

Families fill nave at toddler group

IT'S a group that attracted just two families a couple of years ago. Now up to 60 families pack into church for Little Shipmates.

The toddler group run by St Simon's Church in Southsea expanded rapidly after the church removed its pews and opened up its nave.

Dozens of pre-schoolers can now bounce on the trampet, drive toy cars and sing action songs in the main part of the church. The parents and carers who come love the friendliness and home-made cake, while the children enjoy the space they have to play in.

The group meets each Monday morning in term-time from 9.30am-11.30am. Children can pick up storybooks, play with tea sets, build with Lego, or bounce on rocking toys. The morning ends with 'rhyme time', when adults and children sing songs together and celebrate birthdays.

The group was relaunched by mums Amy Allen and Jo Crawley, who are both part of the St Simon's congregation.

"When I started coming to the toddler group, we were in the hall," said Jo. "But once the pews were removed, we asked if we could go into the church as well, and that gave us so much extra space.

"We used Facebook groups and word-of-mouth to reach other parents and quite quickly more began coming.

"Amy and I take it in turns to bake cakes and I'm sure that helps. We also wanted it to be a place with free play, not too many rules and to provide a good experience for the parents.

"There are a few church families here, but mostly they are from the wider community. We advertise our church events here at Christmas and other times, and some families do come. But the primary aim is just to give families a good experience each week."

Mum Selvi Jose, whose son Ethan, aged 2, attends, said: "I've been coming for six years, so I was able to tell others what a good group this is. They have something for every age from babies to four-year-olds, and we take it turns to lead the singing."

Ruth Willis, who brings her daughter Chloe, 2, said: "It is a



Above: the toddler group in the nave of St Simon's; right: Selvi Jose with Ethan, and Julie Willis with Chloe at the group

relaxed atmosphere and a safe environment, and good to socialise with other parents – sharing problems you have and possible solutions."

Childminder Vicky Nicholls said: "Some other groups are more structured, but I like the fact that children can play freely – they can see what activities are going on and join in. It's a nice big room, and there are no cliques."

Mum Rabia Harper, whose children Lara, 3, and Mira, 1, are part of the group, said: "People are really friendly, and it's a warm environment, especially the rhyme time at the end. I liked it so much, we had my little girl's birthday here."

And Josette Tucker, who brings her nine-month-old daughter Lila Knight, said: "We like the fact that it's a big open space for them to play, and the toys and the floor are really clean! The tea and cake helps too."

The church also holds monthly 'Shipmate Sundays' - family-friendly, 45-minute Sunday services.

And it is now hoping to launch a second children's group, which would include soft play and a bouncy castle for slightly older children. For details, see www.stsimons-southsea.org.uk



Abseil raises funds for MS Society



Penny Candlin on her abseil

SHE is scared of heights, but Penny Candlin abseiled from the Spinnaker Tower in Portsmouth to raise funds for those with Multiple Sclerosis (MS).

Penny, from St Mary's Church, Hook-with-Warsash, was diagnosed with MS - an incurable disease that attacks the myelin around the nerves - 13 years ago. Before her diagnosis, she was a graphic designer and photographer and lived an active life.

Her MS has got progressively worse, but she enjoys the support of her church community.

Review to examine our parish support

BISHOP Christopher has announced a review of the work of two of our diocesan office teams that support the work of parishes.

The review will take place over the summer into the work of our Mission, Discipleship and Ministry team and our Mission and Society team, which are based in our diocesan office.

The former includes advisers in stewardship, spirituality, vocations and work with children and young people, as well as those who organise clergy and lay training courses.

The latter includes advisers in communications, urban and rural ministry, IDWAL and interfaith issues, as well as our support for parishes as they tackle issues of social justice.

The review will examine how these teams can support parishes most effectively in future as they implement our diocese's live, pray, serve strategy.

Two of our archdeacons, the Ven Joanne Grenfell, Archdeacon of Portsdown, and the Ven Gavin Collins, Archdeacon of the Meon, will undertake this review over the summer with the lay chair of our Diocesan Synod, Debbie Sutton.

To discover more about how these teams support the work of parishes, see www.portsmouth.anglican.org/whatwedo.

If you have any views to share with the review team, you can reach all three of them via the email mdm.msreview@portsmouth.anglican.org

She said: "Dangling on a piece of rope, with paralysed limbs being blown around by the wind 100 metres up, looking around taking a video with the camera on your helmet while fending off the wall and releasing the rope with your one good hand is not what I call enjoyable. Quite a crowd came to watch the spectacle."

She raised funds for Gosport and Fareham MS Society and MS research.

You can still donate to her appeal via www.justgiving.com/fundraising/Penny-Candlin.