

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

Ainsdale St John's Church of England Primary School

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| Sandbrook Road, Ainsdale, Southport, Merseyside PR8 3JE | |
| Current SIAMS inspection grade | Outstanding |
| Diocese | Liverpool |
| Previous SIAMS inspection grade | Outstanding |
| Local authority | Sefton |
| Date of inspection | 22 March 2018 |
| Date of last inspection | March 2013 |
| Type of school and unique reference number | Voluntary Aided 104903 |
| Headteacher | Paul Hooton |
| Inspector's name and number | Mike Graham 286 |

School context

St John's is a primary school of average size situated in a mixed urban area. The pupils are mostly from Ainsdale. The proportion with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is below average but increasing. The vast majority are of White British heritage. There have been significant improvements in facilities in the school and church buildings since the previous inspection. St John's church is on the same site as the school.

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

- Christ-like values are the hallmark of all activities and relationships in the school, and this loving and caring ethos makes a significant impact on the whole community.
- The inspiring Christian leadership from headteacher, deputy head, staff, governors and pupils, stemming from their determination to live the Christian values, leads to security and freedom. This enables pupils to maximise their achievement in all areas of school life.
- Church links are exemplary, with the clergy and other church members playing key roles in pastoral care, religious education (RE) and worship.
- RE and worship are vibrant and life-enhancing, involving pupils, staff, parents and governors and making a huge impact on everyone in the school community.

Area to improve

- Refresh and re-visit varied approaches to prayer, with an added focus on the Christian understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit, so as to extend and deepen the spiritual growth of the whole school family.

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

The vision of the school, as summarised by the headteacher, is to be 'a warm and caring school/church family with Christ at its heart.' The welcome and support offered to all, parents and visitors included, indicates that this aim is being met. Always, and especially during difficult times, the Christ-like love and care lavished on the pupils and their families are exemplary. A parent commenting about a recent example said that the 'support has been amazing for the whole family'. The security felt by the pupils enables and allows them to give of their best without any fear of failure. Achievement overall is therefore good to outstanding, as demonstrated by in-school and national data. Any pupils with SEND or any emotional or social issues receive sensitive and well-focussed support academically, socially and spiritually. The skilful, well-trained staff supporting these pupils work with teachers seamlessly so that the individuals are helped subtly and effectively to play their full part in school life.

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development of the pupils is outstanding. The Christian values are not simply well-known and understood by everyone, they are demonstrated in the everyday lives of the whole school family. Perseverance, thankfulness, friendship, hope, trust and respect, the school's chosen key Christian values, are all underpinned by the supreme value, love. Countless examples of respect, love and friendship occur, for instance the quiet and immediate moving aside by two Year 6 pupils during lunchtime to allow a younger pupil using a walking aid to pass through. Reception children retain a fondness for their Year 6 'buddies' throughout the year, and social and Christian responsibilities are fostered through the ethos, eco and council groups. Cultural development is strongly impacted by the high quality of RE work, notably through the annual 'world faith week'.

Spiritual development is enhanced further for many pupils through the varied provision of Christian after school clubs, in school, at the Methodist church and in St John's church. Many parents appreciate the impact this has on their children even beyond primary school. The inventive displays and numerous areas for quiet reflection throughout the building and in the grounds stimulate deep thinking and, when appropriate, prayer. The Christian character of the school is enhanced through the excellent work in this area, and also by the exceptional impact made by RE.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

Worship at St John's is sincere, varied and vibrant, engaging everyone fully and ensuring that Christian values remain central to school life. Links with the local church and the wider Christian community are very strong and mutually beneficial. The vicar and many members of the church are frequently involved in leading and in providing music for worship. The 'agape' meal and demonstration and explanation of the link between the Last Supper and the celebration of Holy Communion by Christians today is one highlight. The Southport and Area Schools Worker Trust regularly provide and lead worship events that are described by a pupil as 'drama, fun and funny!' A parent commented, 'The children love worship provided by the vicar, the church worship team and Tabs'.

The leading of worship by the pupils is significant, with the 'Little Lights' Ethos group planning, leading and evaluating worship and writing the school prayer. Each class leads a worship time at least annually, attended by parents and carers. The Year 1 group used the theme of Antarctica to bring drama, humour, prayer, poetry and excellent singing together to touch the spirits of everyone present. A Year 2 pupil worshipped silently during the singing of a song about offering our lives to God as a gift, closing her eyes and symbolically opening her hands. A parent wrote, '...we can never truly demonstrate how appreciative we are of the immense effort (the) teaching staff put into making Class Services such special, absolutely must attend events'.

Prayer is a strong feature of the worshipping life of the school, and not only during collective worship times. There are reflection/prayer areas in every classroom, and most of the children use these regularly, provoking deep thought and stimulating private prayer. There has been a 'prayer spaces day' led by the deputy headteacher. This had a powerful effect on all involved, as demonstrated by excellent feedback from pupils, staff and governors. The potential to follow this up with further work on prayer has not yet been fully realised, although there are plans to address this. There is however a special quiet place in the 'Rainbow Room' where pupils are able to set up prayer spaces and can be found praying quietly alone or in small groups.

