

St Thomas of Canterbury Church of England Voluntary Aided Infant School

Sawyers Hall Lane, Brentwood, Essex. CM15 9BX

Diocese: Chelmsford

Local authority: Essex

Dates of inspection: 19th October 2009

Date of last inspection: 11th October 2006

School's unique reference number: 115184

Headteacher: Mrs Caroline L'Estrange

Inspector's name and number: Reverend Sally Lynch, NS 128

School context

St Thomas of Canterbury Voluntary Aided Infant School is of average size. Below average numbers of pupils are eligible for free school meals. Most pupils come from White British backgrounds and very few speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils who need additional learning support is lower than the national average. The proportion of those with statements of special educational need is average.

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Thomas of Canterbury Voluntary Aided Infant School as a Church of England school are outstanding

The whole school community is secure in living out the Christian faith in all aspects of school life. Christian spirituality and values are at the very heart of the school's mission statement, documentation, website and, most importantly, they are abundantly evident in the schools daily ethos. A genuine care for whole families and all staff, some outstanding teaching and the centrality of worship enables all children to flourish. Many pupil speak freely of their faith.

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Established strengths

- Christian spirituality and values which firmly underpin the whole school community, and impact confidently on everyday life.
- Very well established links with the parish churches, which support inspirational worship and dedicated pastoral care.
- Outstanding teaching of Religious Education, which is varied and exciting.
- A stimulating whole school environment, which focuses on the liturgical year, especially through artefact and display.

Focus for development

- Provide opportunities for staff training in faiths other than Christianity.

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

Christian values wholly underpin the care taken for, and by, all members of the school community. Children and parents speak of feeling valued and a part of the whole school community, which nurtures everyone. A parent describes the care as *'amazing, our children are incredibly lucky'*. Every child and family member really does matter. Parents cite outstanding pastoral care from staff and clergy at times of bereavement, which has enabled children to cope and move on. The deep care of staff is infectious in sustaining an atmosphere of Christian love. Children clearly care for each other around school, for example, EYFS pupils served each other at snack time in a gentle and respectful atmosphere. A current display of shields hanging in the hall includes one from every child. The name of each child is also on a leaf on a developing 'Prayer Tree' in the hall. Pupils are articulate, able, and keen, to talk freely, and with understanding, about their Christian faith. Behaviour around school is very good. Pupils enjoy the beautiful spiritual gifts in the school environment, such as statues and paintings, and a Mexican cross in each classroom is a reminder of the centrality of faith. The school has made outstanding progress since the last inspection in simplifying the mission statement for children so that simple, one word, qualities displayed in the hall enable children to see their *'little light shine'*. They refer to these in class with ease.

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The impact of collective worship on the school community is outstanding

Collective worship is at the very heart of the school and pupils clearly enjoy daily worship in the hall, as well as classroom prayer. They respect the 'sacred space' provided, but are enthusiastic and keen to answer questions, as appropriate. They go home singing songs and talking about the Bible stories learned. Worship is well planned across the year and structured in each day so that pupils know by heart the Lord's Prayer and the Grace and are familiar with simple extempore prayer. A Reception child explained the meaning of 'Amen' with a superb depth of understanding. Children enjoy acting out stories and do so thoughtfully, watching respectfully. Pupils are very aware of the needs of others and are keen to pray for St. Matthew's, their Kenyan partner school. This developing link provides a strong focus on wider community cohesion and is handled very sensitively so that pupils speak of their pen pals with no hint of patronism. The link is seen not as charity but sharing Christian faith. Children are excited about the new link. School Eucharists are the highlight of every half term. Year 2 children play a key role and the services touch adults, many of whom are present. Sharing tea and cake together afterwards emphasises the family nature of the school. In an Early Years Foundation Stage act of worship the daily snack was shared as part of worship, in a beautiful Eucharistic manner. A breadth of Anglican faith and practice is found in the worship across the school and pupils are able to explain the liturgical symbols clearly, for example many knew that a candle was lit as *'Jesus is the light of the world'*. Simple use of colour (such as a piano frontal) helps an understanding of the liturgical seasons. Assessment of worship has developed well since the last inspection, with governors regularly assessing Eucharists. A book put together by Year 1/2 provides an excellent example of pupil reflection on worship; one entry reads, *'At St Thomas' we have a lovely time because we have brilliant assemblies'*. Children talk about Jesus very naturally.

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The effectiveness of the religious education is outstanding

Since the last inspection the school has developed schemes of work and assessment in RE which are well planned and developmental, allowing pupils to make excellent progress. Each child knows their personal learning target and is able to explain whether it has been met. Creative and varied teaching supports deep thinking from pupils and a firm knowledge base. For example in a Year 2 lesson on Saul both attainment target 1 and attainment target 2 were addressed. Pupils were able to re-tell the story of Saul's conversion, and its impact, in depth, as well as to reflect on the feelings of Saul and Ananias. Year 1 pupils engaged totally with a creative lesson on 'what is God like?', producing very deep written explanations, artwork, and oral responses. Differentiated work allows all pupils to flourish and make progress. Excellent classroom displays and artefacts stimulate discussion and Year 1 pupils explained with enjoyment the building and use of a huge Sukkah, developing well work on Judaism. Reception children enjoyed cross curricular work on Creation, which stimulated awe and used the whole school environment.

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

The Headteacher has worked with vision, energy and Christian commitment, along with a dedicated governing body and fully committed staff team, to build up a spiritual atmosphere in which every person is important. The whole staff team support each other and there is clear succession planning in place, valuing staff. Annual staff quiet days are highly valued as opportunities for refreshment, fellowship and training. Governors monitor progress clearly. The school's self evaluation is well informed and accurate and gives the school confidence to be a church school. The strong parish links provide support for both communities. Parents speak proudly of the contribution to the local community through, for example, a poster campaign to 'show you care, park elsewhere'. Parents feel very much a part of the school and are wholly supportive of all it does. Everyone in this school quite clearly shares the Christian vision. A parent and a governor, independently, commented, *'the Holy Spirit is moving here'*. Another parent summarised the care and learning, as: *'God is at the centre of our school'*.

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