

God's Belongers



I was spending the day with a rural vicar in Worcestershire. We were walking around one of the small communities he served when a woman emerged from a house, clutching a toddler and looking distraught. Her story quickly emerged.

She and her partner had arrived in the parish a year or two previously, their relationship had broken down and he had left. The child was ill and needed a doctor; there was no bus and it was too far to walk. She knew nobody in the community and was hoping to get enough phone signal to contact her parents for help. In the end the situation was resolved and we were also able to point her to the weekly toddler group taking place in the church that afternoon.

A little while later I started to write about how people find, or fail to find, belonging in the countryside. I distinguished four ways in which people in the countryside appear to belong, with God and the church as well as in local society. We involve ourselves through:

- Regular activities
- Attending one off events
- How we relate to people
- Having special places

Belonging is a crucial aspect of being human, not least as its lack will often bring loneliness and isolation. This fourfold model lies at the heart of my book *God's Belongers* (Walker, 2017).

I was concerned that too often all country dwellers were assumed to have the same needs and aspirations for belonging, and that they would engage with God just as you or I would choose. I suspected that people who are very much at the centre of church life are not a cross-section of the wider population, but disproportionately those for whom a very strong component of how they belong is through joining in regular activities; things such as Holy Communion, study groups and serving on the PCC. If we imagine everyone else is like us, we will just put on more of such activities and be disappointed when they fail either to grow the church or serve the parish.

My study allowed me to begin to reflect on what the mission and role of the church might be in offering God's love and welcome as widely as possible. As it progressed, I set out to write what became another chapter of my book. My intention was to describe how people with different ways of belonging could engage with the *Five Marks of Mission* to which the Church of England, as part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, is committed. Half way through writing, I realised that the central argument was going to be something quite different. I found I was describing how people who don't come to church very often could work alongside those at the heart of the church community in the task of mission. They would be co-workers in the mission field, not passive recipients. I believe this analysis can help us think how to respond to loneliness and isolation in ways that meet the preferred ways of belonging of very different individuals.

Regular activities

We tend to be good at organising regular activities. Many rural churches and communities sustain a rhythm of pre-school groups, coffee mornings, WI branches, cricket clubs and the like. People who are natural joiners, who come along knowing that this might create an expectation they will come regularly, tend to find their way to them. Often there is quite a strong overlap between the people leading several such organisations in the same community. The harder challenge is to meet the needs of those who belong primarily in the other three ways.

Attending one off events

The core church members who commit regularly to things are often also good at putting on one-off events, from Christingle Services to Summer Fairs, litter clearing days to rallies for peace and justice. Those among the lonely who are scared of commitment may come as long as it's 'just this once', and may then come along next time, even to something quite different.

How we relate to people

For the person for whom relationships are the strong component of belonging, the task of the church may be first to encourage those of its members who are similarly motivated to find ways to befriend those who appear lonely, and then to help them in turn to use that same natural inclination and preference to befriend others. It's always possible to find an excuse, even in today's society, to strike up a brief conversation with someone, and discover whether it is welcomed or not.

Having special places

A look at many local websites soon shows how the church is the iconic building of the place. Keeping it unlocked during the daytime, with leaflets advertising events and activities, can provide a place of welcome; so can having a rota of local people – not necessarily regular churchgoers – in the church at set, advertised hours of the week, ideally with tea, coffee and biscuits. Above all, let the church be used as often as possible, for as many different types of occasion as possible. Allow the community to feel the place really belongs to the whole village, not just to the congregation. We are less lonely in a place we feel is ours; more open to meeting and getting to know others who share in belonging there.

I don't know what the toddler group to which we directed that lonely Worcestershire woman proved to be for her. If she belonged through taking part in regular activities, it could have been just the thing she needed. But perhaps what she really wanted was to find a friend or two, or to feel at home in a particular place or just to know there were events she could turn up to with no strings attached. Whichever it was, there were things the church could be part of with her that might strike at the heart of her isolation.

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Bishop David's book, *God's Belongers: How people engage with God today and how the church can help*, is published by BRF; a review, written by Revd Elizabeth Clark, National Rural Officer for the Methodist and United Reformed Churches, is included in the Resources section of this edition of Country Way.

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