The pupils have a good overall understanding of the Christian belief in the Holy Trinity. Their grasp of the concepts about God the Father and Creator and about Jesus as Son of God and Saviour is excellent. They are less sure about the Holy Spirit's role, although one pupil explained that after Jesus left them, the disciples received the Holy Spirit and 'He helped them to have courage'. Another added, 'He is always with us.'

The co-operative team approach between staff and children, the vicar and other church leaders, the Methodist church and 'Tabs', the leader of the school worker trust, in planning, delivering and evaluating worship is outstanding. They ensure that worship is constantly evolving and therefore is always fresh and relevant to all.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding

Exemplary teamwork in the leadership and teaching of RE ensures that the subject is exciting, relevant and meaningful for all the pupils. They are deeply immersed in the joys of exploring faith and the big questions of life. A variety of approaches are used, including drama, visits and visitors, re-enactment of Christian and other faith festivals and services and prayer. This includes investigations into Christianity as a multi-cultural world-wide faith. Teaching and learning is always at least good and frequently outstanding, with pupils making excellent progress from their starting points.

Examples of the outstanding impact of RE abound. Reception pupils shared pitta bread in a simple re-creation of the Last Supper, which awakened their senses and reminded them of previous learning. When asked, 'What happened next?' a pupil responded 'Jesus died.' A classmate immediately responded, 'He died and came back to life again!' In a Year 2 lesson on Christian symbols, with the smell of spicy hot cross buns in the background, a pupil said that he thought the most important symbol was 'Bread and wine – symbolises Jesus' body and blood'. The significance of the spices was not lost on two pupils. 'The spices were for His body' said one, with the immediate response from his friend, 'but He was already alive!'

Year 4 pupils studying the betrayals of Jesus by Judas and Peter used photos of a previous role play activity to imagine what was said at various dramatic moments in the events of Holy Week. Their artwork depicting the effects of anger, hurt and forgiveness was very impressive, as were the comments arising from the work. A pupil describing his picture of a volcano erupting with lava flowing into water said it showed 'love overcoming lava, cooling the anger and forgiving'. Another spoke of Peter's upset and regret following his denial of Jesus, saying that he probably felt 'cold in the heart'.

A visit by Year 6 to 'Mission Impossible', an annual event held in a local church exploring the deep significance of Jesus' death and resurrection, was followed by a review of the experience. The teacher skilfully helped the pupils to take their learning deeper. The striking example of forgiveness given by Jesus on the cross as He was dying was used to help the pupils to understand how hard it is to forgive those who hurt us. Examples of hurts suffered that are hard to forgive, with the teacher leading by sharing one of her own, led to deep soul-searching and significant advances in spiritual understanding.

Work on faiths other than Christianity is well planned and effective, including visits and a group of Year 6 pupils taking part in the annual 'Holocaust Memorial Day' at Christ Church Southport. Pupils know the value of studying other faiths, one saying that 'we can understand them better whenever we meet them'.

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

The headteacher and his team are inspirational. They exemplify Christian living to the best of their abilities to outstanding effect, setting examples that the pupils acknowledge and follow. As a result, the loving and caring ethos is clear as soon as one enters the school. As one governor said, 'When you walk through the door you have a hug!' The Christian vision is endorsed and understood by all, with the governors lending united support as 'critical friends'. This vision, being lived out so well, gives the pupils such love and security that they are free to give of their best without any inhibitions.

Governors and senior leaders form a Rainbow Group committee that seeks to monitor and deepen all areas of church school distinctiveness and further strengthen the church/school partnership. The school's own self-evaluation document states that 'all aspects of school life are taken to the Lord in prayer'. All members of the school community sense the care for every family and determination to put the pupils first. A governor said that the staff 'don't see faith or culture as a barrier – they have a self-less, barrier-less approach!'

The impact of the collective living out of the Christian vision is not taken for granted. Governors and staff ensure that it is monitored through open, honest evaluation and thorough strategic planning. This has led to careful and effective responses to the areas for development from the previous inspection report and full compliance with the statutory requirements for RE and worship.

Preparation for leadership is exceptional, with outstanding teamwork, delegation, coaching and in-service training. No fewer than three members of staff have completed the diocesan 'Christian Leadership; Making a Difference' programme since the previous inspection. Partnerships with the local churches, the diocese and the local community are exceptionally strong, with mutual benefits. For instance the school contributes greatly to church worship and the vicar, worship leader and other key members of St John's church play key roles in worship, RE and several vibrant after-school Christian clubs. The spiritual health of the pupils is in good hands. Comments from parents and grandparents included, 'Christianity is clearly at the heart of the school', 'Faith underpins everything' and 'It's fantastic!'