

Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report

St Leonards Church of England Voluntary Aided Lower School

Thrift Road, Heath and Reach, Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire, LU7 0AX

Current SIAMS inspection grade	Outstanding
Diocese	St Albans
Previous SIAMS inspection grade	Good
Local authority	Central Bedfordshire
Name of multi-academy trust / federation	N/A
Date of inspection	12 January 2017
Date of last inspection	6 December 2011
Type of school and unique reference number	Lower 109618
Headteacher	Sarah Vincent
Inspector's name and number	Rachel Peddie
Quality Assurance	Lyn Field 151

School context

St Leonards is a smaller than average voluntary aided lower school serving the village of Heath and Reach on the outskirts of Leighton Buzzard. There are 103 pupils on roll taught in small single year group classes. The vast majority of pupils are of White British heritage. There are small numbers of children with special educational needs, and the proportion of disadvantaged pupils eligible for additional funding known as the pupil premium is below average. There have been some changes in the governing body since the last inspection and the vicar has been in post for 3 and a half years.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Leonards VA Lower School as a Church of England school are outstanding

- Christian values are deeply embedded at all levels of the school's practice, which results in high standards of academic achievement, behaviour and personal wellbeing for all pupils.
- The headteacher has provided an inspirational driving force in developing the school's distinctive Christian character, building highly positive relationships between all members of the school community.
- The strong partnership between the school and local vicar supports the pupils' understanding of the Christian faith.
- The high quality, innovative teaching of religious education (RE) contributes significantly to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC).
- The on-going commitment to professional development and training of staff in RE results in outstanding outcomes for pupils.

Areas to improve

- Embed pupils' development of spirituality and personal prayer through reflection opportunities in both collective worship and across the school day in order that they understand the relevance and importance of this in the lives of Christians.
- Further develop the opportunities pupils have to plan and lead their own acts of worship independently so that they deepen their understanding of Christian worship.

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

Distinctive Christian values lie at the heart of St Leonard's, underpin all that the school does and are lived out daily by all members of the school community. Relationships at all levels across the school are excellent and standards of attendance and behaviour are high. This is because all staff and children model the school's values on a daily basis and children feel secure; as one child said, 'I always feel safe here. School is a place where there are no worries.' Pupils are able to use their understanding of Christian values in their daily lives, such as on the playground. One pupil explained, 'there is no bullying here, we sort out our problems by working together and nobody upsets someone on purpose'.

Parents are highly supportive of the school and value the information and guidance they receive from teachers enabling them to support their child's development at home, such as using the 'values petals' to recognise their child's demonstration of the current Christian value outside school. The school actively supports a wide range of charities, national and international, through fundraising activities and their sponsorship of a World Vision child in Africa demonstrating the values of compassion and generosity.

Values are clearly evident in displays of children's work around the school and creative use of the school's outdoor environment, such as the school garden and woodland, teaches children about the stewardship of God's world. This engaging curriculum contributes significantly to children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC). Pupils achieve highly across the curriculum and make excellent progress; outcomes for pupils are consistently above national expectations. This is because of the commitment of all staff in knowing and valuing each pupil as a child of God. Pupils clearly relate values to their learning, explaining how the value of perseverance helps them to 'stick at things' and how 'we use courage to have a go at new learning'. Pupils can articulately reflect on the importance of values in their lives: 'we have them so we can grow up to be a good person and make the right choices'. They can make secure links between values and Biblical teachings such as trust in the story of Jesus stilling the storm and thankfulness in the story of the ten lepers.

The outstanding teaching and learning in religious education contributes strongly to pupils' SMSC development enabling them to learn about Christianity and a number of other world religions. Pupils show a mature understanding of diverse faiths and cultures for their age. The Christian foundations of the school are entwined in every aspect of the school's work and as one governor said, 'God's love is here in this place'.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

Collective worship has a high profile and is a central part of the school day bringing the school community together in an atmosphere of reverence and praise. Worship is distinctively Christian with a strong focus on the life and teachings of Jesus and the Trinity. It encompasses a number of Anglican traditions and pupils demonstrate a very good understanding of recitals, learned prayer and Christian hymns. Pupils and adults engage with collective worship enthusiastically as a result of the range of approaches used to motivate and inspire such as through music, imagery, and drama. Daily worship is led by a range of leaders including the vicar's weekly worship and through 'Open the Book' sessions. Pupils have opportunities for silence and reflection during worship and explained how 'Father Noel does the Jesus minute with us and we have time to sit and think.' However, use of the classroom reflection areas, prayer boxes and the outdoor Peace Pod are not yet fully contributing to pupils' spiritual development.

Since the last inspection, 'Worship Leaders' have been introduced which gives the oldest pupils in school opportunities to write prayers for use with the whole school. These help to develop children's spiritual understanding as seen in their prayers for Syria. Classes have also begun to plan and deliver their own acts of worship based on the current focus value. Through robust self-evaluation, the school has identified that independent pupil-led worship is an area to be developed further.

