

National Society Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools Report

Countess Anne Church of England Academy

School Lane
Hatfield
AL10 8AX

Previous SIAMS grade: Outstanding

Current inspection grade: Outstanding

Diocese: St Albans

Local authority: N/A

Dates of inspection: 26 February 2015

Date of last inspection: October 2009

School's unique reference number: 140238

Headteacher: David Lodge

Inspector's name and number: Lyn Field 151

School context

Countess Anne became a Church of England Academy in October 2013. The school is linked to a number of churches including St Etheldreda's, St Michael's and All Angels and St Luke's, through the Bishop's Hatfield Team ministry. The leadership of both the school and the church has remained stable since the last inspection. Pupils are predominantly White British with a small but significant proportion of Black African heritage and a growing number of European families. About a third of pupils have been eligible for free school meals for a significant length of time. The proportion with special educational needs is broadly in line with the national average. There is a wellbeing centre on site.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of Countess Anne as a Church of England school are outstanding

- The inspiring leadership of the headteacher and rector is rooted in their personal faith and has created a culture where every child has the chance to succeed.
- This is achieved through exceptional pastoral care that attends to the mental health and social needs of pupils as an expression of God's unconditional love.
- A theological understanding of the school's Christian vision shapes every aspect of the school's work from learning in the classroom to the decisions made by governors and even to climbing mountains.
- Religious education (RE), collective worship and music contribute to the Christian character of the school through their integration into the whole curriculum.
- The partnership with the church reflects a shared mission to serve the community.

Areas to improve

- To develop a sustainable programme of study for RE that has clear building blocks for developing progression in pupils' learning.

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

The school makes a huge investment in the wellbeing and safety of pupils. This is deeply embedded because of stable Christian leadership and the imagination and perseverance of the pastoral team on a daily basis. Consequently, pupils flourish. They progress from very low starting points to reach national averages and disadvantaged pupils are rapidly making up the gap in achievement. Their aspirations are raised through high quality activities such as climbing mountains in Snowdonia and making films for anti-bullying week. Attendance has continued to rise over several years, matching and now exceeding the national average. The level of exclusions is low and behaviour is good. This is the result of strategies to help pupils see themselves as valued and loved by God. Where pupils fall short, the school's Christian character gives clear direction to resolve tensions. Pupils are taught specific phrases to use when saying sorry or forgiving others and these arise from a distinctively Christian understanding of forgiveness. Pupils' knowledge of Bible stories helps them to recognise that prejudice is 'judging wrongly' and leads them to embrace diversity and difference in the community. Christian teaching therefore, has a powerful impact on restoring harmony in relationships and reaches out into family and community life. The school's Living Vision states that *God has a heart for each, no matter their station in life, delighting in their very being and achievements*. This is the motivation for a curriculum model that uniquely incorporates RE and Christian festivals into all subjects as well as giving them a high profile in their own right. The impact of this is that pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is exceptionally well developed. Classes study whole books such as 'I am David' and these are well chosen to highlight the deeper questions of life that pupils learn about in RE. They recognise these spiritual and moral issues in the books they read on their own and so religious ideas come to life for them and make sense in the context of their daily lives. RE plays a key role in shaping the Christian character of the school. The regular musical productions for Christmas and Easter mark pupils' transition through the school and are keenly anticipated. The beliefs underlying Christian festivals are thoroughly understood and pupils as young as Year 2 explain why the caption *Christ Revealed* is relevant to a collage on Epiphany.

