



Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools

St Mary's Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School

Wintringham Road
St Neots
Cambridgeshire
PE19 1NX

Diocese: Ely

Local authority: Cambridgeshire

Dates of inspection: 28 September 2007

Date of last inspection: February 2003

School's unique reference number: 110848

Headteacher: Mrs Mary Barnard

Inspector's name and number: Betty Barratt 203

School context

St Mary's Church of England School is a one form entry school situated about ten minutes walk from the parish church. It serves an area of high social deprivation near the centre of St Neots. There are 163 learners on roll. Most come from the large housing estate adjacent to the school. A few parents from outside the catchment area chose the school for their children because it is a church school. The percentage with learning difficulties or disabilities is above the national average for a school of this size, and the school has a high percentage of learners who come from the local permanent Traveller site. Very few learners speak languages other than English in the home.

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

The strong Christian ethos which permeates the school inspires excellent relationships and very positive values and attitudes to teaching and learning. Learners thrive in a happy, relaxed and secure environment. They respond very well to the high expectations for their achievement and behaviour, and their care and consideration of one another. An exceptionally wide range of out of school activities enrich their learning, and their confidence and self-esteem are boosted by encouragement and reward. Adults are excellent role models.

Established strengths

- The commitment of the headteacher and governors to promoting the distinctive Christian character of the school.
- The Christian principles which are lived out in practice by the whole school community
- The high quality acts of worship, including all learners and staff, contribute greatly to learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development
- The exceptionally good relationships between learners and adults, amongst learners and between staff.

Focus for development

- Systematic monitoring and evaluation of the achievement of the school's vision as a Church of England school involving learners, parents, staff and governors.
- Greater emphasis on teaching factual knowledge and skills in religious education

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

The school's very strong Christian ethos results in all learners being helped to flourish as individuals and to achieve their best. Learners feel valued, safe, and secure in a warm, welcoming and calm environment. The excellent relationships between them and their teachers, amongst learners themselves, and between adults are key to learners' good achievement. The celebration of their successes, for example, in assemblies, the awards listed on the school the Roll of Honour and in the local press encourages them to do even better. Learners are happy, confident, articulate, and very well behaved. They are very proud of their school as a Church of England School, and relish joining its wide-ranging activities including the music, sport, drama, environmental, and after school clubs, as well as many visits linked to their learning in school such as the annual visit to the Isle of Wight by learners in Years 5 and 6. They value the many opportunities they have to take responsibility, and contribute their ideas about school life through, for example, the School Council and the half-termly Big Conversation on topics such as school assemblies. They are very caring, considerate and helpful to one another, and sensitive to the needs of those further afield. Year 6 learners ran their own bring and buy sale to raise money to pay for a new roof for a school in India when they heard of the school's need. Year 6 learners take their responsibilities very seriously especially those as Pupil Assistants. The many learners from Traveller families are fully integrated into school life.

The rich and varied learning experiences provide outstanding support for learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Their spiritual development is further supported by the vibrant and attractive, displays throughout the school, and by the quiet corners and specially designed outside areas, such as the spiritual garden in the centre of the school, which encourage quiet reflection. The presence of Crosses and other articles of faith, , throughout the school, including the prayer books written by learners, are constant reminders of the school's close partnership with the church. This is further emphasised by the school logo which is worn with pride by learners. Learners are especially proud of the large wooden cross in the school hall which was made from timbers from the old school.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

Collective Worship is regarded as being very important, and central to the life of the school. All learners and adults participate fully. Major Christian festivals and special services, such as Harvest Festivals, Easter and the Year 6 leavers' service, are celebrated in church. Collective worship in both school and church are often attended by parents and governors. Learners enjoy collective worship, singing with enjoyment, listening attentively, and joining reverently in prayer. They often take the lead in assemblies and enjoy visiting speakers. They were fascinated by a presentation by an Antarctic explorer who shared his experiences with them in the context of the care of God's earth. The curate plays a key role in supporting the school's worship both in school assemblies and church. Learners greatly appreciate the variety of worship which visitors enable them to experience. There is however, no prominently displayed distinctively Christian focus such as a worship table in the school hall to remind learners of the Christian nature of their worship.

