

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

St. Mary's Church of England Primary School

Castlefields Avenue South, Halton, Runcorn WA7 2NR

Current SIAMS inspection grade

Outstanding

Diocese

Chester

Previous SIAS inspection grade

Outstanding

Local authority

Halton

Date of inspection

15 June 2017

Date of last inspection

July 2012

Type of school and unique reference number

Voluntary aided 111316

Headteacher

Rachel Tainsh

Inspector's name and number

Jean Forward 625

School context

St. Mary's C of E Primary School is slightly larger than average and has nursery provision. Almost all pupils are of White British heritage. The school is situated in an area of significant social deprivation. The percentage of pupils known to be eligible for pupil premium funding is above the national average. The percentage of pupils with a statement for special educational needs or education, health, care plan is below the national average. At the end of KS2 in 2016, pupils' progress in writing was above the national average and in reading and maths was at the national average. The school recently achieved the Religious Education (RE) Quality Mark Gold Award.

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

- The outstanding Christian leadership of the headteacher and her vision for the development of the school ensure that the distinctive character and ethos are of the highest priority.
- The school is a beacon of love, care and compassion in the community. The inclusive environment, rooted in Christian values, has a direct influence on pupils' well-being and eagerness to learn.
- The pupils' excellent behaviour, respect for each other and positive attitudes stem from the school's core Christian values of honesty, love, courage, determination, compassion and respect.
- Worship is central to the school's life. It introduces Christian values in their biblical context and has a significant influence on the spiritual development of the whole school family.
- Members of the governing body provide extremely strong support and challenge through their commitment and expertise. As a result, highly effective and strategic self-evaluation of church school distinctiveness ensures that the school's Christian ethos is at the heart of the development process.

Areas to improve

- Provide opportunities for pupils to learn how to plan and lead worship independently in order to deepen their understanding of the elements of worship and to broaden spiritual development.

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

An outstanding commitment to the development and well-being of every pupil underpins the school's work and is rooted in Christian love. High expectations and encouragement are directly linked to the Christian life of the school. Pupils talk confidently about the importance of the school's core Christian values. A pupil said, 'Christian values help us to live how Jesus wants us to live.' A pupil explained that the core values prompt everyone to reflect on their behaviour and what they say to others. As a result, the positive relationships across the community are rooted in a Christ-centred approach and there is a calm and peaceful atmosphere. Pupils say that staff support and help them in a caring and understanding way. Pupils are happy and enthusiastic about learning and school life because 'everyone feels comfortable and fits in'. This is affirmed by parents who say that their children talk about Christian values at home. Parents believe that the exceptional support for families is directly linked to the distinctive Christian character of the school. A parent commented that the ethos is rooted in Christian kindness and compassion and that this shines through everything the school does. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development is excellent. Pupils have access to a wide range of additional activities which broaden their experience and develop individual skills and talents.

Christian trust and respect are clearly evident and this results in all members of the school community feeling valued. Pupils demonstrate respect and concern for others in and beyond the school. They enjoy being members of the school council and ethos group and understand that these opportunities are an example of service to the school community. The school has a strong commitment to Christian stewardship, supporting a range of charities including MacMillan Cancer Care, CAFOD, the Children's Society and the Runcorn foodbank. Pupils understand the importance of showing generosity and compassion to those in need and know that this is rooted in Jesus's teaching. A pupil said, 'We want to support people who are less fortunate than we are.'

Vibrant displays and Christian symbols emphasise the school's Christian character and prompt the pupils' spiritual awareness and understanding extremely well. Pupils value the classroom and outdoor reflection areas. They are able to explain that these support them spiritually and are an aid to prayer. The school's commitment to widening pupils' knowledge of non-Christian faiths through carefully planned RE contributes well to positive attitudes about other beliefs and cultures. The emphasis on respect for others and their faith makes a strong contribution to the school's Christian character and to pupils' SMSC development.

Pupils make very good progress from low starting points because they feel loved, secure and able to learn.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

Collective worship is at the heart of school life and is a great strength. It is inclusive, vibrant and inspires pupils and staff. As a result, the Christian faith and its teachings are constantly linked to the life of the school and inform the way in which every member of the community thinks about following the example of Jesus. Thorough planning incorporates themes based on Christian values, the Bible and major Christian festivals and feast days. In this way, the worship of the school is linked to the pattern of worship in the wider church. As a result, pupils are able to clearly identify the seasons of the Church's year and their importance to the Christian way of life. Each half term's theme ensures that pupils are able to connect Christian values to biblical teaching and a life rooted in Jesus.

The pupils enjoy worship. They listen attentively, sing with enthusiasm and engage well with questions which explore values and beliefs. All members of the school community experience times of silence and reflection which are an important part of the school's focus on developing prayer. Pupils write their own prayers and share these with one another and their teachers. As a result, the pupils' spiritual awareness and understanding are enhanced as is their inner sense of God.

