum. Diocesan training highlighted for governors the importance of being explicit about Christian values in strategic planning. This is already evident in recent appointments to secure the spiritual leadership of the school for the future. The new deputy, building on the work of her predecessor, has already signalled a sharper focus on Christian values in the way the curriculum is delivered. In addition, there is now a proper expectation of foundation governors that they will draw on their ties with the church in giving clear direction to the Christian ethos of the school. The headteacher, her deputy and the clergy team are clearly excited by the position they have reached. They are encouraged by the success of recent changes and are impatient to set new initiatives in place such as a working party to oversee the combined development of RE and worship. New systems, particularly the review of RE, are helping to define their priorities in moving quickly to being an outstanding church school but too little use is made of feedback from groups in the school community. Their capacity to improve is good because they understand exactly what needs to be achieved and how children will benefit.