

Milton project gave us a taste of the concept

WHEN our first Choir Church project was running at St James Church, Milton, it became commonplace to see children singing in church and across the local community.

Our diocese employed Alastair Ross as a pioneer minister and musical director from 2018-23, operating from St James' Church. He engaged with three schools in the parish, building on existing links and partnering with Portsmouth Football Club's 'Pompey in the Community'.

Children had the opportunity to sing at the cathedral, take part in events to mark the 75th anniversary of D-Day and to contribute to worship at St James.

One of the choir's most memorable occasions was

premiering a new song on the pitch at Fratton Park, at half-time during a Pompey game, in December 2019.

Alastair Ross conducted the choir, which included pupils from Milton Park Primary School and Meon Junior School, in singing two songs during the Division 1 match. Pompey fans roared their approval as they sang their hearts out, despite incessant rain.

The children also had a chance to record a new composition in a professional recording studio as part of the Choir Church project.

The pandemic had a devastating effect on this work, in common with many church activities. By the project's end, there was a Choir Club meeting after school at St James Milton.



The Choir Church group on the pitch at Fratton Park, premiering their new song, conducted by Alastair Ross

The first Choir Church was planted by St George-in-the-East in 2016. Since then, the concept has been used in churches across the country.

In our diocese, we initially experimented with Choir Church based at St James, Milton, and supported by those from our cathedral. Alastair Ross was employed from 2018 as a pioneer minister and project leader to recruit singers from local schools and create new choirs.

Now the plan is to create up to four new Choir Church projects in partnership with local parishes from this September, with potentially another cohort to follow in September 2025. That includes the expansion of what's already happening at St Faith's, Havant, and the chance to build on existing links between churches and schools elsewhere.

In Paulsgrove, the vicar, the Rev Hugo Deadman, already visits Beacon View Primary Academy in Allaway Avenue to lead assemblies regularly, and is the current chair of governors. Choir Church is



Pupils from schools in Portsmouth celebrate St Cecilia's Day – the patron saint of music and musicians – by learning and performing choral music with the Portsmouth Cathedral Choir

something the school would love to be involved with.

Fr Hugo said: "St Michael's Church already has a really good relationship with Beacon View, and Choir Church ticks all the right boxes for them. It is a great way for the pupils to be involved in their local community, it gives them new skills and it develops their social

and spiritual lives. From the church's point of view, we'd love to welcome any newly-formed children's choir into our church. I could imagine their singing enhancing the liturgy and worship in our existing services.

"I'd also be really pleased to see some kind of separate congregation launching, if that was appropriate - with the children

bringing their friends and family to see them participate in our worship, and then our normal friendly welcome absorbing those families into the life of the church. It's an exciting prospect."

The Choir Church project in our diocese is being led by Dr David Price, our cathedral's organist and Master of Choristers.

He said: "Music has always been a great way for people to learn about the Christian faith, and being part of a choir is one way to experience life in a Christian community.

"Choir Church is actually a rebranding of something that has been happening quietly through many generations. A midweek worshipping community based on singing, food, games and activities for children of a primary school age is something that can draw families in. It can build on established links between parish and school, or it can help to create new links."

For more details, see www.choirchurch.com and www.portsmouth.anglican.org/choirchurch



Celebrating the Eucharist at Choir Church in Tarleton

Forming Eucharistic communities is key

FAMILIES gather together in the school hall to hear their children sing. But this isn't a music concert or a school play – this is a celebration of the Eucharist.

This is what Choir Church Tarleton C of E Primary School, near Preston, in the Blackburn diocese.

Choir Church director Robin Stopford leads pupils each week in an after-school club where they rehearse choral music they'll be singing during worship. Then once a month, the local rector, Canon Mark Soady, leads a Eucharist to which all pupils, staff and parents are invited.

Each Friday afternoon there are 15 or so children in the after-school club and around 40 are part of this new worshipping community. Robin also offers music lessons to each of the school's 200 pupils. And once a term, the choristers join the parish church choir on a Sunday morning. The project is now 18 months old.

This is just one of the Choir Church communities in Blackburn diocese, which hopes to have 15 similar projects launched by the end of 2025. The idea is to offer pupils

excellent musical tuition, a sense of community and a commitment to social justice. In the case of Tarleton, this involves raising money for musical instruments for a school in Uganda.

Joy Rushton, project manager for Choir Church in the diocese, said: "It is very moving, and the joy on children's faces is amazing. They wouldn't normally get opportunities like that, as the time for music on the curriculum is very limited."

The Bishop of Blackburn, the Rt Rev Philip North, said: "It's no secret that I came to faith through the choral tradition myself. Music can lift the soul and inspire people in so many ways and we now have the opportunity to test how the choral tradition, with its grounding in sacramental worship, can be adapted to a 'planting context' – connecting home, church and school in fresh new ways."

Choir Church originated in St George-in-the-East, Shadwell, in East London, in 2016. It seeks to multiply disciples among children in our schools and communities, through a love of singing, sacrament and social justice.