

“Getting to know you....”

I love singing! I sometimes catch myself singing a song without realising it 😊. Perhaps that’s why so many of the things I write contain song lyrics? This reflection is no exception. As I was remembering and reflecting on my first year at Billingham, the song from “The King and I” kept popping into my head. I suppose it’s appropriate – it’s what any of us do when we start a new project. We “get to know” the church we’re working with, the people in and around it – and they “get to know” us. I believe it’s where projects are made – right at the start, when we make the relationships that set the tone and try to work out where the project might lead. Community work, as with life, is all about relationships.

“Getting to like you, getting to hope you like me” – is the next line from the song. It matters, it’s really important, that we find common ground, that we make good relationships. We need to understand where the congregation is, what they think, what they like, how they react to new things. So, I have spent a lot of time watching and listening – as well as finding out what is already happening in the town.

So, now that the dust has settled, the house move is thankfully over and I know where the bus stops are – how do I feel about the new area I have been called to? I think often it’s the little things that stay with us, and I can think of 3 lovely little things, that are really big things, that can say something about how it’s all going.

The first is the lady in the congregation who came to speak to me at Christmas. She told me she hadn’t really wanted me to come to her church, she didn’t see the point in a community worker – but she wanted to tell me she had changed her mind. “After watching what you do here and listening to what’s happening elsewhere – I’m really glad you came, and I wanted to tell you”. She went off to finish her tea. This might not seem important to you, but to me it was a huge thing!

The second happened as I walked to church on Christmas morning. As I walked past the flats near the church, a child’s voice shouted “hello Missis Hunny!! Merry Christmas! Are ye away t’the church?” I wasn’t sure where the voice was coming from, but I looked in the general direction and shouted back in affirmation and with a greeting of my own. It had to be either one of the brownies or one of the children from the school – but to me it meant I was being recognised as the “woman from church”.

The third event happened over a few months but began on a Sunday morning around harvest time. During the first hymn, a Muslim lady walked into the church in a state of distress. Our minister walked towards her and asked if she was alright. The lady sat down next to me and asked if it was alright if she prayed. She sat through the whole service quietly praying and weeping – occasionally talking to me to explain why she was there. She lived not far from the church and had received some worrying news about her health – as a mother of 4 girls, she was very scared about the future. She had come in that morning because she had reached a point where she felt lost and helpless – and she told me she needed to go to a place where God was, so she could pray. It touched my heart that she had felt our church would be a safe place to walk in to. I wondered what the response was going to be from the rest of the congregation when the service ended. Their response was to walk across and ask if she would like a cup of tea and was there anything they could do to help. I explained her situation to them, because she felt her English wasn’t good enough, and they were all very sympathetic. For the next few months, “our Muslim friend” as she has become known, dropped into the church now and again – to pray, to talk, to find support – she brought her own candle to light and put on the communion table (her own idea), and she told me how happy she was to have found our friendly group. “After all,” she said, “God is God”. We see less of her now that her treatment is going well, but we continue to pray for her and hope she’s doing ok.

I think I can say after a year at this new project – people of Billingham, “You are precisely, my cup of tea”!!

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