

# National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools Report

## St Mary's Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School

Elliotts Hill  
Brixton  
Devon  
PL8 2AG

**Diocese:** Exeter

Local authority: Devon  
Dates of inspection: 5<sup>th</sup> July 2013  
Date of last inspection: 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2007  
School's unique reference number: 113478  
Headteacher: Dr Penny Fitch ( Head of School),  
Martin Harding (Executive Head)  
Inspector's name and number: Mrs Daphne Spitzer NS 37

### School context

St Mary's Church of England Primary School serves the village of Brixton and surrounding areas, close to the city of Plymouth. It has 33 children on roll in 2 classes. The numbers of children with learning difficulties and/or physical difficulties are above average and those receiving additional support through pupil premium is average. Almost all children are of white British heritage. The school has experienced a period of significant turmoil over the last few years. In September 2012 a new head of school was appointed together with two new teachers. The school has been working with the United Schools Federation of St Catherine's and St Michaels Church of England primary schools under an interim executive board. In February 2013 the school formally joined the federation under the leadership of the executive headteacher.

### The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Mary's Church of England VA primary school are good

St Mary's Church of England VA Primary School is a Christian community which clearly proclaims its roots in the Christian faith and Christian teaching. This enables good academic achievement and personal and spiritual development. The school is at the heart of the church and local village community.

### Established strengths

- The quality of the leadership by the head of school and strong staff teamwork provided by the federation, which ensures learning and progress are good.
- Outstanding teaching and learning in religious education, reflecting its high status.
- Strong partnership between the school, church and village, enabling effective local community cohesion

### Focus for development

- Widen and extend regular opportunities for children's leadership of collective worship.
- Identify and embed a set of distinctive Christian values, monitor and evaluate their impact on the children's academic, personal and spiritual development, using evidence from the whole school community

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

St Mary's Church of England Primary School is a welcoming, friendly community where Christian values are implicitly recognised, celebrated and established in daily life. The school creates a secure, caring, inclusive Christian environment in which all children are cherished

and valued in line with the core Christian belief that each is created in the image of God. This in turn has a very positive impact on the children's good attendance and achievement because children's self confidence is high as is their enjoyment of school life. Children say that teachers make learning fun and as one child said *'it's easier to learn when it's fun'*. They also say that the Christian value of respect is important and so they listen to their teachers very carefully as well as praise their patience in helping them to learn. Children also say they value the time provided for them to think. Spiritual reflection is very effective because quiet times are now integral to the school day and provide a calm setting conducive to learning. Opportunities for spiritual reflection are developing well. This is evident in a child's comment following a visit to the church that *'I liked the quiet, it felt calm, it helped me think.'* Prayer is a central part of the school day. Children are developing their personal spirituality well as noted from the good use made of the pebbles, representing their thoughts for God, placed in the bowl, in the spare classroom. Prayers hanging from the branches of a tree in front of the school promote spiritual development very effectively because they are in a child's words *'closer to heaven'*. Although the spare classroom is regarded as a quiet space for personal reflection, this is not always as accessible as reflective corners or prayer spaces would be in the children's own classrooms. Relationships at St Mary's are outstanding. This is because children recognise that the Christian values of forgiveness and trust are inextricably linked to the value of friendship. Children's understanding of friendship is excellent. For instance, one child said that Christ's teaching about friendship shows him *'how to be a true friend and how to make a friend feel special'*. Children are developing a good understanding of diverse communities. This is reflected in the impact of a recent Muslim visitor to the school as well as pupils' evident enjoyment of learning about other faiths and cultures in religious education (RE). Children in the older class are now sharing their learning in an exciting and meaningful way with a number of schools overseas including one in an ethnically diverse community in New Zealand.