The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

Worship at Countess Anne dovetails seamlessly with the whole curriculum. By the time pupils leave the school, they are equipped with a language and understanding of spirituality to draw on for the rest of their lives. Music plays a major role in bringing this about as singing is seen as a gift for life. Everyone is expected to sing, including the adults, so everyone actively engages in worship. The school's long-term commitment to the Voice Foundation ensures the high quality of music is sustained year on year. Two choirs and drumming, including a 'tribal groove' for each of the school's six values, are just part of the daily diet. Pupils help to shape the content of worship in addition to leading music. They are consulted about how Bible stories might be presented in different media and are responsible for gathering Pupil2Pupil feedback. This confirms the high value pupils place on worship and how it builds their confidence to engage with ideas about God and faith. Pupils are confident in developing their own personal prayer by drawing on what they regularly experience in structured reflections, Eucharistic prayer and saying the Grace. The routines and patterns of worship are deeply embedded so pupils absorb a rich variety of Anglican traditions from the different worship leaders. The impact of worship extends into the community. The sung response 'time to pray' has now been adopted in church. Parents of other faiths value the clear teaching about Christianity and food contributions to the FEED ministry are made on a regular basis. Since the last inspection, consistent oversight by the same worship team has achieved a shift to overtly Christian worship happening in the school. It is a dynamic group, passionate about children receiving accurate theological teaching through worship. The impact of the rector's work in this area is that most pupils have no hesitation in explaining concepts such as 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit'. One pupil described it as 'the love of God growing if we do what Jesus taught'. Themes are frequently challenging, including for the most able pupils because leaders present them through thought-provoking statements such as 'forgiveness is about giving up the right to revenge'.

The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding

Leaders of RE are ambitious for the subject and well informed on current issues so standards are rising year on year. The quality of teaching is consistently good and sometimes outstanding. This is because feedback to teachers from lesson observations and regular scrutinies of pupils' work is directly linked to the current focus for development. It clearly identifies what is working well and precisely where improvement is needed. This translates into the next steps teachers set for pupils through marking and prompts thoughtful responses from pupils. They take huge pride in their work and their individual presentations of the Tree of Life are typical of the creativity they bring to tasks. Attainment of Year 6 pupils is now higher than expected for their age. This represents excellent progress over their time in school. It starts in Reception where their learning journeys show how they embrace other faiths and cultures.

The current syllabus is in need of review because it lacks clarity about the steps pupils need to take in order to develop skills and understanding that are specific to RE. Leaders are never complacent and, inspired by a diocesan conference, have used staff meetings to make a start on developing a new programme of study. The current scheme does not restrict pupils' learning because much of RE is taught in the context of other subjects. This helps pupils to apply their understanding of spiritual and moral issues in a wider context. Year 4 pupils, for example, grapple with the question 'Was Mother Teresa powerful?' as part of a topic on leaders in history. They are challenged and excited in equal measure by discussion of 'ultimate questions of life and death'. Older pupils talk with impressive maturity about the meaning of Christian hope, linking it both to basic Christian beliefs and to their own responsibility to 'spread light in the dark, especially when something bad has happened'. This shows the considerable progress teaching has made towards the ambitious aims for RE, which are to enable pupils to explain theological statements and to understand meaning beyond the literal.

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

The close-knit team of the rector, senior leaders and governors has been in place since before the previous inspection. This stability is central to the school's success as they have developed innovative ways of working based on their deep understanding of the needs of children in this community. The school's *Living Vision*, therefore, expresses exactly what it provides: *a holistic provision that encourages Christian hope; building spirit and soul through faith orientated pastoral care*. The explicitly Christian interpretation of what the school stands for is a constant benchmark for all decisions made across the breadth of the school's business, particularly the securing and use of funding. The systems in place to support the wellbeing of pupils and their families are sustainable because the leadership skills and expertise of staff to manage issues of mental health and social deprivation have been developed at all levels. Much of this work rightly goes unseen but the constant presence of expert practitioners such as a school counsellor, art therapist and family worker enables the most vulnerable of pupils to flourish and tackles the isolation in which some families find themselves. The strong partnership with the church is a reciprocal one. The director of music, for example, supports music in school and the church's newly formed YES choir benefits from the experience of school pupils. All staff and governors, not just leaders, know exactly how the school's Christian character shapes their work and the quality of pupils' learning. This is due in part to the integration of worship and RE into the wider curriculum which enriches pupils spiritual and intellectual understanding. It is also the result of a wise decision to plan and review the school's progress each term. Time and expertise are managed efficiently. Monitoring pupil progress in RE, for example, involves governors in the scrutiny of work so insights are shared and the outcomes immediately inform the next term's action plan.