

Life and faith in rural Britain...

COUNTRYWAY



A God of Surprises

Over the last year, the churches of the East Trent Group in the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham have been exploring how they might draw on the opportunities offered by traditional rural and farming festivals.

In 2019 we decided to get the Harvest Festival season off to a good start by holding a Lammastide service at St Bartholomew's Church and an invitation was delivered to every household in the village. The church was decorated with flowers, wheat and historic farm implements, tables were laden with fresh baked bread and cakes, and willing volunteers agreed to do readings; one surprised everyone by turning up wearing his agricultural historical re-enactment costume!

When the day arrived, we were blessed with warm and dry August sunshine and the beautiful church was filled with people and the sound of glorious hymn-singing.

Looking around, I saw a couple I didn't recognise, so over a cup of tea with homemade bread and jam, I introduced myself and made some surprising discoveries. They began by apologising because they felt like imposters who weren't allowed in because they weren't Christians and didn't believe in God. They'd actually come along expecting a history talk; they'd recently moved into another village in our group and joined in a history society walk which happened to be led by the churchwarden of another of our churches.

Praise God for the joy of rural church connections! This couple made a link between a church person and a history talk, and found themselves singing 'We plough the fields and scatter' and giving thanks for the wheat harvest to the God they don't believe in. However, they did say they were comfortable with celebrating Lammas because it's a pagan festival, not a Christian one.

They said they'd often thought it would be nice to go inside a church and that they'd enjoyed being there and singing hymns, even though they don't believe. They hesitatingly asked if we ever sing carols at Christmas and would they be allowed to join in?

That day I learnt a lot about links and assumptions. Because a church member led a history walk, a link was made to a church event and strangers felt able to turn up. I had assumed that everyone knows that church is for everyone and they're allowed to come. I had also assumed that everyone would know that what we do in church is Christian worship.

I found it hard to realise that other people assumed they wouldn't be welcome and even harder to hear the assumption that if you care for the earth and all of creation, and if you're thankful for the harvest, you must be pagan and not Christian. Whatever have we done with God's command to care for the earth and rejoice in its bounty?

I thank God for that conversation and all the questions it raises. I am reminded that God is full of surprises and that every link is a precious connection as rumours of God spread, ancient memories are awoken, and the church grows.

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