

CHURCH ALIVE: Sunday service offers several different ways in which people can learn more about Christian faith



Left: Lucy Fryer and Marie Noble learning by role-playing, eating fish and bread; centre: the Rev Andy Norris uses puppets to tell a story; right: contemporary worship is part of the mix; far right: listening to a sermon is also one of the options

Innovative worship aims to attract families to church

IT'S Sunday morning, and the congregation is spread out all over the church.

Some are learning about God by role-playing a Bible story, some by listening to a speaker, and some are deep in prayer. In a moment, the worship band will strike up and some members of the congregation will wave flags at the front, while others will fetch coffee and nibble on croissants as the service continues. This is Church Alive at St Mary's Church, Alverstoke, which happens every Sunday from 10.45am. The relaxed, family-friendly service allows people to learn in different styles, depending on what they prefer. At this service, the Bible passage is about the risen Jesus appearing on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, cooking breakfast. So one group re-enacts the story, and then cooks and eats bread and fish on a camping stove. Another group looks at the theology behind the story and how it can apply to their lives. And another group is already asking God to help transform their lives. It's the perfect service for Emma Anderton, 48, her daughter Hannah Young, 25, and Hannah's children Tilly, aged two, and Arlo, who is one. Emma hadn't been involved in church for 20 years, but the death of a close friend left her questioning what she believed. "I realised that I hadn't understood Christianity, and hadn't thought about it as an adult," said Emma. "I came to a Christmas Eve service in 2013. In 2014, a leaflet for the Alpha course came through



my door and I joined the course with lots of questions. "I realised I knew nothing about the Christian faith and had to start again. Hannah did the Alpha course after me and we were both confirmed last November. I went on the committee to start this service up, and I kept saying it had to happen! It couldn't have come at a better time. Tilly has special needs so to bring her to normal church is tricky. "At Church Alive, everyone is

worshipping in their own way. As new Christians, we often have questions, and this is a good place to ask them. We're now doing the Pilgrim course." And Hannah said: "It's child-friendly, it's fun and you don't have to worry about the children running to the front. The atmosphere is friendly and fun, and Tilly has five or six friends her age." The rector, the Rev Andy Norris, started Church Alive a year ago, bringing with him the experience of doing something

similar at his previous church, St Mary's, Warsash. This more informal service is designed for those who wouldn't normally come to church. Straight after the Parish Eucharist a team springs into action, offering real coffee and pastries to worshippers from both services. The worship band sets up guitars and drums, and various props to illustrate the day's theme are brought to the front. Church Alive includes more modern



Left: Libby Norris teaches a Bible story through role play; above: the worship is contemporary

worship songs, drama and informal prayers before worshippers are invited to refill their coffee mugs and split into groups to learn more about God. Typically, there may be a pre-school group, and groups of children and teenagers, as well as groups for those with different learning styles. Everyone then joins back together again for final prayers and a final hymn. "Those who aren't used to church can often find something like a sermon quite hard to absorb," he said. "In schools, colleges and in everyday life, there aren't many occasions where people learn just through hearing someone speak, with no visual stimulation at all. "Some people love that style, of course, but others will learn in different, more creative ways. So it's good to give them various options.

"And it's amazing how many parents say they would like to come to church, but feel they would be embarrassed if their children were noisy or disruptive. We want to tell them that really doesn't matter, by providing a service where their children are free to get involved in whatever way they like."

Mum Jo Fryer, who helps to run the toddler group at St Mary's parish centre, brings her children Kiera, 5, and Lucy, 7, along to Church Alive too. "It's so relaxed, it's a different atmosphere," she said. "The children can make as much noise as they want to. It's a relief that they can run about and we don't have to worry about them. "There is a freedom of worship without restrictions. Some people are more creative, some more visual. Everyone has different styles of learning and so Church Alive works on different levels for different people, and they can then remember what they've learnt." And Emma Ryan, who brings her daughter May Ryan, aged 6, said: "I do the group with Jo and started going to Messy Church. May said she wanted to come here. The kids can do things at Church Alive and everyone's really nice."



The Rev Andy Norris performs the sea baptism during a Church Alive service that finished at Stokes Bay

Baptisms in the sea during service

ONE Church Alive service over the summer started in St Mary's Church – but ended up in the sea at Stokes Bay. Four children from the same family, Iris, Bluebell, Rosie and Persephone Curran, were being baptised in the sea as part of the service. So worshippers met for 30 minutes in church for contemporary worship and to hear the family affirm their Christian faith. Then the whole congregation made their way to the beach.

After the rector, the Rev Andy Norris, had performed the sea baptisms, the congregation then enjoyed a picnic on the beach. "The family have been coming along to the Church Alive services at St Mary's and they asked if their children could be baptised in the sea," said Andy. "I thought it was a great idea and it was a first for me. "It was great to celebrate with that family the amazing beauty of God's love for each child as they were baptised in the waves.

SUNDAY EVENTS DESIGNED TO ATTRACT NEWCOMERS

- FUNDAY SUNDAY, St Jude's Church, Southsea:** Join other families for real coffee, bacon sandwiches, pastries and muffins. Adults can read the Sunday papers while children and teenagers play Wii games or table football, be creative with craft materials or get their nails painted. Then there's a quickfire, 45-minute presentation about the faith, including lively songs and the latest episode of the space-age adventure serial 'The Adventures of the J Team'. **Next service: Sunday 27th September, 10.30am**
- BREAKFAST CHURCH, St James Church, Emsworth:** Come to the parish hall for a cafe-style breakfast on the second Sunday of each month. Enjoy coffee and bacon sandwiches and listen to the worship band. You'll hear about the Christian faith and join in contemporary worship before the children head off for art and craft on the theme of the day. There's a brief talk before the children return and show their families what they've done. **Next service: Sunday 13th September, 10am**
- CAFE CONNECT, St Peter's Church, Titchfield:** Food, drink and company in St Peter's Parish Rooms on the third Sunday of each month. Come and go as you like, have coffee and a bacon roll or home-made cake. You'll be served by a dedicated team of volunteers. Read the Sunday newspapers and chat to others, whether you've attended the service at St Peter's Church or not. **Next Cafe Connect: Sunday 20th September, 11am**

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