



We're embracing new church styles

We've doubled the number of Fresh Expressions in our parishes - helping us to engage with more people

SOPHIE Wills knows the Messy Church sessions in Meonstoke are the perfect way for her family to be involved with church.

She brings her two children to innovative Messy Church events in her local school each month. Volunteers organise exciting art and craft activities on a Biblical theme, lead a short act of worship and then offer a hot meal.

It's the perfect combination for mums such as Sophie, as the timings and activities are geared towards families' needs. Her children, Amelia, aged 8, and Joseph, 5, can join in with whichever painting, gluing or creating activity they fancy – and there's no need to rush home in time for tea.

"The level of effort that the church puts in is astonishing," said Sophie. "A lot of thought and preparation

goes into the crafts, even though they only have 15 minutes to set it up after school finishes and before we all come in.

"We don't go to church – I've previously felt that our children were too young for that. But this is a perfect way for us to have links with the church and to feel like we're involved, even if we can't make it on a Sunday.

'This is a perfect way for us to feel we're involved with the church'

"It works for us, as Amelia used to go to this school and she still loves to come back. There are always lots of inventive crafts for them to try and it's fine for them to make a humongous mess!"

Worshippers from **Meonstoke, Droxford, Corhampton and Exton** have been organising Messy Church sessions since last summer. Up to 50 people, including volunteers, parents and children, squeeze into the dining hall at Meonstoke C of E Infant School, where art and craft activities are laid out invitingly for children to try.

For their session on Noah's Ark, families were invited to paint animal masks, make rainbow-coloured windmills and create paper boats. Children splashed paint, glue and glitter around in a way they might not be able to do at home.

Their creations were left to dry as the children moved into a classroom to hear the curate, the Rev Samantha Martell, tell the story of Noah's Ark with the children providing sound effects.

Meanwhile, other volunteers wiped tables, cleared away paper and paints, and set up pasta and jacket potatoes for the children's tea.

Lucy Wakefield, who brings Lara, 6, and Oscar, 4, said: "The kids love it. It's great fun for them to try the activities, and it's a familiar environment, as Lara's at school here."

Becky Evans, who is mum to Molly, Rose and Harry, said: "They enjoy it because they are allowed to get messy, and I wouldn't let them do this at home! Everything here is washable, so it's fine."

And Sharon Sherfield, whose daughter Rebecca is 5, said: "She was desperate to come again because she had such a good time last time. She loves doing all the crafts and seeing her friends."

Many of our churches run Messy Churches on weekday tea-times, or on Saturday or Sunday afternoons. The concept began in St Wilfrid's Church, Cowplain, back in 2004, and there are now many thousands of Messy Churches across the world.

One of the over-riding principles is that Messy Church is actually a congregation in itself – not a stepping stone to encourage families to come on Sundays instead. That's one of the things that makes it a 'Fresh Expression' – a new way of being Church for those who probably wouldn't attend Sunday worship.

Fresh Expressions also usually have their own identity, separate from the main congregation, and often spring up from a perceived local desire for a different way of engaging with God.

The number of these kind of Fresh Expressions running in our diocese has doubled in the past five years, according to



Top: Lucy Wakefield helps Lara and Oscar at Meonstoke Messy Church; below: Amelia and Joseph Wills get messy with paint; top left: the Rev Samantha Martell tells the story of Noah's Ark at Meonstoke's Messy Church

research by the Church Army. By 2018, almost 2,500 people were regularly attending these innovative styles of worship – a significant percentage of our total attendance figures. And half of all those attending were not part of a church when they started coming.

Another interesting statistic from the Church Army research was that 83 per cent of the leaders of Fresh Expressions in our diocese are female. Of the male leaders, two-thirds are ordained.

Messy Churches account for 25 of the 48 Fresh Expressions within our diocese. But there are other types of Fresh Expressions too.

Some can offer new ways of engaging effectively with those who describe themselves as "spiritual, but not religious". They wouldn't attend a traditional worship service, but are open to exploring spirituality and faith differently.

That's the vision behind a new Fresh Expression that will be