

Life and faith in rural Britain... COUNTRYWAY



In harmony

It is often said that sharing stories of hope, of what God has done and is doing in our lives can inspire, encourage and enthuse. I hope this story will do just that.

It began on Open Farm Sunday 2017 with a visit to St Bartholomew's Chapel on Corton Farm, Portesham. That day, I met Anne and Mike, now in their nineties, on whose farmland the Chapel stands. Generous in their welcome and hospitality, they shared the story of their family and farming life and worshipping in a rural community.

Revd Margaret Preuss-Higham reminded us that we are all called by God to serve with our gifts. It struck a chord and I returned to the Abbotsbury, Portesham and Langton Herring Benefice a few months later to provide music for their Harvest Service and for a day's placement with Margaret to explore rural ministry. Understanding more about how mission in the rural church calls for energy and imagination, it seems God was calling me to a new story of renewing hope.

In the Diocese of Salisbury, we are called to consider three challenges for renewing hope: 'What do you pray for? Whom do you serve? How will you grow?' As Bishop Nicholas says, 'There can be no renewal without prayer,' and this truth sits quietly at the beating heart of In Harmony as we use our gifts to serve parishes, schools and communities to help make Christ known. For us, the Sherborne Girls' Jazz Ensemble, this involves combining tradition and innovation as we collaborate 'in harmony' with primary schools, churches and communities for workshops, services and concerts in churches.

This seems to have had an impact on the group themselves. On arrival at one of the churches, 16-year-old Alice leapt into the pulpit and began to proclaim the gospel. On another occasion, the group themselves suggested they rehearse and lead the youngest children present in singing our jazz gospel arrangements of Hallelujah and Amazing Grace. In effect, what they did was to form an intergenerational choir as the community family joined in singing the gospel.

Naturally and rather organically in rural communities, In Harmony has reflected 1 Corinthians 3:6: we planted, others watered but God gave the growth. The three-point relationship between school, church, community is vital, with God calling us to join together for his growth. We never know how things may unfold in the future, but with our first project bringing fifty people into the church, the second 120 and the third, 65, it seems the message of listening to the community and serving with our gifts rings true. We know there are thousands of rural churches in the UK and that over 40% of all Church of England worshippers can be found in rural communities, but also how few young people and families are rooted in the churches. In

Harmony seeks to redress this, making a difference intergenerationally, with the ultimate mission to grow community choirs and disciples of Christ.

Jenny Nelson

Teacher, Sherborne Girls and Ordinand, Diocese of Salisbury