YR EGLWYS YNG NGHYMRU THE CHURCH IN WALES

Section 50 Inspection of Church in Wales Schools Report Proforma

St Mary's VA Church in Wales Primary School

Intermediate Road
Brynmawr
Ebbw Vale
NP23 4SF

Diocese: Swansea and Brecon

Local authority: Blaenau Gwent
Dates of inspection: 26th March 2025
Date of last inspection: 2019
School's unique reference number: 401417
Headteacher: Mrs Cathryn Knowlson
Inspector's name and number: Jennie Downes

School context

St. Mary's Voluntary Aided Church in Wales primary school is highly regarded by the families and community of Brynmawr and the wider area. Of the 236 learners on roll, those identified as having ALN is low. The number entitled to FSM is 12.3%. No pupils speak Welsh as their first language. Languages of learners with EAL include French, Zimbabwean, Brazilian, Hong Kong Chinese and Chinese. Attendance for 2023/24 was 91.54% (inclusive of statutory and non-statutory pupils).

The distinctiveness and effectiveness of St Mary's VA as a Church in Wales school

'Together we can believe and achieve'

St Mary's Church in Wales school is proud of its historic Christian foundation and seeks to, 'Provide pupils with an enriched education and enhanced experiences which encompass our Christian faith and values'. The headteacher and senior leadership team describe the school vision as evolving and are in the process of working with stakeholders to refresh the vision to ensure it remains current.

Learners enjoy sharing the culture of their school, they speak of how they are a school that shares a name with the Church. The younger learners describe the significance of their school logo, explaining their jumper is green and they are a 'green' school. A well-established Eco-Platinum school the children demonstrate their engagement with nature as they stop to notice the birdsong in the sensory garden and sensitively describe shimmering water on the pond and mountains in the distance.

The children are courteous and kind, they speak of how the Buddy Bench is a special place to go. Teachers share how learners respond with compassionate concern to the feelings of their friends, offering quiet companionship when necessary. Teachers have a process to 'check in' with the emotional feeling of learners as they arrive at school. Wellness is described as the golden thread that 'runs through everything we do at St Mary's'.

The school families describe the positive impact of the children's voice in the community and how choice is integral to each child's individual journey of faith and belief. They share how the ethos and Christian distinctiveness of St Mary's school gives a 'foundation for life'.

The four purposes are central to raising learners' aspirations and through their engagement with AI and digital technology older learners deepen their understanding of the past as they use this information to learn from and become future global citizens. The school strives to foster collaboration, friendship, and shared learning through the values of kindness, respect, and faith. The impact of the school's Christian distinctiveness is evident in the value that the headteacher of St Mary's VA Church in Wales School places on the flourishing relationships the school promotes and nurtures within the wider community.

Established strengths

- The school's lived values and the positive impact of these on the Christian ethos.
- The inclusive, intergenerational culture and community partnerships.

Recommendations

- Continue to develop child-led Collective Worship.
- Continue to embed the innovative pedagogy and a cross-curricular approach to Religion, values and ethics across the school.

The school, through its distinctive Christian character, is meeting the needs of all learners including the contribution of Religion, values and ethics to the Christian Character of the school

St Mary's VA Church in Wales School aims to provide opportunities for 'learners to take a keen interest in their community and the world around them'. This is lived out in the school's culture of intergenerational, community engagement. The impact of the reciprocal friendships formed with members of the older generation are of notable value. Staff share how community involvement enriches life within St Mary's Church in Wales School.

The importance of nurture is evident in the work of volunteers and value is placed on the important role of support staff; an example is in how the caretaker supported the school realise its vision of a sensory Reflection Garden. The learners, their families and teachers all appreciate the school's involvement with the development of Brynmawr Intergenerational Choir. The impact of the work of the choir is evident in the respect and compassion learners demonstrate for older members of their community. Positive outcomes from the Intergenerational Choir are commented upon by parents, who appreciate how it reflects the school's Christian foundation of values and respectful relationships.

Further examples of the school's involvement in the community are the annual marking of Armistice Day. The traditions of the Remembrance Poppy are developed by the school into a creative use of recycled materials. Learners develop innovative designs each year, using the concept of the poppy as inspiration. These are displayed both in school and within the local community. Younger learners speak of how it is important to remember all who fought in the wars 'because without them we would not be here'.

Evidence of the importance and value St Mary's School places on cultivating an ethos of inclusivity, respect and understanding can be seen in the school's accreditation as a School of Sanctuary which recognises the development of learners as ethical informed citizens of Wales and the world.

Older learners share how they have each pledged to make their mark on the world. They recognise how when looking at their fingerprint no-one has the same fingerprint, an example of how all people 'are unique and special'. Drawing around their feet, learners are encouraged to write in the footprint 'a value they stand up for'. The value which 'stands up for all' is identified by the learners as the 'love which is all around'.

The impact of collective worship on the school community

The Clergy are an encouraging presence in the school, with regular collective worship exploring the Bible through interactive storytelling. The children enjoy taking part as the parable of the Lost Sheep is retold. The message is that everyone is precious and special to God, that everyone matters.

