

'Singing in church has deepened my faith'

SHE was baptised in this church and has grown up being part of the choir. Now she's proud to be the organ scholar there.

Emily Smith, aged 17, has been singing in the choir at St Mary's Church in Fratton, since she was seven. It's given her a love of church music and cemented her Christian faith.

Her grandfather, the Ven Mervyn Banting, who used to be an archdeacon in our diocese, encouraged her to develop her choral ability when she was younger. And Emily's 13-year-old sister, Sophie, has now taken over from her as head chorister.

"I've been here all my life and been in the choir for 10 years," she said. "We used to go out for Sunday School, but when I was seven, I remember walking in and seeing the choir singing an anthem. I thought I'd like to do that."

"I had friends and a godfather in the choir already, and my Poppa – Mervyn – was a singer who was always very positive."

"I love music, and doing this is so different to what lots of typical teenagers might do. The people in the choir are really lovely, and I love being able to lead a congregation in worship."



Emily Smith with the choir from St Mary's Church, Fratton

"Singing has definitely helped my faith, and it makes you feel part of what is going on in church. That was especially true during Covid – still being able to sing as part of the choir helped me maintain a connection with God."

"We had rehearsals and quizzes on Zoom, then we were able to sing in church as the clergy and a small choir led livestreamed services. Then slowly the rest of the choir were able to come back and sit

socially distanced. It all made me realise how much I do like being part of a physical choir singing together."

Emily has seen many local children recruited to her church's choir via the St Mary's Music Foundation. It offers free tuition in piano, organ and singing to eligible children, in return for them joining the church choir. That's helped to ensure the choir has a full complement of 20 adults and 20

children, as well as offering musical education and training to local families.

It's also the Music Foundation that funds two organ scholarships, giving young people such as Emily the chance to develop skills in organ-playing and conducting.

"You can see young people on their journey with the Music Foundation – from being small children to becoming amazing singers who have real confidence," said Emily. "Some drop out, of course, but it is great that they get that opportunity."

"As organ scholar, I'm learning to play the organ, and will play for some services. I'm also learning how to conduct. I get paid a small honorarium. The main organ in St Mary's sounds amazing and you can really feel its presence, but I'm currently playing a portable one while the large one is being restored."

"One of the things I love about this church is that it's so friendly. We do all sorts of things, including a pantomime and social events. You can also talk to people about any problems you have."

God's word and have opportunity to question – if you don't know the answer then that's OK.

"Often young people are not a part of a church because they feel like they don't belong, so don't totally segregate your young people from your congregation, try and find times for you all to do church together – we are all on a journey."

Kate Smyth, youth worker at **St Peter's, Bishop's Waltham**, runs 'The Group With No Name', which meets on a Sunday night and includes games, drama, snacks and Bible study. They use resources from Urban

Saints or Scripture Union to ensure they are offering something relevant to their 11-14 year olds.

She said: "Most of our youth come through members inviting their mates. Although we're not a large club, they do keep coming back. We promote the club on social media, leaflet drops in schools, and we link in with Year 6 through events."

"My advice to any church that feels like giving up on youth is to pray and dream and seek opportunities, maybe to link with another church to support you. Youth work is a rollercoaster, but it's vital we ask God

how our churches can guide and nurture these youngsters to a strong relationship with Jesus."

Kate believes that churches with small numbers of young people benefit from linking up with neighbouring churches to create joint events and services. Five or 10 teenagers can feel isolated in a congregation of older people. But if several such groups meet together, it's easier to feel part of something bigger and more dynamic.

That's what has happened in Gosport, where a Youth Alpha course that started a few years

ago between **St Faith's, Lee-on-Solent**, and **St Mary's, Alverstoke**, has become a group called Kids for Christ (KFC). It meets on Wednesday evenings at St Mary's Parish Centre in Alverstoke and includes teenagers from various local churches. A separate group for 11-13 year olds, called TGI Thursdays, also meets at St Faith's Church.

Working ecumenically is also the premise behind 'High Tide' monthly youth services, which are explored overleaf. For more details of what's on offer, and to find resources, do explore www.portsmouth.anglican.org/youth



Clare Hargreaves leads The Zone at Church of the Good Shepherd, Crookhorn

Food is vital to cement real friendships

WHEN Clare and Nathan Hargreaves started leading the youth group at Church of the Good Shepherd, Crookhorn, they thought food would be vital.

They now cook a meal for the 11-18 year olds who come to 'The Zone' each Friday night. It allows them to build relationships as they eat together.

Now anything up to 20 teenagers will gather to share food, worship, games and Bible study each week between 6.30pm and 8.30pm. Typically, after their freshly-cooked meal, they'll sing worship songs together, hear about an aspect of faith, and then do some craft or game.

They now know each other well, so in-jokes and competitive games with Nerf guns can be followed by serious discussion about issues such as identity and self-esteem.

"Food is really good for building relationships," said Clare, who is youth and families team leader. "We did food and games for a while before introducing Bible study as we got to know people. That's been the formula for about two years, although of course we were interrupted by the pandemic and had to start up again by meeting outside."

Among the group are some who would call themselves Christians and others who wouldn't. Most live

locally, but some come from further afield because of pre-existing friendships.

Josh Murphy, 16, who attends with his twin sister Jess, said: "The people are really friendly, and it's always good activities. It's good to be involved with other people from our age group, and to pray together. And you feel comfortable talking about faith."

Julia Woods, 18, comes to the group from Portchester. She said: "It's good to have people you can talk about stuff with, who are similar age and I think it's worth coming all this way."

And for 18-year-old Chloe Smith, the community element is important too. "You can get to know the gifts that God has given to you and learn how to use them," she said. "I also feel comfortable about talking to other teenagers about the group and bringing them along."

The Zone is just one of the groups for children and young people at the church. There is a similar group for those aged four to 10, which meets on a Wednesday evening, plus Sunday groups and a midweek toddler group. And young people from the Zone make the monthly High Tide youth service a priority too.

For details of all these activities, see www.cogs.org.uk