

Welcoming the Stranger: When a travelling community turns up on your patch

In this interview with Martin Robinson, Mat Wilson tells the story of the week a community of travellers moved onto the sports fields managed by the church on behalf of the neighbourhood. How would a church committed to welcome and hospitality navigate the tension between this group and the neighbours and their sports field?

Mat reflects further on this encounter:

During a warm early summer evening, the leadership of Pavilion church^[1] were engaged in a vibrant conversation as we sat outside in the rear garden home of our host. The conversation focussed on the vision and culture of the church community and what it means to be a people who share the message of Jesus through being welcoming to others, generous in spirit, inclusive without boundary, conscious of justice and celebratory of life both inside and outside the church. There was energy and enthusiasm as we shared wonderful food and rich discussion. We did not anticipate that such idealistic talk would soon be challenged and tested.

A couple of days later as I was walking towards the community centre where the Pavilion Church is based I noticed something very usual. The gate to the park next to the church was broken and there were numerous shapes and sizes of caravans parked far away in the distance. I saw a few people moving between the caravans and then the realisation dawned. A sizable travelling community had positioned itself, without warning, on land that the church manages on behalf of the neighbourhood. Lots of thoughts raced through my mind. How did they get in to the field? What will the neighbouring community think and feel? How long will they be here? What should be the response from the church?

Before I could answer my own questions, some people within our neighbourhood had already taken to social media to share their fear, anxiety and apprehension, seeking a quick solution to what they considered was a major problem. The main sentiment aired was that the travellers must leave immediately before they began to cause trouble.

However, whilst social media reactions tend to heighten emotions and speed up responses, we wanted to slow things down a little. Rather than make a rash decision on what to do, a few people in the church gathered to listen, pray, talk and find unity on how to respond. Jesus said, 'consider carefully how you listen' (Luke 8:18) and James writes to the church community scattered far and wide that it is crucial to be quick to listen and slow to speak (James 1:19). Motivated by these verses we acknowledged that the first action concerned our own attitude. We wanted to be a people that suspended judgement. Whilst there would be different responses and reactions based on high emotion, we wanted to reserve our judgment and instead take the simple step of walking over to this new community to introduce ourselves.

Walking towards people in peace, in the hope of learning, listening and building relationship, to gain understanding was our motivation. As we approached with warm smiles we were

welcomed by the travellers and after exchanging pleasantries we soon delved into deeper discussions about where they had arrived from, which caravan belonged to whom and how long they were going to stay. We talked about practicalities too. The police were present and they reminded us that the law protected the travelling community but if we deemed it necessary we could invoke Article 61, meaning the travellers would have to move on. Our desire was not to invoke this but rather to establish a positive relationship where there would be an agreed understanding that the church would provide practical assistance such as shower facilities and toilets and bin-liners for rubbish. The offer of support and kindness was met with an element of shock and surprise. More often than not people had confronted the travellers with negativity expressed through suspicion, threat, aggression and violence. It was clear that a common feature of their culture was self-protection, resistance and defensiveness. Rarely had their community experienced support, friendship and a desire for peaceful relationship. The church is called to be a peacemaker (Matthew 5:9) and a signpost of shalom (Isaiah 11) but sometimes it takes courage to do this and not everyone will welcome it. A vocal minority in our local community were critical of the church for being too soft and seemingly encouraging travellers on to their land.

Our gesture towards building relationship through practical support led to deeper conversations with the travellers about the place of the church in the community. I shared a little of our story and desire to be a place of welcome, hospitality and generosity. This was greeted with much intrigue and further questions and a promise that a few of them would visit the church on the following Sunday morning. Whilst I was delighted, I confess I had little faith that this intention would be fulfilled. To my embarrassment and shame, on that Sunday morning as I looked out over the people in the church, I was taken aback to see an unmistakable group huddled at the back. They were the smartest dressed people there! In that simple and flawed church service barriers were being broken down. There was a sense of cultures intertwining and enriching one another. People chatted, shared stories, hung out together, surprised one another in their shared humanity and broke bread by celebrating communion. Then for me was one of the most touching moments I have experienced as a Minister. As people drifted out of the building having met hunger and thirst with bread, wine, tea and coffee, a couple of the travelling community shared, with tears ruining their make up, that they had never experienced the presence of God through the love of people so much as they had in that hour. They felt loved and valued for whom they were. They weren't being asked to move on or move out but simply to share life for a moment with a few worshippers in Bournville.

The next day the travellers moved on peacefully and with much gratitude. Who knows where they went but one thing is for certain, they were a gift to our church. Community life is always about embracing the other, the outsider and the neglected. Jesus demonstrated this in his teaching and life. The Spirit was at work enriching our church life through the lives of our guests.

[1] Pavilion Christian Community manages and inhabits Rowheath Pavilion and grounds through its Trust. This includes responsibility for parkland and sports fields.