



A school transformed: ‘I can feel the presence of God surrounding our school’

How a London headteacher led a failing school from ‘Special Measures’ into a strong Christian ethos and an outstanding OFSTED report [Michael Schumm writes](#)

I have been the Headteacher of St Stephen’s CE Primary School for ten years and I can say quite truthfully that God is at the centre of our school. I may not always remember that – but He is always there leading me and our school forward along such a clear pathway, that as I look back I wonder how I missed the signs at times.

We had been living outside of London, in Ely, and I was teaching in a small village school but desperately wanted to move back to London. I convinced my wife Rachel, resigned from my job, we sold our house and only then did I start looking for a job. As I write that down today, I am bewildered at the order of my decision making!

I set off to London to visit three primary schools, two in Wimbledon and one in Shepherd’s Bush - which Her Majesty’s Inspectors had deemed to require Special Measures. I was fully expecting to find the two in Wimbledon a dream come true and the one in Shepherd’s Bush just an interesting experience. Of course, God had other plans!

The moment I walked into St Stephen’s, I knew this would be the place for me. I applied for the job and got it. I worked with a fantastic Headteacher and within a year the school was out of Special Measures. I then began to think

about moving to another school but unexpectedly the Headteacher informed me she was resigning. I applied for the job and got it. I soon learnt that getting a school out of Special Measures is hard, but changing a community’s view

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of a school that has been in Special Measures is much harder.

One of the first things I did was to ensure that our status as a Church of England Primary School was evident from the moment you walked through

the gate. That meant creating an ethos built on strong Christian values and not just hanging a few crosses in the classrooms. New parents began arriving, parents with a strong faith who felt God had led them to St Stephen's. A group of parents set up a prayer group and began praying each week in the school. A new vicar came to the parish and we began to pray together every Monday morning. Slowly but surely, God began to change our school and our community. So many positive things happened to reinforce and encourage us in our vision for our school.

We were awarded a grant to buy part of the vicarage garden and an old, near derelict parish hall to convert into an Early Years unit. We prayed and prayed for the development of our school. So many obstacles were put in our way, but God knew what He was doing and in 2009 we opened our new building.

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Two years later, God set us another challenge: could we share our school with more of the community? Could we double in size, to become two form entry? But right in the heart of Shepherd's Bush, where would we find the space? Finally we decided to investigate the possibility of squeezing a new classroom block onto our small car park. At a meeting, the architect commented that it was a shame we couldn't buy the house next to the car park and develop it as part of the new building. We realised that was the only practical way to make the expansion of the school work.

So one Saturday morning I found myself standing outside the house, texting the Chair of Governors to start praying, as I was about to ask the owner if he would sell his house to our school. I decided to try bargaining with God! If he sold us the house, I would go to New Wine with my wife and three boys (they would go every year, while I enjoyed

a quiet week at school recovering from the summer term). Big mistake! The owner of the house was facing redundancy and would happily sell his house to the school. So off I went to experience the joys of camping for a week!

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Two years later and as I look out of my office window and can see our new upper school building nearing completion, I can feel the presence of God surrounding our school so strongly. I have been incredibly fortunate to work with such a committed, dedicated and gifted team. We have staff who go above and beyond the norm in their commitment to the life of our school. The parents support our school, fundraise tirelessly and of course share their greatest gifts with us – their children. I am so incredibly proud of the children at St Stephen's, who are bright, well behaved and a shining example of a school community that works together for them.

I strongly believe you lead by example. That has meant cleaning up vomit, sweeping the playgrounds, serving school lunches – and also meeting with Ofsted Inspectors to be told our school is now 'Outstanding'. I love it all (well, maybe the vomit is pushing it!). Our mission statement says: 'God is at the centre of our caring community, which celebrates the diversity of the local area' – and it is a privilege to play a part in the leadership of such a special place. 

about the writer

Michael Schumm lives in Ealing with his wife Rachel and his three sons Ben, Joe and Max. He is originally from Middlesbrough in the North East. He started life as an actor before turning to teaching in his early thirties. He enjoys reading, going to the theatre and of course going to New Wine! *Michael is pictured with left to right: Tatiana, Hannah, Felix and Moses.*

Annunciation

after George Hitchcock, 1887

On the brink of a late-
nineteenth century twilight, this girl is still
at the edge of the lake. See how silently she
gathers
each stem – the wavering rows
like a passage of time – as between
the layers of lilies like a veil,
her agitated movements go unseen.

The water is hard in the milky light, taut
as her dress in the labouring wind.
And behind her the deserted fields recede
into an empty sky. This is the way
we enter in: threading back
down to the horizon, back
to before the birth of God.

Eyes closed, she does not know
that a bud has slipped
from out of her grasp. How, in an instant,
like a bead of glass, it will break
the surface of the upturned sky. And,
like a wing unfurling, the world
will loosen into beauty.

Here it will set the seed
of sorrow at the heart. Here
at the quiet centre of each minute, she holds
the lilies in her pure white frame.

So she waits with patience for the aftersong
of silence, forever as the world becomes
undone.

Dominic Hand

Dominic's poem won first prize in the 2014 Christopher Tower poetry competition which is open to 14 to 19 year olds in full or part-time education in the United Kingdom and aims to promote the reading and writing of poetry in young people. Dominic is 18 and lives in Oxford. In 2014 he was also one of the winners of the Foyle Young Poets Award. He has a strong interest in European poetry, and has translated works by Rainer Maria Rilke, Arthur Rimbaud, and the French Surrealists. He also devotes much of his time to painting. See also www.towerpoetry.org.uk

The theme of the
next issue of
ReSource will be

The Paraclete

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