Representatives from years 2-6 are working in collaboration with Church in Wales Education to develop impactful child-led collective worship which aligns with their ethos as a 'Rights Respecting' school. Learners engage in critical thinking activities to consider why their school worship matters to them. Using a model of 'gather, engage, respond, send' learners consider the practices which are important to their unique Cynefin. These include using reflection, prayer and singing. Learners enjoy exploring many different ways to worship, from visiting St Mary's Church for celebration of the church seasons to celebrating the confirmation of Year 6 learners who choose to confirm their Christian faith in this way.

The Reflection Garden, designed by learners, is designated as a special place within St Mary's VA Church in Wales Primary school. Surrounded by the natural environment, learners are offered a place to pause and connect with nature. The learners speak confidently of what it means to have a developing relationship with God. 'I like to pray because it is special to me'. They ask searching question as they explore belief and faith such as 'What' made Jesus? Creating a stained-glass window which reflects their Cynefin, learners consider who they are as individuals and what is important to them. Explaining the image of the globe in their Cynefin design, a learner explains how 'the world is our home and people needing to flee, can come here'.

Learners are keen to share how a prayer culture is encouraged through prayer spaces around the school. Prayer Club is held weekly, here learners are invited to share their prayers. The children take turns to pray for what really matters to them. The children's prayers are sensitive and thoughtful. Learners of all ages pray for peace and for the wellbeing of people they care for. Learners are keen to be a supportive presence in their community. Working in collaboration with their peers in a neighbouring school the learners of St Mary's School are working to develop Collective Worship which reflects the aspirations and values of their school community and the Church in Wales.

The effectiveness of religion, values and ethics

The school clearly identifies where they are on their curricula journey and are developing a holistic and cross-curricula approach to curriculum design which supports the principles of Curriculum for Wales. Older learners proudly describe role models who depict the attributes of the four purposes of Curriculum for Wales. The school aim is to develop a curriculum which 'allows our pupils to pursue their aspirations so that 'together we can believe and achieve'.

Experiential outdoor learning is used to engage learners with the concept of seeking refuge. Spending the day in activities which include creating a shelter and making a simple stew, learners were inspired to fundraise in support of the Welsh homeless charities. As a result of their work on exploring what it means to belong and developing as a welcoming and inclusive learning environment, St Mary's Church in Wales School has been successful in attaining accreditation as a School of Sanctuary.

The school is working to incorporate the Church in Wales Religion Values and Ethics (RVE) Guidance and sub lenses into their planning. Younger learners think about the importance of making right choices. They consider what is fair and unfair through learning about the life of Rosa Parkes.

Understanding of Welsh culture is encouraged as the narratives of Saint David, Twysog Llewelyn and Mary Jones are discovered. Describing a range of religious traditions and beliefs including Christian parables, Bible stories and religious symbolism, learners enjoy sharing what they have been learning in RVE.

Older learners use their digital competency skills with apps such as Magic School to 'chat' with influential people from the past. Questions such as 'What message do you have for young people today?' are asked to key figures such as Anne Frank and Mahatma Gandhi. This approach is beginning to encourage critical thinking as learners consider how the actions and lives of people from the past can still affect and influence us today.

The effectiveness of the leadership of the school as a church school

St. Mary's Church in Wales School in Brynmawr demonstrates strong leadership, with a clear focus on identifying key priorities to ensure its continuing journey of improvement and development. The senior leadership team maintain a consistent focus on pedagogical priorities. This is evident in Priority 1 and 3 of the School Development Plan. The school is committed to ensuring learner voice, intergenerational connections and wider community engagement is valued. The evidence can be seen in initiatives such as the Intergenerational Choir and collaborative worship planning with a neighboring school.

The Governors act as critical friends in the school's process of evaluation to maintain progress and ensure the realisation of the school's vision. The Governors meet with the pupil voice action groups, which include the Rights Respecting Group, School Council, Digital Den, Cynefin, Heddlu Bach, Intergenerational Choir and the Eco Council. These groups present their action plans to the Governors, whose valuable support enables learners to use their voice to bring about change. Learners are developing as compassionate future citizens and evidence of the children's developing faith can be seen in the confidence of those who are enabled to ask God 'for strength, for wisdom and for peace to be brought into our hearts'.

The community links formed through the Intergenerational Choir have created a pathway to mutual respect and understanding between the different generations. There is evidence of great empathy, spiritual understanding and compassion between the relationship of the very young and the elderly.

The developing collaborative working with learners and staff of a neighbouring Church in Wales school is mutually beneficial. The two primary schools are in a process of exploring with the Church in Wales education team how they can work effectively to support the development of Collective Worship, led by the children. The aim being to further develop leadership skills of learners across both schools whilst sharing messages of hope, compassion, and faith in God.

The Governors of St Mary's VA Church in Wales School are fully committed to continuing and further developing their partnership working with the Church of St Mary the Virgin, the Brynmawr Ministry Area, Diocese of Swansea and Brecon and the Church in Wales.

The school meets the statutory requirement for collective acts of worship	**Y**
The school meets the statutory requirement for religion, values and ethics (where inspected)	**Y**
Religion, values and ethics is objective, critical and pluralistic	**Y**