

Church, Community and Doodling



I have just been writing a detailed response to a public consultation about the Lower Thames Crossing (LTC). There are a whole host of issues related to the impact of the construction of this massive project: compulsory purchase of homes, removal of public footpaths and highways, re-routing of villages, damage to the environment, road closures, loss of animal, bird and insect habitats, stables and farmland.

Producing a considered response to the project, with its years of disruption and permanent change to the landscape, has caused me to think a great deal about what practical part the Church has to play in it all and what we mean by community. Perhaps it's only when we are forced to look at destruction, change and new things that we start to ask what 'community' really means.

A sacred place

The first thing I have had to think about is what the physical space taken by the LTC means. The land on which the crossing will be built is sacred to people: places where people have walked, prayed and scattered ashes; created, honoured and cherished a history. The land we work, build on and change contains traditions.

Every road tells of the community who travel on it. But the community brings back stories to the place of origin for sharing. Others who are just passing through also impact on the community. What does this mean for a shared history? Often it is the churches in those places which hold and honour those stories; sometimes these churches are, in a startling phrase I heard recently, 'too small to die'.

Travellers' tales and sacred stories

Those things so often described as 'infrastructure' are, through different eyes, a network of travellers' tales, pilgrimages, sacred stories and settings out. Put that way, a dry question about what I think the impact on local roads will be becomes a deeper spiritual question about historic rights of way and the people of the community around me, those who are walking, cycling and riding horses, taking people to hospital, schools and places of work.

Such a question asks me whether I really understand how a community goes about its business and how best that is to be done. It reminds me too, of a recent concern about housing developments in villages, where a development re-routed the main road away from the local church leaving it isolated, no longer 'on the way' to anywhere. Roads can nurture their communities with access; they can also take it away. So I have started to think: if the LTC means loss of local access and issues with travel, where in the future could the Church offer practical help? Plans for that need to happen sooner rather than later.

The second thing I have had to think about is both the impact of the project on real people living now and their children growing up in the towns and villages affected by the project in the future. There are some worrying issues about noise, pollution and air quality for people already living in proximity to the M25 and other major routes into Essex and Kent.

It isn't just a question of impaired living in community for the lifetime of the project, but whether people will want to put down roots, bring up children and raise new workers for this area. What sort of communities will these want to be in a few years' time? How would they see the new crossing: as an opportunity rather than a blight? Perhaps this is something the churches could really help with, imagining the future as a community re-drawn by the LTC as well as speaking out now on behalf of those with the fewest choices who are likely to be most affected.

Speaking for God's creation

The third thing I have had to think about is the communities which surround all human populations: the habitats of animals and birds, the communities of woodlands and fields, wetlands and marshes. If we believe we are called to 'strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth'* we must speak for God's creation, to remember what is often least valued in the march of human progress and change. Those communities of living creatures live around and among us; they are part of us and deserve our attention and care. The LTC inevitably impacts on habitats and ecology. We have to be caring stewards of what that means, including the right to mourn what might be lost for ever. What could we do now, practically, to safeguard the displaced animals, insects and birds?

Chickens in trousers

While I have been working on this consultation response, I have been wondering how we, as Christians, form a habit of thinking about community and the churches' role in responding to history and future formation in which the Church is always actively embedded. Oddly, I found hope in a recent BBC News article about the Museum of English Rural Life. On a meticulously drawn series of maths problems 18th century schoolboy Richard had added doodles of his life: a black and white dog by a kennel, a donkey, a smoking chimney and a chicken in trousers.

So, as Richard was sitting there working out the angles of a triangle, images and ideas about his home and community life began to filter through on to the page. In his exercise, he called to mind the things that mattered to him: dreams of travel (there was a beautiful ship sailing along one of the lines), family life, animals and birds.

If we all doodled a bit more around the sharp lines of our Church lives, remembering those we love and care for in community, then perhaps when we have to look carefully at decisions affecting us all, we might remember the least of those whom God asks us to love. I am sure God constantly doodles within his creation, out of sheer delight in it. And perhaps we need to embellish our responses too, so that our love, care and stewardship of Church and community really shines through.

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* Five Marks of Mission (anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission)

This article first appeared in Country Way 80: Building Community, February 2019. Go to germinate.net/country-way for more information about how to subscribe.