

Families flock to toddlers group

THEY launched a toddler group with a handful of volunteers a year ago. Now their church hall is packed every week.

Tots and Toddlers at St Alban's Church, Copnor, attracts up to 40 families each Monday morning. Parents, carers, toddlers and babies squeeze into the church hall for fun, friendship, play and songs – all for free.

Fresh coffee and croissants are available from a café table strewn with fairy lights. Toddlers play with wooden trains, toy cars and building bricks, push around walking toys, and dive in and out of play tents. And there is a chance to do some simple colouring or gluing at a craft table.

After a quick clear-up of the toys, the families move into a back room so children can sip juice and eat from snackpots. Then it's back into the main hall so they can sing nursery rhymes together.

Lisa Hartley, who brings Tommy, aged 3, and Toriana, who is just 1, said: "It's my favourite of all the groups I go to. The people that run it are lovely and everyone is really friendly. I came by myself just after it started, and then brought a couple of friends."

"There are lots of different toys to play with, and Tommy is safe to play by himself if I need to do something with Toriana. There's social interaction for the children, and also the adults."

And Kate Barrett, who brings her daughter Gabrielle and nephew Maxwell, both aged 1, said: "There aren't many groups like this for free, and we really enjoy it. There's a lot of toys they can play with, and they especially enjoy the things they don't have at home."

The group was launched by a team from both St Alban's Church and Harbour Church in Portsmouth. As it has developed, some of the regular mums joined the team running the group.

In the summer term, they offered a 10-week parenting course, immediately after Tots and Toddlers each week. It included a crèche, so the 15 mums could focus on what was being said and pick up tips to help them at home. This term, a similar course will



Top: Tots and Toddlers in St Alban's church hall; middle: Kate Barrett with Gabrielle and Maxwell; bottom: Laura Celestine with her daughter Pippa; above right: Toriana Lee has fun

run in the evenings. Laura Morgan, who brings her two-year-old son Frank, said: "There is a lot of support from other mums, especially if you are a new mum. People can help you through any issues

because they've all had children at different stages."

And Liz Wood, who leads the group, said: "When we got involved with St Alban's, it was clear they were already building relationships with families in the



Maureen Twitchen

How your cash helps vulnerable youngsters

ALMOST £18,000 was raised for The Children's Society last year from parishes in our diocese.

Much of this is down to our box co-ordinators who hand out collection boxes to fellow worshippers at church. Each of them pops spare change into their box during the year and urges visitors to do the same.

One of our most effective box co-ordinators is Maureen Twitchen from St James Church, Emsworth. She promotes the scheme, signs up new members and counts the donations.

Last year the church raised £1,102 from its boxes alone. She has increased the donations via boxes by 26 per cent since taking over in 2014.

"It's a very intense week when the boxes are opened, but this is just because the parish are so generous," she said. "It is worth the effort and my time."

Jessica Meale, relationships manager for The Children's Society, said "The money raised from house boxes across the country is vital to the continuation of our work. It's a very simple and non-invasive way to support us. All you need is an enthusiastic individual like Maureen to make it happen."

The money raised goes to help vulnerable young people across the UK. The Children's Society has been at the forefront of this work since 1881 and has recently switched its focus to the most vulnerable children aged 10-18.

If you would like to take part in a box collection scheme or invite a speaker to talk about the work of the Children's Society, contact Jessica on 0208 390 9730 or Jessica.Meale@childrenssociety.org.uk



local area, so we wanted to build on that by providing a midweek group for that demographic. When we started the group, we were amazed that 25 people turned up in the first week. Now we've set a limit on 40 adults, so that we're not too crowded, but there's plenty of people to get to know.

"We were grateful to get some external funding so we could buy lots of toys and make the group free. And we discovered that other groups in the city had closed down because of lack of funding.

"We want to build up relationships with people, so we provide good quality refreshments, we offered the parenting course, and we do invite families to church events too. Over the first year, we've now been in contact with 240 different families.

"Our heart is to provide a safe and encouraging place for parents, to help them feel loved and supported."