

‘Sunday School prompted my career choice’

IT was partly her experience of helping at Sunday School that convinced Sharon James she should work in a church school.

She joined St Mary’s Church in Funtington with her husband and children around 17 years ago and got involved in helping with the children’s work. It felt so inclusive and supporting that when a job came up at St Alban’s C of E Primary School, she decided to go for it.

Her role as deputy head at the West Leigh school was her first in a C of E school. She’s still there now – and would recommend teaching in a church school to anyone else.

“I’d not worked in a church school before, so had no firm preconceptions about it,” she said. “I’d started to attend church and got involved with the Sunday School, and church life. I found it relaxing, and inclusive – everyone was positive and wanting to support each other. I wondered how that would work in education too.

“When the job came up here, I felt it would be good to explore something different. The Christian ethos was very palpable – there was a sense that everyone was welcome, everyone was special.

“I think it took me another two or three years to unpick it, and discover what faith could offer in an education setting. I feel compelled to stay here because I can see how children leave this school comfortable in how they feel about themselves.”

Sharon initially started teaching in Broadlea Primary School on the

a while. The choir was singing, she was looking at the candles, and she cuddled into me because she was so comfortable there.

“We talk about the Christian ethos as a governing body, providing more of a structure for collective worship, so we know why we light a candle at the start, and which Bible stories to tell to reflect our values. We also want to involve the children more in collective worship, so they can write prayer reflections on a wall, and have



Isle of Wight 30 years ago, and only moved to the mainland when she got married. She was then at Redlands Primary School in Fareham, and taught for 10 years at Denmead Infant School. She had never considered any career other than teaching and believes it’s a vocation.

“You can make a difference to someone’s life every single day,” she said. “You won’t impact every child every day, but you can see someone’s eyes light up with understanding, and every time that happens, it is so rewarding.”

Now, as deputy headteacher at St Alban’s C of E Primary, she has taken charge of collective worship

prayer monitors in each classroom.”

As far as seeing teaching as a vocation, what Elizabeth enjoys is finding new things to do with the children. She was never great at maths herself, so as a maths lead, she was pleased to find new ways to help pupils who were less confident.

“When you have a difficult day, I then try to spend time with the children and remind myself why I got into teaching in the first place,” she said.

and RE.

“We serve a changing demographic here, and all families are welcome, whether they have faith or not,” she said. “Families are open to hearing about and learning from faith, without any fear of indoctrination.

“There is no expectation that people will become believers, but I am passionate about faith. Like taking part in sport, the best way is not to learn it from a text book, but to participate in it. Our children will have been influenced by faith and it provides a foundation for their lives.

“Our ethos permeates our lessons, and we spend a lot of time looking at our core values. We have

“There’s nothing quite like seeing the penny drop and a connection made, as they are able to do something they’ve struggled with.

“And I think one thing I’ve found about this community is that everyone is in it together – the staff, the caretaker, the cleaners. We all check how each other is doing, and support each other if things are difficult. Now my daughter is talking about being a teacher. She wants to create a school where every

Sharon James with Bessie Gurney and Jack Huntley, both aged 7, at St Alban’s C of E Primary, West Leigh

Bible-based acts of worship, led by all staff – and we want to get back to pupils leading worship as well.”

Among other projects, one that has really taken off in St Alban’s is its commitment to improving its grounds to help pollinating insects, such as bees and butterflies. The school is part of the national Polli:Nation project, and has designed and installed a new front border and a ‘bee wall’ to provide nesting and shelter.

It’s based on a commitment to conserve God’s creation.

pupil has a bespoke journey and curriculum – where people are able to be what they want to be. I’d have no hesitation in encouraging her – or anyone else – to go into teaching.

“And we’re proud of the decision our family took to come to the island. I drive past Yaverland every day and I have to remind myself that I live in this beautiful place. The initial expense of moving is worth it, for the beaches, for the walks, and for the sense of wellbeing.”



Pupils from Newport C of E Primary School enjoy workshops in our cathedral as part of the Leavers’ Services over the summer

Commitment shown at Leavers’ Services

ONE way in which our teachers show their commitment to the network of church schools is via the annual Leavers’ Services in our cathedral.

Staff bring hundreds of Year 6 pupils to the cathedral each July to mark the moment they leave their C of E primary school.

This year, more than 1,000 children attended one of four separate services led by senior clergy – and many of them took part in workshops too. It’s the first time our diocese has run this event in person since 2019.

Each day, a different set of 10 and 11-year-olds took part in two hours of workshops on different themes in the morning.

They ate lunch inside or outside the building, and then joined in an act of worship that gave thanks for their time at their C of E school – before they head off to secondary school this month.

The workshops inspired pupils to create prayer pyramids, draw labyrinths, improve their singing, and re-enact the Queen’s coronation in her Jubilee year. The prayer pyramids involved writing prayers on the side of a pyramid, which can then be illuminated by a battery light.

Children were also inspired to develop their communication skills

in a Lego challenge that involved one partner doing the building, with another held the diagrams and giving instructions.

The Leavers’ Services also mark the culmination of the 2021-22 project devised by our education team for church schools. The Ten:Ten#flourishing project was based on the verse in John 10:10 in which Jesus says he has come to bring us “life in all its fullness”.

As part of that project, schools brought in flowers made from a host of recycled materials, to help to create a series of banners that may ultimately be displayed in our churches. Horndean C of E Junior School will create a glazed canopy which will be inscribed ‘ten:ten #flourishing’.

The act of worship itself at the Leavers’ Services was led by cathedral clergy and our education team, and included a short talk by Bishop Jonathan or one of his colleagues.

He commended them for their hard work in tackling climate change and improving ecological diversity through projects in their schools, urging them to continue to make a difference.

To find out more, see www.portsmouth.anglican.org/leaversservice