

Welcoming students is a vital ministry

IN DEPTH: STUDENT MINISTRY



Our churches and chaplaincies are pulling out all the stops to support and disciple those studying at college and university

THE lighting is subdued, the music is pumping and the coffee is flowing. A large illuminated sign behind the worship band says 'You Belong Here' and cushions are scattered across the carpeted floor. As the band starts playing, around 120 students and young adults worship God together.

This is Harbour Co, the Sunday night service hosted by **Harbour Church** in St George's, Portsea. It's just one of the ways they offer Christian discipleship to those studying at the University of Portsmouth. And those students appreciate the enthusiastic welcome, lively worship – and the chance to serve others.

Abi Williams, 22, who is in her second year, studying illustration, said: "I'm here with like-minded people who are similar age, and who want to reach out to others of the same age. I've been here

a year and am part of the media team that handles our social media and advertising, which is a perfect fit for me. It's great that I'm trusted to do that on behalf of the church, and it helps us to reach others."

'It feels more like a family than a church. They made it easy.'

And Euan Rixson, 20, a third-year sport and exercise science student, said: "I've been coming since my second week in Portsmouth. It was recommended by someone in my home church in Basingstoke.

"I felt welcome immediately – people were on the door introducing me to others. Now it feels more like a family than a

church. They made the transition to student life very easy.

"My initial thought was about just coming to services, rather than becoming part of the core team. But I was thrown in at the deep end and served on various teams. I think that's the best way to learn and grow. I've been leading Alpha groups and other small groups. It's the kind of church where I can bring student friends or friends visiting from home."

Harbour Church was originally created in 2016 to appeal to young people and students, but it's not the only way we help them. Other churches and chaplaincies across our diocese also offer support to the 28,000 students who are part of the University of Portsmouth, as well as those attending FE colleges.

Josh Walton graduated in September, and now leads



Harbour Church's ministry to students. It's focussed on the 6pm Sunday service, but also includes smaller groups on Tuesday nights for Bible study and discussion.

"The Six is similar to our normal services, but with a different vibe," he said. "We try to appeal to those aged 15-28, it's darker, we have our café bar and merchandise out, and we welcome people at the door and try to help them to make meaningful relationships. We also work hard on our comms. It's important to us that students around the city, in church or not, know that there is a church for

them, and social media is one of the best tools to spread that news."

"I remember being nervous and overwhelmed myself when I moved away from home, and was grateful to find a church family that cared for me. That's even more so this year, as Covid restrictions meant parents couldn't even stay long in the student buildings.

"Eight per cent of students arrive here with a church background, but by the end only one per cent are still involved. Our aim is to reach the eight per cent first, and

Far left: coffee and snacks at the Six in St George's, Portsea; above left: the worship band; above centre: students pose for social media posts; above right: Harbour Church curate the Rev Kathryn Message leading worship at the Six; and left: graduate Tom Packham on the PA desk

through them the 92 per cent who haven't been interested before. We rely on the third years to be our core team.

"And the groups on Tuesday nights are either Harbour Co nights – a more intimate, chilled out version of church – or Bible study and discussion in people's homes. Sunday night is designed to be more celebratory and uplifting, with a time for people to pray for each other."

Digital media graduate Tom Packham, 22, is also typical of those who have moved from being students to being part of the core team leading Harbour Co services. He's often to be found operating the PA and audio-visuals.

"You do get a sense of belonging here, and it's also a great place for me to use my skills in making