

# Choirs can help our worship to soar

**Parish choirs have been integral to the faith of many in our pews – leading our singing and giving young people a role in worship**

JOIN our Choir Church and you could be singing in front of a packed house at Fratton Park.

That's the offer on the table from the man in charge of Portsmouth's music-based church plant. He hopes to attract more boys to his choir by linking up with Portsmouth Football Club.

It's just one of the ways that Ally Ross, musical director of **Choir Church in Milton**, hopes to create a brand new congregation, using music as a way of attracting people to worship God. He is now eight months into his new role, and has already created many links with pupils in Milton schools.

He helps to lead music lessons as part of the curriculum, and then invites children to join him in an after-school choir club each week. One 15-strong group from

Meon Junior School has already performed in school assemblies, special concerts and at St James' Church, Milton. They were also part of a joint choir that sang with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra for the 75th anniversary of D-Day. However, Ally is aware that all 15 of his singers are girls, and wants to address that.

"We started with three boys and lost them all," he said. "This is telling and happens a lot. I'm aware that it needs addressing. I've struck up a partnership with Pompey in the Community that will enable us to sing at Fratton Park.

"They have offered us a half-time slot at a home game this season, to which I will take a combined choir from Milton schools. The music for this half-time performance will be specially

written. We've asked for a football song with a Portsmouth twist!"

Ally has also offered that St James' Church – whose parish includes Fratton Park – runs the club's carol service this year. It takes place in the North Stand, and MPs, dignitaries and club staff will be there, as well as the club's samba band.

This is on top of his work helping to lead music at Meon Infant, Milton Park Primary, and Moorings Way Infant Schools. He's hoping to unite children from all the local schools to sing at Harvest and Christmas services at St James Church.

"The first stage is to encourage a desire to sing, using pop songs or music they are familiar with," he said. "Then we can work on pitch, rhythm, singing in parts and solos.

If the children want to come to the after-school clubs, we can introduce them to Christian music, and talk about its importance in worship. When they realise that they can actually sing quite complex pieces that might help others to worship, they can get enthusiastic about performing in church.

"We hope that the experience of singing in a church building helps them to overcome any fear of crossing the threshold. Already we've seen that their parents will come to see them in a church service, and it's the involvement of whole families that we hope will help us to create a brand new congregation in the future."

As well as Choir Church, Ally is also leading an adult community choir, Breve Easy, which rehearses weekly and has performed locally. And he is working with a Christian music publishing house, Same Boat, on original compositions.

The importance of music in our churches can't be overstated. Many of our clergy and lay people originally came to faith by being part of choirs, learning their theology through lyrics and experiencing God's presence as harmonies echoed through the building. Not every parish church has its own choir, but several have found ways to develop their musical tradition over the past few years.

The church choir at **St John's, Newport**, was at a low ebb around 12 years ago, with only a couple of children in its junior choir.

Director of music Jo Dover addressed this via the diocesan scheme 'From classrooms to choirstalls', which brought children from local schools into the choir, as is happening in Milton. Numbers built further as children



**Top: Ally Ross and the Rev Paul Armstead with Choir Church members at St James Church, Milton; below: Ally helps to lead singing in Meon Junior School**

saw other children involved.

Jo also decided that the choir needed a project to aim for each summer, so it has performed a variety of secular concerts over the past 10 or 12 years, alongside local primary school choirs. This has helped to emphasise the links between school and church choirs.

St John's now has around 30 choir members, including 12 young choristers aged 15 and under.

They lead worship each Sunday morning, singing with soprano, alto, tenor and bass parts. They sing a variety of traditional and modern hymns, plus anthems, Psalms, Taizé chants and the Communion setting – and they rehearse weekly.

They also sing at special services during the Church's year, including special anthems for Easter, Harvest and Remembrance. On Good Friday, they may tackle