

Sowing the seeds for church and community engagement

Verity Sutherland started in her role as Children's and Families Worker at Haslemere Parish (Diocese of Guildford) in September 2021. As well as the spiritual teaching and social elements of her groups, she wanted to give the children opportunities to join in with what God was already doing in their local community.

So, one of the first things she did was to enquire in the local neighbourhood about what people thought the needs of the community were. It was incredible that the initial ideas that came forward then lead into projects, which then helped develop connections to other people, projects and needs in the community where God was already at work.

Verity also wanted to find out what causes her kids were passionate about, to create drive and commitment in the activities they were doing - the idea that young people have a deep desire to fight for a cause that really stirs their hearts and minds resonated with her. She found there were many different passions and concerns identified within the group, one of these being an awareness of climate change and a sense of anxiety because of it being outside of young people's control.

When talking about her work with young people, Verity frequently mentions God's concern for the whole person – spiritual, physical, mental and social wellbeing – and how God is at work in the young people and the wider community in all these different aspects. *"Through God's saving work we are helping to make people whole again, enabling them to have a closer relationship with God"* she says, adding *"Nature a great place to experience God. Nature wasn't an afterthought to God."*

Creating a wild verge garden (which has been tended to and expanded on by the children over the years), was one of the initial activities in which she noticed the kids connecting with God through engaging with nature. She recalls how a child who noticed the first apple on a tree they had planted reacted by shouting *"Hallelujah. Isn't that wonderful"* – his first reaction was to recognise God at work in the harvest the tree was producing. They have also started running 'Muddy Church' sessions.

Verity engages a lot with neurodivergent children (ADHD, Autism) and observes how they have high levels of engagement in the environmental work - it seems to make them flourish (she uses the word 'glow'). The child mentioned above, is one such example.

The projects in the community that her groups are involved in are all about helping others and the environment. They include litter picks (on land and water), water testing, work in a community garden and local clubs, and in the churchyards. In their adopted road verge, they plant insect friendly wildflowers, apple trees and have built a dead hedge and created slate signs to educate passers-by. In the churchyard itself they created another wildflower area complete with a bug hotel. Last year St Bartholomew's Churchyard was awarded silver guilt in the South & South-East in Bloom competition, and this year they were awarded Gold, and these efforts played a key role in such recognition.

Sometimes, aspects of the work have been strengthened by getting experts in the community involved (e.g. a Green Party Councillor, other technical experts). This has helped draw in people who were previously not connected with the church, stimulating conversations about faith and prayer, and a request to get a Bible. Some of these folks are now integrated in the church.

Some top tips from Verity:

- ~ Share with the wider church what you want to do – people will step forward to help.
- ~ Don't work in isolation just in the church - use gifting and expertise in the wider community.
- ~ Go with your passion, knowledge and links. Once you start working, God will work through you.
- ~ Bring Bible passages into your work whenever it's appropriate.



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