

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

St James' Church of England Lower School

Main Road, Biddenham MK40 4BD

Current SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Diocese	St Albans
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Outstanding
Local authority	Bedford
Date of inspection	5 July 2017
Date of last inspection	27 April 2012
Type of school and unique reference number	Voluntary Aided 109164
Headteacher	Maria Soulsby
Inspector's name	Mary Westley
Quality assurance	Jayne Pavlou 628

School context

St James' is a smaller than average lower school in a village setting, within close reach of an area of high mixed ethnicity. The current headteacher is the fourth since the last inspection and took up post in April 2015. The school will transition to primary school status in September 2017. The vicar was new to post in January 2017. The percentages of both special educational needs and disabilities, and those receiving the additional funding allocated to disadvantaged pupils, are below national averages. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is higher than the national.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St James' Lower as a Church of England school are good

- Excellent levels of care result in a very strong family orientated community, rooted in the Christian values of love, respect and the firm belief that every individual child is cherished as a gift from God.
- The well-being of all members of the community is given great importance and is directly attributable to the Christian character of the school.
- Inspirational leadership provided by the headteacher has galvanised the whole school community to strive to make this school the best church school possible, serving the community with love and perseverance.
- The school's Christian character ensures a fully inclusive approach so that the needs of all children are met well.

Areas to improve

- Enable all members of the school community to understand more fully what makes the school's values distinctively Christian by establishing clear links between the values and biblical teaching in both collective worship and religious education (RE).
- Review the current RE provision, and time dedicated to the subject, in order to improve outcomes for the children.
- Formalise the school's self- evaluation strategies so that all leaders have a clear understanding of how effective and distinctive the school is as a church school.

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

This school values its Christian foundation highly. The headteacher and governors are united to ensure a fully inclusive approach where 'every individual child is cherished as a gift from God'. Academic excellence is sought for all, within a Christian context and individual pupil achievements across the school are highly valued. As a result, academic standards are broadly above the national for all pupils. Attendance rates are high, due to the fact pupils feel loved and valued in this school. There is a powerful sense of respect running through the community and this is very evident in all relationships and at all levels. This leads to a very strong sense of community, with all families feeling welcome and included. This has also impacted on staff positively. The well-being of all members of this community is given the highest importance and this is directly attributable to the Christian character of the school. This can be seen, for example, in the extremely thoughtful and appropriate messages and prayers sent to a recently bereaved staff member from the children. Staff feel supported and valued because of this Christian ethos. Aspects of RE, including the Year 3 faith tour, have contributed to this appreciation of all, but it is the values of love and respect being consistently referred to in school that has made pupils and staff so aware of each other's needs. This includes a very well-developed awareness of diversity due to the way families of different faiths are welcomed in to the school. More use could be made of opportunities in RE to reinforce the Christian values and link them more tightly to a biblical context. The school uses God's 'rainbow promise' to remind all of His love and that all are equal and precious in His sight. This has been shared relentlessly, including a prominent display in the hall and mention on every newsletter. Linked to this are 'rainbow moments' used to catch pupils demonstrating the Christian values of the school. These include acts of kindness and consideration. They are celebrated as part of collective worship, shared in the weekly newsletter and in written messages home from the headteacher. Pupils, parents and staff value this highly and it clearly shapes their attitudes towards one another. Pupil behaviour throughout the school is excellent showing respect at all levels. Pupils' spirituality is developed through their use of 'candle time' and prayer. They are able to think about issues and do so comfortably although there is no formalised planning for these opportunities. Pupils' understanding of Christianity as a multi-cultural world faith is developing and they have some understanding of different Christian denominations. The headteacher has worked relentlessly to build the Christian character of the school. As a result the school is an extremely supportive Christian community caring deeply for the needs of all its members and the wider community. For example in the 'Race for Life', organised by pupil governors, each child wrote a meaningful message as well as raising a considerable amount of money for charity. There is a culture of giving across the school through supporting local, national and international charities. Pupils are centrally involved in this, including pupil governors choosing which cause is the most appropriate to support and organising proceedings. Pupil governors are also actively involved in promoting good relationships in school. The friendship charter which they developed is displayed and shared throughout the school. Children are taught to understand the importance of kindness.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is good