### **The impact of collective worship on the school community is good**

Collective worship is an important part of daily life at St Mary's Church of England VA Primary School because it effectively promotes the Christian values the school lives by. Children say that they associate the values with stories from the Bible such as the way that Noah trusted in God and the way that Jesus told us how to treat our friends. Collective worship effectively promotes spiritual awareness and the centrality of prayer. This was evident in the worship observed led by the head of school about prayer. The symbolism of laying pebbles in turn beside the cross created an evocative, reflective atmosphere, to which all pupils responded. Children understood that in this way they were sharing their happy celebratory thoughts with God. During the recent church vacancy, the Lay Reader has maintained strong links with the school in worship times. Her role has been highly welcomed and valued by children as well as staff. She works closely with staff in planning worship and is also well able to evaluate its impact by talking to children in an informal way. Staff monitor and evaluate children's views on a regular basis. This has shown that the role of children in planning and leading worship is underdeveloped. Children's understanding of Anglican practice is good. They understand the significance of the changes of the liturgical coloured cloth; also the lighting of the candle, which children understand represents the light of Christ. The school holds a Eucharist service in school at regular intervals which unites the school and church community and is having an impact on the lives of the children. It has introduced them to the Christian understanding of the Trinity and provided further opportunities for spiritual development as reflected in a child's comment that it *'was so good to receive food from God'*.

### **The effectiveness of religious education is good**

Achievement in RE is good. Children are now making good progress across the key stages from their varying starting points which are generally in line with national expectations, to attainment at the end of Year 6 which is now in line with the national average and in some cases above. Progress since September has been rapid, reversing previous standards which had been poor. This is because teaching across the school is outstanding. Learning is of the highest quality because teachers plan in a skilful manner, differentiating learning outcomes by well chosen activities which are both challenging and exciting. Teachers use excellent

questioning skills to promote deep thinking and higher level analytical skills. This was evident, in particular, in the older class when children were demonstrating an exceptional ability to ask very difficult philosophical questions about the meanings of life related to God's world. The high level of children's thinking skills are evident in the way a child refined his question from 'why do I exist?' to 'why did God choose me to be here?' This is also an example of how RE contributes in a highly effective way to spiritual development. Christian values are very well promoted by RE as evident in another lesson where children were learning about the way the disciples had to trust Jesus and follow Him. The RE curriculum is engaging and interactive, ensuring that children enjoy the subject and find it relevant to their lives. Children say RE is important because it helps them understand people who have a different faith and culture. Children demonstrate a good understanding of Christianity. Young children were able to identify Jesus's disciples as friends and make links with their own friendships. RE is very well supported by the RE subject leader for the federation. She acts very effectively in an advisory capacity, visiting the school to monitor lessons, provide feedback for staff and assist in raising standards. The head of school also regularly monitors teaching in the same way as the other core subjects and tracks children's progress ensuring children achieve near to their potential.

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

The leadership of the school over the last year has been inspirational in providing clear direction for the promotion of the school's distinctive Christian character. The Christian vision of the federation adopted by the school community, following the consultation process, has totally transformed the school in a very short time and has been key to the school's success. Governors have a good understanding of how the school's Christian character impacts in a very positive way on the children's achievement. They say this is reflected in the calm learning environment and excellent relationships based on Christian values. However, as yet, the school leadership have not explored distinctive Christian values in a robust theological manner together in order to explore which ones best fit the needs of their school community in developing the whole child. Parents fully support the school's distinctive Christian character and say they notice the impact of the introduction of Christian values in the way children talk about friendship, for example. The process of self evaluation as a church school is as yet in its early stages due to the school's short life within the federation. However, monitoring and evaluating of current practice by leaders and staff is ongoing and has a high profile. Areas for development are accurately identified The new incumbent is planning to develop a Christian club for children in order to increase their roles within the Eucharist service. The partnership between the school and church has grown strengthened. This is evident in the way a member of the community plays the piano regularly for collective worship, the school's valued contributory role in the recent church fete and the part played by the children at the monthly Messy Church. The role of the diocese in support of the school over the last year and a half has been greatly appreciated. Professional development by the diocese is also valued as are the support of key members of the federation.

SIAMS report July 2013, St Mary's Church of England VA Primary School, Brixton, Devon, PL82AG