

## ‘I’d no idea who’d want to date someone who is ordained’

MANY of our clergy hear God’s call and journey through ordination alongside a spouse. It means it can be a shared vocation.

Others may be ordained while single, then fall in love and get married. Things can feel different for their spouse, who joins a vicar or curate who has already established relationships within a congregation.

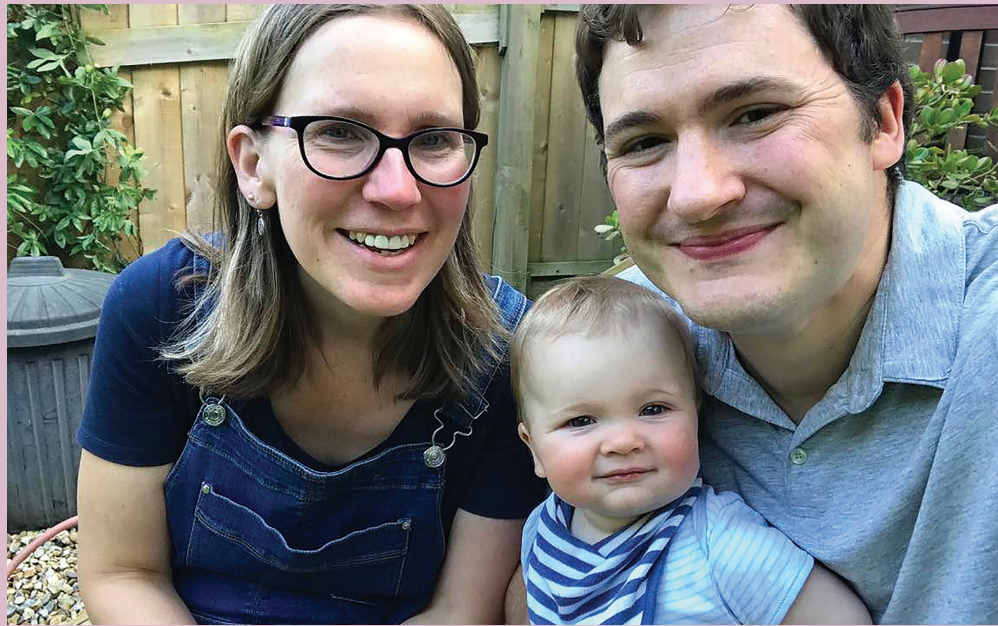
That’s what happened to the Rev Julie Jackson, who was ordained in 2018 and joined St Wilfrid’s, Cowplain, as their curate. She then met Dan. They were married in October 2019 and their first child, Noah, was born in August 2020.

“It was during my theological training that I realised I really wanted to get married and have children,” said Julie. “I had no idea who might want to go out with someone who was ordained, but that feeling didn’t go away.”

“I joined online dating sites and went out on some dates but it was hard work getting to know someone virtually and then realising when I met them that they weren’t right for me.”

“I remember talking to God about it and said if online dating – or dating generally – wasn’t of him then asking him to take it away. It was then that I remember seeing Dan’s profile. I kept going back to it and there was something about him.”

“I thought that if I didn’t try



Julie Jackson, with her husband Dan and their son Noah

this, I’d never know. We met and it did feel that I wanted to know him better. But I waited for a month before he came to my house because I wanted to be sure there was something in this.”

When they first met, Dan stayed up late Googling ‘clergy husband’. His background was with free churches, so ministry in the Church of England was a new thing. There was so little information on ‘clergy husbands’ that he ended up Googling ‘clergy wife’ instead, and assuming it would be similar.

“Julie told me about her role, but it’s a hard job to describe,”

he said. “I knew there would a spotlight on us as a couple, and the congregation might be invested in our relationship. So I knew that we couldn’t date for months before deciding whether or not to be committed. In the end, we were engaged and married within a year of meeting.”

“St Wilfrid’s was very welcoming but joining a congregation as the husband of one of the leaders can be quite a big thing, and so I eased myself in slowly. Eventually I got involved on the technical side, but then of course when we had Noah, my role became different.

“I’m looking after Noah while Julie is up front on a Sunday. But Noah likes to explore, so if he toddles up to her, she’ll pick him up and carry on. It’s good to model to the congregation how important children are.”