Pupils become familiar with Anglican practice through the use of traditional prayers, responses for greeting and dismissal and a liturgical framework. These daily rituals within school worship enable pupils to develop an understanding of church tradition and that worship plays a key part in the life of Christians. The school places great importance on developing pupils' understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is addressed in an age-appropriate way throughout the school. As a result, pupils are able to talk about the Trinity with confidence and with a deeper and mature understanding as they progress through the school.

The vicar of St. Mary's, Halton and foundation governors from different Christian traditions play an important part in the pattern of worship. The school worships in the parish church on a termly basis. Parents support these occasions and the fortnightly family worship in school. As a result, they are welcomed into the wider worshipping community and feel that they belong.

The pupils contribute to worship through prayers, reading and music. They enjoy preparing for and contributing to special acts of worship at key points during the school year. As yet, they do not have the experience of planning and leading worship independently. The school has highly effective systems in place for all members of the school community to evaluate worship and this leads to discussion, development and a true sense of involvement.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding

The importance of RE in the life of this Christian school is demonstrated by its high priority as a core curriculum subject. Teaching is consistently good with much outstanding practice. Standards are comparable to those in other core subjects and reflect the consistently good and often outstanding progress pupils make from low starting points. Lessons are planned to meet the needs of all learners, using varied and differentiated activities which engage pupils and develop essential understanding and skills. The subject is taught in a creative and interactive way with a strong emphasis on developing Christian values. The diocesan syllabus provides rich and varied learning opportunities which widen pupils' knowledge and understanding. Pupils are challenged to question, investigate and reflect and they experience a range of interesting activities. There is a clear balance between learning about religion and opportunities for pupils to think about what their learning means to them. They have an impressive knowledge of Christianity and they think deeply and express their opinions with confidence. As a result, they are enthusiastic and say that they enjoy their learning. A pupil commented, 'We have to think about big questions.'

Evidence of prior learning and thinking skills was demonstrated in a Year 6 lesson about aspects of Hinduism. Pupils tackled challenging tasks with confidence and were invited to make comparisons with the Christian faith. As a result, they demonstrated a high level of prior knowledge, collaborative discussion and the sharing of ideas and opinions. Year 1 pupils were able to explore the concept of creation drawing on their prior learning. A range of focused questions and suitable challenge encouraged pupils' involvement and their desire to contribute. Non-Christian faiths are introduced through the RE curriculum and special focus days. A pupil commented, 'We enjoy learning about other faiths.'

Teachers are well-supported by the knowledgeable and enthusiastic subject leader and the school has a range of resources to enhance teaching and learning. Informative marking guides pupils and invites them to answer questions in order to extend their understanding. The subject leader monitors teaching and learning through a rigorous programme of observations, moderation and book scrutiny. Formative and summative assessment is highly effective in tracking attainment and progress. As a result of this ambitious leadership, staff are committed to delivering RE of the highest quality.

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

The headteacher's informed and dedicated Christian leadership is rooted in a deep personal faith. The dynamic promotion of the core values ensures that the Christian ethos is always paramount. The headteacher has a clear Christian vision for the school and she is supported by a strong senior leadership team and governing body. They are committed to fostering all aspects of pupils' development and well-being through Christian care and love. There is a determination to ensure that the school enables all pupils to do their best and 'love and live like Jesus'. As a result, the school recognises the importance of creating a Christian ethos which supports effective learning and equal opportunities.

The school knows its pupils and their families extremely well and meets individual needs through a culture of Christian nurturing, support and compassion. Parents recognise the distinctive Christian character of the school and believe that it fosters a strong sense of family. They are involved in the daily life of the school and contribute in many different ways. As a result, the home and school partnership is constantly reinforced. The school and the vicar of St. Mary's have a close working relationship. He spends a considerable amount of time in the school on a weekly basis. This strengthens the spiritual and pastoral elements of the relationship between the school, its families and the church.

Ecumenical foundation governors have a clear understanding of their strategic role. They ask informed questions and provide a high level of challenge. Detailed action plans for RE and worship are included in the school's development planning and are reviewed regularly. These plans set challenging targets and strategies for further improvement. The school meets the statutory requirements for RE and collective worship. The school's Christian ethos draws together every element of decision-making and leads to highly effective and strategic leadership.

The school is outward-looking and plays a full role in local cluster initiatives. Strong links with St. Chad's High School ensure that pupils are confident at the point of transition. A strong partnership with the diocese through discussion and training has contributed to the highly effective development of church school distinctiveness. Continuing professional development and succession planning for leadership of church schools has a positive effect on the school. It opens up opportunities for staff to contribute ideas and insights which enhance their own and the school's Christian development.