

It's where fresh ideas and wisdom meet

Franceska Dante wandered around a few churches before finding herself back at St Nicholas in North End – which felt like home

Who am I? I'm Franceska Dante. I'm autistic and proud, a musician, a crazy bunny lady and an altar server. I also lead a monthly fireside discussion circle called 'Common Ground', which welcomes people of all spiritualities.

What church are you part of? St Nicholas Church, part of the North End Team Ministry in Portsmouth.

Why did you start going there? It's a long story! In 2004, I took over running the St John Ambulance unit that met in the church hall. I wanted its younger members to have the social skill of attending church so that, if they wanted to explore faith in the coming years, they wouldn't feel uncomfortable there – and so we attended church parade every few months.

At the time, I was unsure what I believed but asked the then vicar if I could attend to think and to reflect. Her reply: "that's what it's there for!" saw me attend regularly for five years. After that, I spent a few years singing in church choirs around the city until, at a point of personal crisis, I realised that I needed to focus on the liturgy and not the notes.

I wandered around a handful of denominations, ultimately finding myself at St Nicholas, 10 years



Franceska Dante in St Nicholas Church, North End; above: the church hall plans



in the first few months that I attended there, lively debate would take place over coffee after the service.

It is an intergenerational community where fresh ideas meet with wisdom and experience on an equal footing and where so many friendships have been formed.

since I'd first been there. Not only was I made welcome but the Epistle reading on that Sunday was the same as the first Sunday I'd attended St Nicholas all those years earlier: one body, many parts – which had long been an important part of all that I believe. In short, I was home.

What do you love about the church? St Nicholas is a church where we discuss and aren't afraid to hold differing opinions. Even

For the past seven years, it has been led by the Rev Sam Duddles (AKA our beloved vicar), who has sat and listened to each of us carefully and formed us into a more loving and cohesive community; she's noticed the creativity in us and nurtured it.

We are seeing gentle, consistent growth too, both in our relationships with God and in numbers. As we plan our new eco-build and gardens, we're creating a space for the wider community too, with a brand new church hall that residents and groups can hire.