“People seem to find it helpful that we allow Noah freedom in church – they feel more relaxed about what their children are doing during worship

“Things have changed from the well-established mindset that men are clergy and their wives do childcare and domestic stuff. That’s partly because women are now ordained, but also because parenting is different. We certainly take it in turns to be the primary care-giver. And we block out time in the diary for us to be together as a family, so we can protect teatime and bedtime each day.”

And Julie said: “The pandemic and having a family have changed my priorities. I’m more confident about what I think are the priorities of my ministry, rather than necessarily doing what other people expect me to do.”

“It feels as though enabling whole families to grow and develop their faith has become more important. It’s also given me the chance of a healthier work-life balance, with time set aside for family.”

at Cuddesdon, and stocked up the freezer full of food for the family before heading off for week-long theological residentials.

“I thought they would be unable to cope without me, so I had the ritual of filling the freezer with meals before I went, and baking bread and cake,” she said. “It turned out that they preferred their dad’s cooking.”

Kathryn was ordained in 2010, and served in several parishes in Southwark diocese – albeit not the same ones as James – before coming to our cathedral in 2019.

“When we were in separate parishes, times like Christmas and Easter could be exhausting,” said James. “And the fact that we weren’t actually worshipping together was a real loss.”

Parish ministry wasn’t always easy for Dom and Eliza too, as they had to share their parents with several different congregations.

Eliza, who is now 17 and studying at the King’s School Canterbury, said: “Sometimes we had to tell our mum and dad to stop being nice to other people, and be nice to us instead! Sometimes as well we had to

pretend that we knew the names of people in the congregation, when we didn’t – as they all knew us.”

Their experiences may have prepared them well for later life. As Kathryn said: “I think Dom and Eliza have a well-developed affinity for other people, and I think that comes out of having to socialise with congregation members of all ages and backgrounds.”

Being part of a clergy family can also impact on your response to the gospel. The children of some clergy embrace faith enthusiastically,

while others can be put off. And some actually become clergy themselves later in life.

Dom said: “I do believe in the centrality of love in the universe, but I don’t believe Jesus died for us. But that has changed. I used to be quite anti-Christian.”

And Eliza thinks similarly. She said: “I had to go to church, but as soon as it was safe for me to stay at home, my parents gave me the option not to. I think I’m in the middle ground too, like Dom, but that might change when I have time to think about it properly.”



Carolyn, Jonathan, Phoebe and Jem in the Staunton Nativity

## Acting is real family activity

BEING part of a clergy family in Leigh Park has involved learning acting skills – and regular performances.

The vicar, the Rev Jonathan Jeffery, and his wife, Carolyn Owens, have taken leading roles in a series of Passion Plays, pantomimes and community nativities over the past few years, most of which have involved their children too.

Phoebe Jeffery, now 20, has been the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalen, and a principal boy – often opposite her dad, dressed as a pantomime dame. Her brother Jem, now 17, has found a niche as a Roman soldier, while 14-year-old Gabriel has been a memorable shepherd boy, among other roles.

With mum Carolyn often writing, directing or producing shows, the weeks leading up to Christmas, Easter or a summer Passion Play often mean all five of them learning lines in the vicarage and attending intensive rehearsals. Most recently, they all took parts in the Nativity performed at Staunton Farm in the days leading up to last Christmas.

Phoebe, who is now studying theology at Chichester University, said: “I don’t know what it would be like not to be part of a clergy family, but perhaps I take for granted things that others would find odd. And there are definitely arguments and stress involved with trying to put on shows.”

“I’ve embraced the Christian faith for lots of reasons, but the

people I’ve met in church, and through community productions are so important. They’re like family. I’m studying theology because it interests me, not just because dad’s a vicar, but my experiences are part of me.”

And Jem, who is at Oaklands School, said: “I enjoy performing, and it’s my church family and friends, as well as my actual family, who have helped my faith develop.”

“I’ve had to get used to people knocking on the vicarage door at all hours to ask for support – vicarage life can be very unpredictable, but grounding.”

Both Phoebe and Jem have been involved with Stagecoach Performing Arts, based in Crookhorn, for many years, so their acting skills have also been honed outside the family.

Carolyn said: “When we get together with everyone else who is performing, we have a really joyful and creative time. And, yes, often when we get back to the house, it all kicks off with us yelling at each other! But being in a clergy family does make you resilient in lots of ways.”

And Jonathan said: “You have to make yourself vulnerable as a family. These children have had to get used to their dad leading assemblies at their schools and embarrassing them for years.”

“But the dramas we put together have helped teach them to be bold and confident, as friends, as neighbours, in their faith and in life.”