

SHE believes in the power of music to help us engage with God – and she’s been practising what she preaches for years.

Deb Henning-Vears has been involved with church music for most of her life and is now musical director at All Saints, Catherington, and St James, Clanfield.

And she’ll have a new role later this month, when she is licensed at our cathedral as a Reader. She’ll be leading services, taking funerals and preaching at both churches.

Deb is one of five new Readers who will be licensed on September 23 after three years of theological study. And the training has made her more careful about the songs and hymns she chooses to sing.

“Faith is part of my life,” she said. “I’ve grown up with it, so there was no one moment when I got it. But it is who am I and feels perfectly right.

“My natural curiosity about things has meant that I have really enjoyed the research I’ve had to do on my training and the academic essays that I’ve had to write. I like to get my brain thinking. But it means that my tendency to wonder about things, including what we sing in church, has got even greater.

“Some hymns and songs are great, and express our theology very well. But there are others that I wonder about. Sometimes we sing them anyway, even if I don’t like them personally, because I know they really help other people to engage with God.”

Deb was born on the Isle of Wight and went to Holy Trinity Church, Ryde, until she was five. They then moved to St Thomas, Bedhampton, where she joined the choir at the age of six.

“I was one of the weird people who preferred Evensong to Sunday School,” she said. “I remember not wanting to go to Sunday School because I wanted to sing in the church choir, and I was allowed to when I was six. And I ended up helping out by playing the organ.”

At the age of 15, the family moved churches to Clanfield and Catherington, where Deb’s mum was the curate. She has stayed involved in those parishes ever since. She studied for a degree in engineering and management at Portsmouth University and has a teaching diploma from Trinity College, London.

Her preferred instrument was the clarinet, and she taught woodwind instruments for 20 years, privately and in schools. She then started working as a freelance organist, playing regularly in churches and crematoria.

Four years ago she became musical director at Catherington and Clanfield, encouraging the

Musician felt call to the pulpit



Deb Henning-Vears at our cathedral

two small choirs to join forces with each other and with other neighbouring churches. They’ve sung Stainer’s *Crucifixion* and other well-known pieces, and share the musical input with a worship band.

“Sometimes I join in with the worship band for something like a patronal festival, but mostly if I’m playing the organ in one church, the worship band will be leading in the other church,” she said. “We will sing Communion, and perhaps do an anthem, and there are various one-off events during the year too.

“I’m a big believer in using the right instruments for the right songs. A modern worship song needs to be played by a contemporary worship band, because that’s what it was written for. A more traditional hymn is better with an organ and choir.

“It gives me a lot of pleasure to see amateur singers do well. You would expect a professional choir to sound good, but volunteers who really want to improve often get a lot more out of it.”

Because her mum was ordained, Deb had always resisted the idea that she might respond to

no one was on the rota to lead the service, so got in touch with the churchwarden and put a service together.

“I was always saying there was no way I was going to follow my mum, but I did get thinking about vocations, and I realised that God was guiding me towards the very

my faith

Deb Henning-Vears has grown up in the world of church music and still gets a lot out of inspiring others. Now she’s going to have a new challenge after being licensed as a Reader

God’s call in the same way. But she became involved in leading Family Praise services and worship at Catherington and Clanfield. In fact, her first opportunity to lead a Family Praise service came when she discovered there was

thing that I had said I wouldn’t do!” she said.

“I looked into it and it snowballed from there. I did my first year on the old Exploring Christianity course, and my second and third years on the

NEW READERS

To be licensed by Bishop Christopher in our cathedral (September 23, 11am):
Christine Hoskins and Deb Henning-Vears (to serve at Catherington and Clanfield),
Jan Fuller (Portchester), Paddy Trasler (Alverstoke), and Tom Cooper (Petersfield and Buriton).

Portsmouth Pathway, where clergy and Readers are trained together.

“I enjoyed it, partly because I like studying. I also liked the fact that clergy and Readers were learning together. It means that everyone is on the same level, rather than there being a hierarchy, and I also think it’s good for Readers to know what clergy know, because you never know when we might be called in, in an interregnum or something similar.

“Leading the music in a church means that you already have a pretty good idea of the shape of a service. And leading Family Praise has given me a good springboard into leading other services. Once I’m licensed, I think I can play the organ and also preach, but it’s difficult to lead a service and then have to keep running over to the organ each time we sing.”

Recently, Deb has joined our diocese’s Royal School of Church Music (RSCM) committee. It encourages music-making in churches, organises training events, develops an understanding of how to use music in churches and engages young people in singing. Among other things, our local RSCM committee is running a ‘Come and Sing’ day with renowned composer John Rutter on September 16 in our cathedral. Details of the event are on www.portsmouth.anglican.org/rutter

And Deb said: “The RSCM events do give us the opportunity to bring people together from different parishes, including those who aren’t Anglican, to make music together. That can be very encouraging, especially for those worshipping in churches without many musicians.

“The John Rutter day will be special because a lot of people may never have had the opportunity to do that kind of thing. Not many churches have choirs that can sing in four-part harmony regularly.”

Deb also accompanies the Hayling Island Community Choir, which gives her the chance to be involved in more secular music. She is married to Steve, and they have children aged 17 and 13. And she has recently taken up running, raising £1,000 for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight Air Ambulance by completing the 5km run along Southampton Airport runway.

She concludes: “I guess my faith can be summed up by a line from my current favourite song – *In your power you’re changing me into the person I should be.*”