

# God helped me to transform school

**SHE became one of the youngest headteachers in the country – and helped to transform Brighstone C of E Primary School.**

Amanda Johnston more than doubled the number of pupils there, led it to becoming an “outstanding” Anglican school, and helped the community cope with the loss of nearby Chale Primary School.

Her faith played an important part in the success she’s had over the past four years. Amanda has helped to forge new links between church and school, as well as putting prayer and worship at the top of her school’s agenda.

Now she’s leaving the Isle of Wight to become a headteacher in Winchester diocese. After Easter she’ll take charge at Pilgrims’ Cross C of E Primary – a brand new school on a housing estate that is still being built.

“Faith has been very important to me throughout my time at Brighstone,” she said. “It has really helped to set the vision and values of the school, and the way we work with one another and the community. For me, knowing that God loves and values every single pupil and each of their families helps to shape my whole approach to teaching.”

Amanda grew up as part of a hard-working Christian household in Northwood on the Isle of Wight. Her upbringing included the expectation that you would attend church and be part of the village community. She went to Sunday School, was confirmed at 13 and helped during parts of the service at St John’s Church until she left for university at 18.

She was the first person in her extended family to go to university, attending King Alfred’s College, Winchester – now Winchester University – for a four-year degree in Primary Education and Theology.

“I wanted to come back to the island to teach, as I’d not had a positive education experience myself, and I wanted to improve that for future generations,” she said. “Studying for a theology degree had also tested my faith and left me questioning it and the values I’d been brought up

to hold. I decided to find my first teaching post in a church primary school, to help me resolve the questions I had, and to try and re-find my faith. I started at St John’s in Sandown – now known as The Bay Primary – in 2002.

“I was there for four years and was RE and collective worship leader. Relationships with the church and other teaching staff and the chance to help plan school activities together helped to re-kindle my faith, and inspired me to want to go on to become a church school headteacher.”

She moved to Haylands

72 children in three classes there. By July 2012, the school had expanded to 190 children across seven classes.

The island’s education system changed from three-tier to two-tier, meaning her school switched from teaching four to nine-year-olds to teaching four to 11-year-olds. As part of the reorganisation, the neighbouring church primary school at Chale closed and most pupils transferred to Brighstone.

Her school oversaw the closure of the Chale site, integrated the pupils into Brighstone and commissioned a home-to-school

and lead worship in school.

“My faith has been significantly challenged at times, especially during the expansion of the school building,” she said. “We didn’t have enough space and were teaching children in the hall and corridor spaces.

“The power of prayer and knowing that God would provide support and guidance to me and my leadership team was important. The advice, support and challenge of parents, governors and the diocese enabled us to build extra classrooms and develop our buildings so positively. We now attract many children from out of our catchment area, who want to be a part of the unique ethos and community Brighstone provides.

“Exploring Christianity, and particularly spirituality are key elements in daily life at Brighstone. There are opportunities for the children to encounter God and their faith all over the place, from the painting of the school values on the walls, to using the ‘reflection area’ in their classroom or the school prayer table.

“Children often seek to improve the lives of children less fortunate than themselves and recently took part in a toilet twinning project with a school in Africa and raised £300 for the Children’s Society. My faith, the weekly worship theme and prayer are always

referred to in the weekly newsletter, so that parents and children can understand why we do what we do and how they can be a part of it.”

The school was inspected under the Statutory Inspection of Church Schools (SIAS) process and described as “outstanding”, with the inspector highlighting Amanda’s Christian vision and inspiring leadership.

Amanda has used a variety of ways to promote the school in the local community, including a new website, social media, a DVD highlighting what the school offers, and regular drop-in sessions for parents. And her new role at Pilgrims’ Cross will involve helping to bring together a fledgling community.

“I’ll be sorry to leave the island as I have so many happy memories here,” she said. “But I’m excited about the challenging of working in a brand new school in a new development. I know God will be guiding me as I try to make a difference there.”

## my faith

**Amanda Johnston was one of the youngest headteachers in the country when she came to Brighstone. Now she’s moving on, she reflects on how her faith helped her to make a difference**

Primary in Ryde, where she was an assistant head, then deputy head, then acting head over three years. “Haylands is a community school, and – although it was a great place to teach – I found it incredibly challenging not to be able to reveal and share my faith in the way that I could at my previous, church school,” she said.

“So it was important that my first headship was at a church school, so that God could be an important part of school life. For me, faith was the driving force behind wanting to improve pupils’ behaviour and the ethos of the school, as well as supporting the local community.”

She was appointed headteacher at Brighstone in 2009, aged only 29. At that stage there were only

escorted transport service for the pupils. It also started offering breakfast, after-school and holiday care for local families.

Relationships with the local churches have also flourished, especially since the appointment of the Rev Helen O’Sullivan as priest-in-charge of Brighstone, Brook, Mottistone, Shorwell and Chale. They have employed a youth worker to work in the school, church and community, providing Godly Play, youth work, family learning and activity days, and the chance for 11-year-olds to explore faith.

There is also a monthly Family Eucharist in St Mary’s, which the whole of Brighstone Primary attends, as well as weekly opportunities for children to plan



**Amanda Johnston: left: times of reflection in Brighstone C of E Primary School**