Collective worship and church services encourage learners to reflect and engage with Christian values and prayer in their own lives. Prayer is of key importance in the life of the school. Prayers are said at the end of morning and afternoon school. They are also said at the start and finish of governor's meetings. Learners write their own prayers, and these are included in the books of prayer which are found in every classroom.

Worship makes an important contribution to developing learners' understanding of the Anglican faith and practice. Learners greatly enjoy church services and have an impressive knowledge of liturgy and church practices. For example, they have a very good understanding of the Eucharist, describing the breaking of bread and other parts of the service in detail. They attend Eucharist services both in school and the church, along with staff, parents, governors and members of the church congregation. Collective worship is very carefully planned, and its effectiveness is reviewed and evaluated. The school plans to improve these procedures especially through increasing the involvement of learners.

The effectiveness of the religious education is good

Pupils enjoy religious education. They relish the exciting opportunities for them to engage in imaginative, well-planned lessons. Teaching and learning are good. Pupils are thoroughly engaged in a wide range of activities designed to encourage them to think and reflect. Learners are helped to learn through art, drama, music and dance. Learners in the Reception class were busily involved in the construction of a Succoth, the Jewish harvest symbol. Palm leaves and colourful paper chains all contributed to the decoration of a playhouse outside the classroom. Year 1 children were intrigued to see bread being made in preparation for the Harvest Festival in church. Year 5 learners responded very well to the challenge for them to interpret the life of Jesus and his disciples through dance, and to evaluate each other's performance.

Both of the Year 1 and Year 5 lessons built on to earlier work. Year 1 learners had learned about God's earth, and Year 5 had learned about the story of Jesus. Both lessons encouraged learners to participate fully and reflect, but neither included enough teaching of factual religious knowledge.

Religious education is regarded as being of great importance in the school. It is well planned and resourced, the effectiveness of lessons is kept under review and pupils' progress is systematically assessed. Learning is enriched by visits to churches and other places of worship including Ely Cathedral and a local mosque. All teachers attend termly diocesan training along with regular meetings led by the religious education co-ordinator. Religious education makes an important contribution to promoting the Christian character of the school, and provides strong support for learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Learners make good progress on the whole. They have a good awareness of how their faith affects their lives and those of others. They understand what it means to be part of a faith community and different ways of worshipping. The religious education syllabus currently focuses on three faiths: Christianity, Islam and Judaism but this is being revised to include a greater range of religions.

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

The headteacher and governors are deeply committed to promoting the distinctive Christian character of the school. The school's Christian purpose and values are made clear in the school's aims, and staff appointments are guided by the need to ensure that these are upheld by those new to the school. Staff feel greatly valued and strongly support the school's vision as a church school. They are excellent role models, and work well together sharing very high expectations for learners' achievement and behaviour. There is great respect among adults and learners, all are valued equally. The school's admission policy is fully inclusive, and the school's Christian vision is made clear to all families.

The foundation governors are a very strong influence and source of inspiration and support, especially in promoting close links with the church and local community. They have an excellent understanding of their role, and are deeply committed to the achievement of the school's Christian vision and aims. They work very closely with the school as critical friends, questioning and identifying areas to be further developed.

The links with the local church are very strong and the parish priest was a significant influence in promoting learners' understanding of the Anglican faith and practices. Pending the appointment of a new vicar, the curate is continuing this role. She has assumed additional responsibilities for supporting the school, in addition to her already close involvement helping in the teaching of music and drama, and running confirmation classes. She regularly visits the school and leads collective worship in school and the church. These services include Eucharist attended by members of the church congregation. There is a strong working partnership between the school and church. Learners share harvest gifts with the church, and the school contributes to a monthly article in the Parish Magazine and helps to publicise church events. Members of the parish church help in school with story telling, reading and explaining about their faith. The school is seen as an important reminder of the church's presence in the local community.