

Thought for the Month of August 2021 by Alison Ball, Associate Rural Chaplain

Hello everyone. I have now completed my first two in-person visits as associate rural chaplain to the ABC Market on Monday mornings in Bakewell. As a newbie, I am very conscious of being in a different space to my 'normal'. I live in the market town of Chesterfield on a relatively modern housing estate, so very much a townie! I have really appreciated the "hellos", "mornings" and "ayup's" I have received from those who I have been introduced to. However, my confession is that I am very much still suffering from 'imposter syndrome', which in my case, feels like not quite being a part of the furniture! So, if I have not been introduced to you yet, please look out for me and say "hello"! It will help me to feel at home.



It reminded me of some volunteering I did quite a few years ago when I was a street pastor. It's almost the opposite end of the spectrum from rural chaplaincy! As a street pastor, you serve from 10pm – 1am during the night time hours, supporting folk out on the streets of the towns. I met teenagers out clubbing who had lost their shoes on the dance floor (yes that happens and we carry flip-flops for those occasions). I met a man in his sixties, homeless, on a snowy night, hanging out in Weatherspoon's but he was not sure where to go once it closed.

Although our purpose was support – we weren't recruiting for the church – the conversation, as it often did, went like this: "Are you wardens? Will you give me a fine if I drop litter? No? Who are you then? Volunteers? Why would you do that if you are not being paid? Oh, you're Christians!" And the conversation went off in many and varied directions after that.

During one such conversation, a woman in her 30s said to me: "I would love to go to church but I can't. I'm divorced." As a divorcee myself, I asked her why she felt excluded. She had the impression the church was only for the squeaky clean and when life goes wrong you were on the outside of it. I hope that is far from the truth.

There was a book written by the Bishop of Manchester called 'God's Belongers' which explored different ways people in rural communities chose to belong to God, or a faith community. He described belonging through occasional events - the Harvest Festival or Christmas service, a couple of times a year. He also described belonging through place – the local church or chapel in your village or market town; a place of memories, of weddings and funerals, relatives who are regulars, family events, Sunday school outings and heritage. Maybe it was built on land offered by your great, great, great grandparents or they were involved in building it and setting it up in the village. A place of gathering and celebration – your church. There are many ways to belong.



To anyone who feels that there are obstacles in the way of belonging to a faith community or a sense of the Divine, I offer this account of Jesus and his disciples. You may recognize it.

'One day children were brought to Jesus in the hope that he would lay hands on them and pray over them. The disciples shooed them off. But Jesus intervened: "Let the children alone, don't prevent them from coming to me. God's kingdom is made up of people like these." After laying hands on them, he left.'

The story is about an encounter with children but it could apply to anyone.

Nothing should hinder belonging to God's Kingdom because God's Kingdom is made up of people like you and me. See you at the Harvest Festival if not before ☺.

The Harvest Festival is 17th October 2021 at 2.30 pm at the ABC