

## CRCW Theological Reflection June 2018 – Jo Patterson.

### Finding God in Unexpected Places.

After four years of training, with the last two on placement in Brixton, working with two very different church communities, I find myself reflecting on those experiences I have been blessed to witness and generously been invited to share. Theological reflection is asking, “Where is God in this?” So, I want to talk about where God is ‘unexpectedly’. As people of faith, we expect to find God in certain spaces or situations. To begin, worship would seem the most obvious one, where we come together, voluntarily in the most part, to worship God, in song, prayer and sometimes in ritual or liturgy. What we hope to find in those actions depends on the individual experience. If we arrive full of joy and expectation at glorifying God and seeing people we care about then we might find God in that joy. But if we arrive carrying burdens, weighed down by grief, pain or sorrow, we may struggle to find God anywhere at all. And certainly, if we are surrounded by a church full of happiness to remind us of our situation! This year when I have preached in placement or led worship, my best hope is that I reach someone, just one person through words or prayer. But their reaction and the resulting relationship with God is only something I can guess at.

Perhaps we would also expect to see God in our mission, the community work or fellowship. Where we are gathered in the name of God and the church. Fundraisers, church meetings, prayer groups or bible studies. All these may teach, enlighten and discern. But if you are the one that hasn’t quite ‘got it’, doesn’t quite understand, or feels left out because everyone else seems to be closer to God than you... how do we minister to that? We hear testimony about great, epiphanous moments of conversion or awesome illumination, closer relationships with God and new experiences of vision and spiritual experience. But for some people, that is never for them.

When I first began attending my sending church, I couldn’t understand how people just appeared to give up everything to God. I felt like the only one who did not understand what a relationship with God looks like. It is still in my personality to want to take control and question everything. I will always struggle to give things up to God! But I am certainly more at peace with where I find God, see God at work and can see where my own relationship with God is today.

I see God in many unexpected places. God is in the conversations I have with vulnerable people in my Christians Against Poverty (CAP) work, whose concerns need a listening ear and reassurance. God gives me a nudge if I feel impatient and gives me words to say in prayer for them. God is in the bravery of the person who asked for help, contacted the CAP office or the church, when pride had been overcome by desperation and they picked up the phone. God is in the privilege it is for me to be part of the grieving person’s life and in the wisdom I gain from my experience with them. God knows I need the wisdom.

In the last twelve months I have experienced God in the gifting of those working in the Kingdom, making tea at church for another, bringing flowers on Sunday morning, volunteering to clean, at Foodbank, at Christians Against Poverty. God is the gifts of leadership I encourage in my community work, of prayer, of singing but also in the gifts of the doctor, the shopkeeper, the plumber. God is in the laughter brought to a home where illness and poverty are suffocating and a little light relief is needed. In the conversation with a person struggling in their own mental health issue, where a little love and compassion is shown. And sometimes in the community they find afterwards, which helps

them to grow. I have seen many churches work with these goals in mind and can see how my previous suspicion of evangelism actually holds those who did not know of God's presence before and enables this to develop.

God is in the care, love and warmth shared between friends when one is in grief, another suffers with anxiety and another has money worries. When a community in placement or at college – whatever that community is – comes together to share the burden and hold the ones who need to be held. And the community that campaigns for social justice in the world.

I have often said that church for me is not really on Sunday. I much prefer the other six days of the week. And that is where I find God. It is not that I don't like worship. I find times for lively worship that feed me and times for contemplative worship that comfort me. But God is in the people, not the building. It is in what we do as well as what we believe. And in those relationships between the people we see and minister to. There is so much for me to learn from others and the privilege of working with these diverse communities in my placement has allowed me to this. Every experience of meeting with another shows me something new and that is God working through them and me.

So, my unsteadiness of 15 years ago, my confusion at others' understanding and peace with God has abated. But not just because I have a relationship with God that I am comfortable with, but because I'm not looking for God in the same places as I was. I am looking for – and finding - God in the unexpected ones.