

The church for seniors that meets in a pub

IT'S the middle of the afternoon and people are sitting around tables in the back room of a pub near Petersfield.

They are watching a slide show, while on each table is a pile of paper, scissors, glue and pens. It might not look like it, but for many of those gathered, this is actually 'church'.

It's called Oasis and it is the Fresh Expression launched by worshippers from St Mary Magdalen Church in Sheet four years ago to reach those who might not be able to make Sunday services.

It's led by seniors' chaplain Julie Slade, and normally includes a presentation, discussion, a creative activity such as drawing or craft, and a brief act of worship with hymns and prayers. The session finishes with tea and cake and the chance to catch up with each other.

It usually took place twice a month in the Half Moon pub, not far from the church. The planning team would project an image of St Mary's stained glass windows onto the screen and place a cross and a candle on a table as a focus for worship.

The group paused its get-togethers during lockdown, keeping in touch with members by phone, letter and one-to-one contact. But they've started meeting again outside the pub in groups of six.

"We were aware that there were a number of people unable to get to church, as it's on a slope and it's



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not easy to walk up it," said Julie. "There's also no toilets in the church, and to get to the nearest toilets you have to walk down the slope and back up again. It's also hard to park and the heating wasn't great.

"After prayer, we decided to set up a church service that was more accessible, and that could accommodate older people, especially those with dementia. A few who come do go to St Mary's, some used to go, but some were never churchgoers.

"At St Mary's we pray for each street in the parish, and we knock on people's doors in that street beforehand to ask if we can pray for anything specific. When we meet older people who might feel isolated or lonely, we invite them to come along to Oasis. Some people join us after a bereavement or a church funeral.

"Sometimes we put questions on the tables for people to discuss,

or some hands-on practical art or craft. It does help them to be doing something, and it helps to drive the message home."

Member Eileen Barnes, said: "I enjoy the company and it's not far from where I live. I used to go to St Mary's when I was younger, but I don't go now, so this is my church service."

Shirley Weston said: "We were relatively new to the area and I was caring for my husband. When he died, the vicar, Richard Saunders, took the funeral and asked me to come along. That's how I started three years ago. I do now feel part of this church community."

And Thelma Berry, said: "It is a lifeline for so many people. It brings up interesting conversation and makes you think about things you maybe haven't thought about for a long time."

For more details about Oasis, see: www.sheet.church