The school places great importance on collective worship as shown by the attendance of all staff on each occasion. Pupils engage well by listening attentively and singing joyfully. They all enter the hall ready to worship with hands crossed and walking calmly. The worship is inclusive and no families of other faiths elect not to attend. Pupils are aware that worship contains 'messages of how to behave'. In the worship observed a pupil volunteered that, as part of Christ's body, they would 'love others and take care of them'. Pupil involvement since the last inspection has increased. Pupils take turns to welcome the school to worship, light the candle and share a greeting. They also finish worship with their chosen hope, wish and a prayer which they prepare spontaneously. Year groups take turns to co-ordinate termly services in church where all classes contribute. Pupils enjoy this and the vicar reports that he only has to 'top and tail' as pupils prepare all the rest. Opportunities for pupils to evaluate this and other acts of worship are in an early stage of development. Planning is effective but needs to enable more opportunities for pupils to link the school's Christian values to biblical teaching in their worship and involve the newly appointed vicar in this planning and evaluation. Pupils have an age appropriate understanding of the key Christian beliefs such as that of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and can explain their thoughts. There are opportunities for prayer in their worship and in class rooms where each class has a dedicated prayer table with prayer boxes. Pupils are aware of these areas and access them readily. They are able to articulate their thoughts clearly and recently wrote moving prayers for the survivors of Grenfell and the souls lost. They are able to reflect quietly and candles are used to aid reflection both in worship and during candle time in classes. Pupils are familiar with Anglican responses which start and conclude the worship, with pupils involved in leading them where appropriate. Parents are welcome to, and make time to attend, the termly services in church. Many attend on a regular basis, including those of other faiths. Worship provides a strong community link with the village through a harvest festival shared with members of the parish. The vicar leads worship weekly in school and 'makes Christianity fun'. Pupils and staff appreciate the enthusiasm he has brought to worship in a short time. There is a clear pattern for worship in school with attention made to the setting of the atmosphere with entry music, candles and a worship table displaying seasons of the church year. All staff regularly lead worship as 'God's story tellers' and have appropriate resources to do so. Staff and parents feel involved in worship as they feel it increases their sense of belonging.

The effectiveness of the religious education is satisfactory

Standards in RE are broadly in line with national expectations. Pupils enjoy RE and work well together in pairs or small groups. They are encouraged to think widely and the introduction of philosophy for children has helped facilitate this. One Year 4 pupil reported that he enjoyed 'going deeper' when exploring topics in RE where they are given time to think. Pupils are taught three world religions in addition to Christianity. Pupils say they enjoy learning about other faiths and they are able to share some key ideas. Effective use is made of first-hand information from pupils' own faiths, including Christianity, enabling comparisons and understanding. The regular faith tour in Year 3 provides a clear comparison of three world faiths through back to back visits to a mosque, gurdwara and a Church of England church in a different style from that in Biddenham which pupils know well. Their knowledge of Christianity as a multi-cultural world faith is developing through the annual international week and charity links. RE is given the same value and respect as other core subjects, for example literacy. Work is generally well presented. Pupils also create 'shared' whole class books to record sensitive responses to relevant issues raised in RE. However, overall there is limited work in books and insufficient records over time to indicate levels of achievement. This makes it harder for teachers to grasp the progress that pupils are making. Pupils can retell some Bible stories and they are aware of the Old and New Testament, their knowledge of the Old Testament being stronger. They find it harder to talk about the stories' meaning. There are limited opportunities in RE to link the schools' distinctively Christian values to Bible stories and the gospel teaching. Pupils' behaviour is excellent in RE lessons and teaching in the subject is at least satisfactory. Tasks are clear but could be further matched to the needs of all learners to ensure rapid progress. The headteacher leads the subject with passion and has introduced 'Understanding Christianity' training and materials to the whole school in January 2017. Impact has already been noted in Year 4 where their study of the salvation unit has led to deeper pupil questioning and thinking. The teaching of RE is monitored regularly by the headteacher, as subject leader, but there are time constraints. Plans are firmly in place to spread leadership across new senior teaching staff and to involve the newly appointed vicar in the planning and monitoring of the subject.

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

The headteacher has worked tirelessly since her arrival in April 2015, to make sure the school's Christian character is evident. As a result, a deeply caring community exists at all levels. She leads by example in all her behaviour and her own faith is very evident. This has led to all staff and pupils sharing care and respect across the community. Small acts of kindness abound every day and are common place. Members of the community help each other from fetching another pudding for a neighbour at lunch time to applauding a child's success when the going is tough. A Year 3 child said that since moving to St James' she had learned to care more about other people and their feelings. The headteacher cares deeply about every child in the school, knowing them all by name and personal characteristics. The warm welcome given to all in the school, and by all, is epitomised in her greeting every child and family as they enter the school gate every day, 'rain or shine'. She knows her pupils and families very well indeed and they all know and appreciate this. Both the governors and headteacher greatly value the Christian foundation of the school. They form a strong partnership united in the desire to improve the life chances of every child. All pupils are considered gifted and talented in their own right. Praise is given loudly. The school meets its mission statement of 'academic excellence for all in a Christian context', as standards are broadly above the national for all pupils. Disadvantaged pupils achieve in line with their peers and thrive in the school's supportive and encouraging ethos. Christian values shape relationships and help recognise each individual as precious and made in God's image. RE and collective worship have a clear profile in the school. Governors are reminded of the school's Christian values as these are shared at each meeting. An example of how these influence governor action is the discussion on how their admissions criteria might be used for the benefit of some vulnerable families. Although governors are involved in aspects of monitoring, there is not yet a systematic self-evaluation by the governors of the school as a church school. The school's relationship with the local church is strong and has been strengthened with the arrival of the new vicar who shares the school's Christian values. A close link exists between the local church and the governing body as three foundation governors are members of the parochial church council leading to a further sharing of Christian values. The headteacher, as subject leader for RE, has made a good provision for staff training including induction for the Understanding Christianity resource and in the introduction of philosophy for children. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is enhanced through the emphasis on Christian values. Working with the diocese, governors have looked ahead to plan and provide a suitably experienced new senior leadership team from September, when the school will assume primary status. The school values its links with the diocese and benefits from the training and support it offers. There is a very strong partnership between parents and the school, and parents are very aware of the school's values and expectations.

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