

It's challenging, but God holds onto me

"IT'S the most challenging thing I have ever done but it's also the best."

That's the way that Sarah Merrick describes her role as a foster carer. The 49-year-old from Gosport has been fostering for nine years and sees it very much as an outworking of her Christian faith.

Sarah, who worships at St Mary's Church in Fratton, said: "At the core of my role is my faith in God.

"Being a foster carer isn't easy. Being a parent isn't easy. Someone once said to me that being a foster carer is 'parenting plus' and I think that is quite true.

"You do everything that a birth parent does – meeting their daily needs practically and emotionally; giving them the love, encouragement and support that they need to be able to develop into the best person that they can be. I couldn't do any of this in my own strength.

"Without my faith in God and my confidence that in the most challenging times he is still there holding me I wouldn't be able to continue."

Sarah has been a Christian since she was a child. She was baptised in her local parish church, attended Sunday School and was

confirmed at the age of 14.

When she was 17 she joined St John Ambulance and her commitments there meant she couldn't attend church on Sundays so regularly, but she saw her involvement there as part of her Christian discipleship.

Her faith in God was rocked when her dad died when she was just nine years old, but she now believes that this developed in her a sense of empathy for others.

Like many people, Sarah dreamed of getting married and having children so when she learned that she wouldn't be able to have children her life goals were shattered.

"Getting married and having children had been my life goal, so when I was told that I could never have children of my own it shook me and with it my faith," she said.

"The core of my faith remained. I didn't stop believing in God but my attendance at church became less regular. I went through a series of relationships because I couldn't make sense of what was happening to me. It was my way of coping."

At the time, Sarah was working for the NHS and living with her mum in Hampton Court. She wanted to put down some roots and saw getting her foot on the property ladder as a way of

my faith

Sarah Merrick is a full-time foster carer who has looked after a series of children. It's the best thing she's done, but also hard work. She is adamant that she can only do it with God's help

doing this.

She searched for areas in reasonable commuting distance to London and found a property in Clive Road in Fratton which she bought.

She then met her now ex-husband and they were married in St Mary's Church. They then moved to Gosport. Her husband was aware that she couldn't conceive and so they started looking into adoption.

The process is extremely challenging and involves completing a lot of paperwork, being observed caring for children and being interviewed by a panel.

Sadly the couple's relationship broke down after the assessment process was complete and this again challenged Sarah's faith.

"It was a really tough time and my faith was challenged," she said. "It wasn't that I lost my faith in God but I questioned my faith in myself as a Christian. I found it really hard to forgive and that is at the core of our faith as Christians.

"That took a couple of years for me to work through that and I

came through the other side, but it was in God's strength that I did that."

Sarah decided not to continue on the adoption journey because that had been the path she and her husband were going down together, but she decided instead to offer herself as a foster carer.

"The process was really tough and it does push you to the limits of your own self beliefs, but I felt in my heart that this was right and everyone around me was so totally confident that I would be accepted," she said.

Sarah started by offering respite care to a child with special needs. She then cared for two brothers for three or four months.

When they left she cared for a nine year old boy for around two-and-a-half years. After that she cared for a pair of siblings.

In 2013, she began caring for a pair of siblings and then another girl. It was at that point when she left her management role at the NHS and became a full time foster carer. She continues to care for these three children.

Although her faith is at the core of what she does, she is careful not to impose her faith on to the children she cares for.

"My faith underpins all that I do as a foster carer but I won't impose it on the children," Sarah said.

"It's important that they choose for themselves what they believe. It needs to be their faith and their relationship with God and Jesus. I can't have it for them.

"We started attending St Mary's Church in Fratton together a couple of years ago and the older girl was baptised and confirmed by Bishop Christopher at the church in April this year.

"That was a really special moment, but it was entirely her decision. I was quite clear that it needed to be her choice.

"They attend the young church group during the Sunday service and that is my time of tranquility when I just feel this enormous sense that I am enveloped in a loving community of people with wonderful music and a beautiful building."

Sarah would advise others considering fostering or adoption to go into it with their eyes wide open, to fully explore what it involves and to be prepared for the wider impact on their lives.

"If you're going to do this role you need to do it with your whole heart," she said. "I would also suggest you get a balanced view of experiences – the positive and negative. Being a foster parent is tough, but it is so worthwhile."

Pompey Churches

campaign to promote adoption and fostering

How birth parents are helped

OUR diocese is working alongside the Christian charity Home for Good and Portsmouth City Council to promote adoption and fostering among church families.

Last month, we held an event at the top of the Spinnaker Tower for those who were interested in adopting or fostering. Churchgoers heard case studies from those who had done so, as well as hearing inspiration from Joanna King, regional development manager for Home for Good.

A second event for those interested will take place at St Jude's, Southsea, on Tuesday 26 January at 8pm.

Of course, there are some parents in our congregations who have experienced the pain of their children being removed by local authorities and

fostered or adopted by others.

One place where their needs are catered for is the Roberts Centre, in Crasswell Street, Landport, which was originally founded by the then Bishop of Portsmouth. It provides a child contact centre service, providing a safe, neutral environment where children can see family members they no longer live with. The venue provides a child-focussed play room as well as a waiting room for the parents the children now live with.

For more on our campaign, see www.portsmouth.anglican.org/adoption. For information about the Roberts Centre, see www.robertscentre.org.uk.