Statutory requirements for collective worship are met and careful planning supports pupils' knowledge and understanding of Christian values, the liturgical church year and Biblical teachings. Pupils talk confidently about key times in the Christian calendar, including Epiphany and Pentecost and can explain the colours of the church altar cloths and the candles on an advent wreath. Pupils have an impressive understanding of the Trinity for their age and the use of a 3 wick candle in collective worship deepens this understanding; pupils write their own recitals for each wick of the candle.

Pupils are very positive about the weekly worship led by the vicar and through sharing his experiences abroad, this is developing the children's understanding of Christianity as a worldwide multi-cultural faith. The vicar also teaches the oldest pupils in school 'The Bible Code' which means that they are all confident to access scripture in the Bible by the time they transfer to middle school. Systematic monitoring and evaluation of worship by pupils, clergy, staff and governors have led to a number of improvements since the last inspection and the school's motto of 'Growing in Faith' accurately reflects the school's journey in recent years.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding

Religious education has a very high profile in the school as a core subject and statutory requirements are met. Pupils attain high standards in RE as assessed against the expectations of the core syllabus.

Pupils make outstanding progress in RE during their time in school due to the high quality, vibrant curriculum they receive and because of the excellent subject knowledge of teachers. The school has been very committed to improving standards in RE and the subject leaders have all undertaken a wide range of specialist RE training. This has impacted significantly on the whole school through sharing of knowledge and modelling of outstanding teaching. RE is led highly effectively and this ensures that the subject remains high profile across the school. The school is currently working towards the RE Quality Mark (Gold) and this includes championing RE in other local schools through offering training opportunities for non-RE specialists. The curriculum is based on a clear scheme of work, due to be revised following recent Understanding Christianity training.

Teachers are confident and imaginative, planning inspiring lessons through which pupils can question, reflect and develop deeper thinking skills. RE includes a range of experiences and resources including Godly Play in the Reception class and use of 'big questions'. RE lessons and activities are matched effectively to the needs of all learners and teachers' marking and feedback skilfully probes the pupils' responses further to facilitate deeper thinking. There are carefully planned opportunities to enhance the teaching of RE with trips, visitors and whole-school practical 'Experience Journeys' on Harvest, Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. Pupils speak with confidence about the impact the trip to the Gurdwara and Mosque had on them: 'when we go there it helps us to learn about other faiths so we can understand what they believe and it helps us to see how everyone is equal.' Trips to St Albans Abbey and activities in the parish church further support their understanding of Christianity. RE contributes extensively to the SMSC development of pupils of all ages. Pupils talk with enthusiasm about RE and enjoy the challenge it provides. One pupil explained 'I love RE because it makes me think hard – do I believe or not? Was Jesus real or a myth?' Learning fits closely alongside the school's Christian values, for example the youngest pupils learning the story of David and Goliath, linking with the current value of courage. Pupils have a secure knowledge and understanding of Christianity and the other faiths studied and can describe in depth some of the features and principles of different world religions.

The quality and status of RE at St Leonard's is clearly visible throughout the school through classroom organisation, displays and in the exceptionally high standard of work in children's books.

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

Since the last inspection, the inspirational headteacher, ably supported by staff, governors and vicar, has been relentless in her drive to raise the profile of the school's distinctively Christian character and vision: 'that all children receive education of the highest quality in the context of Christian belief and practice'. Her robust evaluation and subsequent development planning for the school ensures that the school's Christian foundations and mission underpin all aspects of the school's work. This has impacted significantly on the achievement of pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, as evidenced in the high levels of attainment and progress of children across the curriculum. Issues from the last SIAS inspection have been addressed in full. The governing body play a key role in school leadership and are deeply committed to shaping and sharing the school's distinctive Christian character. Governors make frequent visits to school and are actively engaged in the monitoring and evaluation of RE and collective worship which means that they contribute effectively to insightful self-review and school development planning. The honest, yet modest, self-evaluation provides an accurate picture of the school's current position and reflects the continuing ambition for further improvements by precisely identifying areas for future development. Partnerships with stakeholders are highly positive; parents speak highly of the school and recognise the many developments in recent years. The school is very well regarded in the local community and, because of the work undertaken since the last inspection, is now absolutely recognised as a church school. The relationship between the school, the parish church and vicar is particularly strong in a genuine mutual partnership. The charismatic vicar contributes significantly to developing children's understanding of the Christian faith through his contribution to school worship. Pupils' RE and values based work is displayed in the church which further strengthens the school's status as a church school.

Staff can confidently describe how the school's Christian character has grown in recent years and one teacher summarised, 'we are now a proper church school - and worship is definitely worship and not just an assembly'. Another member of staff explained how the school's Christian foundation had affected her personally: 'My own faith has grown since being here because it has made me question things about what I believe.' One of the most significant strengths of St Leonards is the headteacher's commitment to high quality, ongoing professional development for the staff and her skilful nurturing of relationships and partnerships. All combined, this results in a very sincere, and secure, shared vision across the community for the future of St Leonards as a church school.