

*Life and faith in rural Britain...*

# COUNTRYWAY



## And who is my neighbour?

A young man from Eastern Europe arrived in the UK full of hope and expectation. He had accepted a job offer which would provide a good income, security and the possibility of further training. It had been a struggle to save up for his contribution towards the costs of transport, but he knew it would be worth it. He had travelled in a very crowded minibus with a lot of other equally hopeful young men. Might they be future neighbours, sharing space and life stories?

On arrival everything changed. On a remote farm he and two others were taken out of the bus. A powerful controller showed them a shed where they would 'live'. It would only be temporary. They would need to work to raise money to pay further transport costs. Their passports were taken away. They were told to keep away from the police, who would put them in prison. Their inability to speak English meant that they were dependent on the controller for any communication with local people. There were a few groceries and some cans of beer in the shed. It did not look as though any 'neighbours' were near.

Fearful, not least because the organisation who had brought him to this place knew the whereabouts of his family and had threatened to harm them if he misbehaved, the young man was picked up the next morning and taken to a car wash in a nearby market town. With seven others he spent the day cleaning cars; no protective clothing, feet drenched in chemicals and cold water, and just a sandwich at lunchtime. He was now to live with this small group in a caravan at the back of the disused garage forecourt from which the car wash operated.

He was there for four months. His companions were not attractive neighbours as most of them coped by drinking heavily; a plentiful supply of alcohol was the only expression of generosity from those running the business. People lived around them and passed by in the street but were not really neighbours; they seemed more like inhabitants of a different world.

He began to feel depressed and desperate, losing hope, with a poor diet and terrible living conditions, plus no contact with his family. Suddenly he was taken ten miles away to a farm in a small village. Now he joined the gang working on the harvesting of crops, hard work with equally bad living conditions. In the village he could see the tower of an ancient church. He heard the bells ringing on Sunday mornings. He noticed some people going to worship and thought of his mother praying for him in her church back home. Occasionally a couple of them would go to the village shop to buy provisions. No one spoke: the barriers of language and mutual fearfulness were too strong. He was living amongst neighbours, but none of them seemed to notice him.

He developed a terrible toothache. His minder took him to the dentist in the market town, did all the translating, and was with him even in the consulting room; his own voice was silent. The gap between him and any kind of neighbourly encounter seemed absolute, unbridgeable.

Last week he was moved to another location, to work in a local factory, still within the same controlling bubble that kept him from being recognised and accepted as a neighbour.

This story is not uncommon, and the sad tale illustrates how modern slavery exists and thrives even in the midst of small communities where people generally learn to acknowledge each other and join in being neighbourly. Although some may choose not to participate, generally this is noticed in a rural environment. Neighbourliness is acknowledged, whether expressed or not.

The challenge for our times is to recognise those in our communities who are present but not really noticed or acknowledged. With life being so busy for many of us, it is little wonder that we have no time to engage with the question at the heart of healthy community: who is my neighbour?

In the Gospels, Jesus embodies a ministry of noticing the unnoticed and giving voice to the unheard, the foundation of the good news of Christian justice. The Clewer Initiative's strapline We See You demonstrates our commitment to learning to notice and respond to those hidden in plain sight. We are working with almost all of the Dioceses of the Church of England, with ecumenical partners, friends of other faiths, and statutory agencies to develop an ethic that echoes Jesus' own ministry to the unseen and the unheard.

The Clewer Initiative is developing resources, building networks and identifying ambassadors who will enable individual Christians and local church communities to notice and respond, to reach out and rescue those who may be virtually invisible in the margins and hidden places of our communities.

Rt Revd Alastair Redfern

For more information about how you and your rural church community can get involved, go to [theclewerinitiative.org](http://theclewerinitiative.org).

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