

# *Life and faith in rural Britain...* COUNTRYWAY



## Beliefs or values?

I am intrigued as to why some people find the diversity of Christian denominations a problem when they can happily accept multiple chains of supermarkets. They all have in common the sale of food and other items. Some might claim to major on quality, while others emphasise price. Some are known for the speed at check out. Some provide greater choice of products. But they are all about provisions.

The plethora of Christian denominations today often confuses those who have little or no understanding of the doctrinal interpretation that make one particular denomination or tradition different from another. Certainly we have much in common, but our labels do not always communicate what makes us distinctive from others. Take, for example, my own denomination, Congregational. Essentially, this defines us by how we are governed. We are non-hierarchical and our churches are autonomous. Each church is governed by its congregation, hopefully under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

But this says little about what we believe doctrinally, and the matter is complicated by the fact that we are deliberately non-creedal. This has been an important characteristic since 1662 when nonconformity began. Generally our beliefs are conventional, but that does not help the person outside the church who asks, 'what is it that you believe?'

As I pondered this during my last pastorate, I came up with an alternative way of defining our village church. I produced the following set of values:

We value all individuals, young and old, male and female, regardless of wealth, ability, or standing in society. We value communities in which individuals care for one another. We value the kind of love that puts the needs of other people before our own.

We value justice for all people and long for a world where there is greater fairness and equality. We value truth. We value kindness and compassion. We value deeds more than empty words.

We value the peace that comes from respect for other people who might be different from us in some way. We value the kind of unity that can also celebrate diversity. In other words we value the kind of world about which Jesus taught and for which he gave his life.

For me, this seemed more helpful than defining ourselves doctrinally, such as the depth of water and the timing of baptism. What was more important was that it proved helpful to the wider village community when we displayed it on our noticeboard and in the church entrance. In Jesus' day there were religious groups that had distinctive and defined beliefs. In contrast, Jesus simply said, 'Follow me'.

Ultimately, whether we prefer Aldi to Tesco or Tesco to Waitrose depends to some degree on our experience of them. For many, settling in a church is much the same. I suspect that it is our values lived out that matter more than other ways in which we might be defined.

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