

What's so great about a Church of England Baptism?

James Pierce talks about the baptisms of his two children, Leo and Lyla Stevens-Pierce.

The Church of England will happily baptise most people of any age and the important thing to know is that a baptism and a christening are the same thing; only the label is different!

Perhaps the other thing to know is that the Church will baptise you if you are married, unmarried or divorced and the children of married, unmarried or divorced parents are very welcome, even if they are not regular church-goers.

Parents, civil servant James and primary school teacher Cindy describe themselves as Christian but their church backgrounds were different from each other. James said, "Cindy went to a faith school, she was confirmed and she was a regular church-goer. I was baptised, but I didn't attend church regularly. Church has always been in the background for Cindy, and whilst as an adult, it was a question of her finding her way back, for me it was more about finding a way in."

Like many parents, James and Cindy worried about the children being disruptive during the regular services. James said, "Everyone at All Saints' Church has been very welcoming. We have never felt judged and we have been made to feel able to go along. I was looking for other access points to church, without necessarily attending regularly on a Sunday.



LYLA STEVENS-PIERCE

For me, that has been the tots group. I can't overstate the role church has had for Leo and Lyla in establishing them in the community. Leo joined the group when he was very young and Lyla is a real force of nature; she joined tots when she was just four days old! It's really lovely when you feel your children are at home in the church. Leo is about to go to Messy Church, which is entirely focussed on the children."

Like most Church of England churches, All Saints' runs other events which the Stevens-Pierce family have been pleased to attend. James said, "We have met other parents through the tots group and the children have made friends, but we have also met people through other events like remembrance Sunday and the Drum Head ceremony marking the WWII Centenary. It's great to recognise familiar faces and feel at home."



LEO STEVENS-PIERCE

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Although James and Cindy did not marry in church, once they had Leo, they sat down to discuss what they wanted for the children. James said, "When you have children, it's a reflective time in your life. Cindy and I were both baptised but we had different relationships with the church."

"As a parent, you want to give your children the best start in life and you do feel that responsibility. We hope we will give them that foundation in their faith that they can build on. As they get older, they can make decisions about it for themselves."

New parents have a lot to think about and joining their local church community may not be top of the list but being part of a supportive community can make a huge difference to a couple.

James said, "We would have found our way to the toddler group anyway, but the children would not be as close to the church community without their baptisms. If anything, in these first few years of their lives, the real difference is probably for us and not for them. We have developed a real relationship with Brian (the Vicar). Folk just stop for a quick chat. It's just another group of people who are concerned about the lives of our children and their well-being which they would otherwise have missed out on.

It's easy for busy people commuting to work to get caught up in a Monday to Friday routine and James likes to run in his spare time. He said, "Before the children were born, we had lived in this parish for about a decade but we didn't know the vicar. We did a bit of internet research, found the right parish priest and made a phone call. I must admit being slightly nervous, because

we weren't regular church-goers but they were very pleasant; there was never any judgement and they were very welcoming. We soon met Brian (McHenry) and a church visitor came to chat with us to answer any questions we may have had about baptism. The practical side was pretty straightforward; for example, we needed to set a date. Brian baptised Leo and because he was on holiday Jenny (Driver) baptised Lyla. It couldn't have been easier. The church visitor helped us to navigate the process."

For James and Cindy, baptising Lyla was very straightforward, because they were already part of the church community. Lyla became the youngest ever member of the tots group; testament to how comfortable with the group the young family had become. James said, "The vicar was willing to work around our needs. I was working flexibly and Cindy was working part time.

Neither of us wanted to miss out on time with the children. Leo had been in and graduated out of tots, ready for school and by the time Lyla was baptised, we had good friends in the group. Brian's mum comes and plays the piano for us at the end of the tots group. People like that keep the church running. The office is just through a door rather than an email away. We even used the church hall for the function after the baptism."

For people who have never been in a church, the idea of approaching a vicar they don't know can be very daunting, but it need not be. James said, "The bottom line is just go for it! You are not going to find anyone scary!"

"Think about it - take your time. There's no judgement. Baptism is just an access point for church. It may stop there, but church in your life will be as significant as you choose to make it."

Choosing Godparents can be quite a challenge too, but James said, "We had a bit of a shopping list! In the end, Leo has six and Lyla has 7. The church was perfectly accommodating about it. Just have the conversation. If people are worried about having religion thrust upon them, that wasn't our experience.

Coming away from both days, we have very happy memories of each occasion. They were very positive experiences."

You can discover more about having a baptism service here: <http://www.rochester.anglican.org/learning/baptism/>

