

*Life and faith in rural Britain...*

# COUNTRYWAY



## Losing Your Voice Aids Church Growth

This was not a headline I would ever have expected to see or to find myself writing about!

When I arrived in my parishes just under six years ago, communal Morning Prayer was not part of the routine. I had talked with my spiritual director about moving into parish ministry from chaplaincy and the one thing he said that stuck in my head was the importance of ringing the church bell and praying. Day one after my induction I duly rang the bell and said Morning Prayer on my own.

For the first week I was on my own and day one of week two I sat on my own, crying, wondering why I had ever thought leaving my previous post had been a good idea and generally feeling a bit sorry for myself. I'd just begun the opening prayer when I heard the church door open. Marcia came and sat down next to me, telling me that she'd heard the bell ringing and just had to come and join me. From that point on I have very rarely been on my own and Morning Prayer has become a very special start to the day.

There might not be many of us but this quiet time at the beginning of the day has attracted a small group of faithful attendees, plus others who drop in, knowing that we're there, needing a space. For some this is their 'Sunday'; for some this has been a way into faith; for some this is an opportunity for discussion and asking challenging questions.

While this has become a special time for a number of people, it's also a time that I – or my curate, or another ordained person – have been responsible for leading. And when I say 'leading' I mean leading everything, including reading the Bible passages and intercessions. My parishioners were proving fairly resolute in their resistant to taking on anything more than joining in.

Then I became ill; nothing particularly awful but for a week I had no voice. Suddenly I had volunteers to read the Bible passages and we whispered through everything else. My voice returned the following week, but I refused to take back the readings and now one element of Morning Prayer is shared. The Bible gets passed around and someone picks it up; Marcia read a passage from Ruth, her favourite passage, and you could tell. We laugh at the difficult words but no-one feels embarrassed, and even though I'm still technically leading it is much more of a shared experience.

I wouldn't be surprised if you were thinking, 'So what?' This doesn't seem like ground-breaking stuff but for us it was. I'm not the kind of person who needs to be in charge, but my parishioners believed that reading the Bible, praying and leading Morning Prayer were all the responsibility of the vicar, the 'professional'.

Now we all read the Bible. I'm already working on handing over the intercessions, working on convincing them that my prayers are no more effective than theirs. I've often been told to look for where God is working and join in; it must be working because now if I can't make one morning they carry on without me!

*This article first appeared in Country Way 84: Heaven in Ordinary, June 2020. Go to [arthurrankcentre.org.uk/country-way](http://arthurrankcentre.org.uk/country-way) for more information about how to subscribe.*