

Fostering helps us to share God's love

THEY have fostered 66 children over the past 21 years - and they still pray for each one of them.

Laurie and Ethel Brokenshire, from Holy Rood Church, Stubbington, felt called by God to help care for children who weren't able to remain with their birth families.

They've fostered children from babies to 18-year-olds, those who need respite or emergency care, those who will be adopted, and those facing court cases. And they've helped to demonstrate God's love to children and teenagers who desperately need to experience love of any kind.

"We do it because we want to give something back to these children," said Laurie, now 63. "You always see some kind of change in every child, even if they are not huge changes. It is a sacrifice, and your whole life will change as a result of fostering. But it is hugely rewarding, and it is something we feel called to."

Laurie had served in the Royal Navy, so had never lived in the same place for longer than three years. But when the family came to Stubbington, he knew he would be based in HM Naval Base in Portsmouth for a significant period. The couple independently heard a radio advert from Hampshire County Council seeking foster parents and felt it was a sign.

"Fostering had been at the back of our minds for a while, but it hadn't been practical," said Laurie. "But we prayed about it, and felt God speaking loud and clear. We were fast-tracked through the process in six months because they were so desperate. And we also had to get our own children on board with the idea, as they were 7, 9, 11 and 13 at the time.

"We've cared for 66 children since, and we pray for each of them once a week. In the early days the average age was 13, but more recently it's been about nine years old. We started by fostering one child at a time, but now we can have three - including sibling groups of three. The longest time someone has been with us is 18 months, but it's usually shorter.

"We had three girls together once and two of them improved



Laurie and Ethel Brokenshire: foster carers for 21 years

by eight reading levels in a term. Another girl who was three didn't know her colours when she arrived, but ended up doing times tables.

"It's had a positive effect on our own children too. They were all very secure; they knew that us loving other children wouldn't diminish our love for them. They've really benefited from it by appreciating all the positive things in family and life that they have, and have gone on to care for others. Rachel is a primary school teacher, and Phillip hopes to be ordained in the Church of England next year."

And Ethel, who is now 60, said: "Lots of the foster children find it difficult to come to terms with the idea that there is no confrontation. They ask us why we don't shout and swear, or why we don't hit them. For some of them, the only attention they'd had in the past is when they are naughty and were hit.

"One lad, who was 14, went out and came back many hours after dinner time. We told him that, as he knew, dinner was gone long ago, but that he could have some toast etc. He never missed dinner again. It's those kind of boundaries that they've never had before, yet need."

Some of those children have

been to their church and enjoyed Messy Church, the youth group or the toddler group, each of which Laurie also helps at. They need to ask whoever has parental authority over the child for permission to take them to church - or the

couples in our congregation - and more widely - who were thinking of adopting or fostering; some are now doing it."

It's not just children that they get to care for. As experienced carers, they are able to help recruit

my faith

They have been fostering for 21 years - and they aren't stopping yet! Ethel and Laurie Brokenshire were inspired by God to open their home to dozens of needy children and young people

teenager themselves, if they are over 16.

"Our faith sustains us," said Laurie. "Sometimes it is challenging, and you need God's strength, much as any Christian parent does. It's fine to explain to the foster children that 'Christians believe that...', but of course we can't proselytise.

"Some of them want to come to church activities, and some don't. Three foster children came with us to Messy Church for two years after they had left us.

"People from our church do help us and pray for us - especially the home group, men's group and prayer triplet. They'll ask us how things are going, they'll give us toys, clothes and other practical support. And we've helped other

and train other foster carers, and to support those who are less experienced. "It is an important part of our role," said Ethel. "As well as helping with recruiting, we help to deliver training, which is really good and covers all aspects of fostering, from psychology to first aid."

They run support groups for carers, host Fostering Panels, sit on Care Matters Board sub-groups and Laurie is vice-chairman of the committee of the county network that represents the voice of foster carers. This all takes up quite a bit of time, so may need to be borne in mind, as people become more experienced carers.

The couple put their fostering on hold recently while they spent three months cycling and camping

across Canada. They also look after their own grandchildren three days a week, so have reduced to emergency and respite care only for a while. But they are keen to see others start; the need is huge.

"If people are thinking about it, I'd suggest they pray about it, make sure they both feel called, and include their own children in the conversation, if they have children," said Laurie. "They need to listen to God, read books about it, and make sure they aren't looking at things through rose-tinted spectacles.

"It will be challenging, so there is no need to feel guilty if you decide not to do it. There is payment involved, but if you are just doing it for the money, that's not really the right reason."

And Ethel said: "You need to get your whole family involved, including grand-parents, aunts and uncles, and you need their support.

"The process of getting approved is very good and they do make sure you have a network of people to support you. You need to be sure that you can love these children, even if at times you may not like them very much."

● **If you live in Hampshire or the Isle of Wight and are interested in fostering or adoption, see www.hants.gov.uk/adoptionandfostering.**