

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 17 May 2020, 11am
Rev Ruth Bottoms, WLM Chaplain

Interview with Jo, Chaplaincy Volunteer

What drew you to the idea of being a chaplaincy volunteer with WLM, and when?

- About three years ago I had the feeling it was time for a change in the way I was using my work and my time.
- I was involved a lot with my church, which I enjoyed and got a lot out of but I wanted to “branch out” a bit, beyond what I knew.
- I was involved in a church-based night shelter (our version of the Westminster Churches’ Night Shelter) so I wondered about doing some more volunteering with homeless people. But again – I felt that would be more of what I knew already.
- One thing I enjoyed about helping with the night shelter was the chatting to guests, getting to know them and talking about their experiences. And I had also had some fascinating conversations about how people felt about sleeping in a church! And the associations, memories, thoughts and feelings that sparked. So I googled “homeless chaplaincy London” and came up with Ruth’s advert for chaplaincy volunteers on the WLM website.

What do you actually do? In past and now in lockdown?

- Volunteer at the Haven, normally visiting on a Thursday.
- Hanging out, chatting, playing pool, watching TV, etc.
- Bible discussion group
- Support occasional events for Christmas, Easter, etc
- Activities eg trip to National Gallery, Crafternoon
- Now in lockdown: have been Zooming in for chats and Bible discussion

How would you describe the faith, spirituality, seeking of those you meet at the Haven?

- Gloriously diverse! (All faiths and none; big range of backgrounds/experiences/views)
- Grounded (I find people make real connections between what they value/believe and their experiences)
- Genuine (People are very honest, not afraid to articulate unorthodox views, disagree, question)
- Fresh (Encountering people with such a range of perspectives and experiences has given me a fresh look at some things.)

'Chaplaincy in WLM – affirming the search, giving voice to faith.'

– Revd Ruth Bottoms, WLM Chaplain

Bible Readings Acts 17:22-31 and John 14:15-21

Pleased to be with you again to share in worship, and to share something of how chaplaincy in the WLM services works out in practice.

Act 17:23 the description is that Paul went through the city of Athens and looked carefully – he paid attention to what he saw around him. I recently had a meeting as part of their induction as a new staff member. I do this with all new staff helping them to understand something about WLM as a faith based organisation, and my role of chaplaincy. I asked, as I often do, if they have come across chaplains before: some folk have, in hospital, universities etc. this person had a little and, asked me in turn what the difference is between a chaplain and a minister/vicar in a church. Of course, people may be both, but in exercising chaplaincy the key difference is that at that point chaplains are not church based, building or structure based. Rather chaplains go where people are. In so going, they need to walk gently, listening, observing first.

v23 goes on to tell how Paul says from his observations 'What therefore you worship as unknown, I proclaim to you.' This affirms the journey the people have been on thus far, and offers to take it further. A few months ago a resident at KPH, was telling me about how he was brought up Methodist, but inside he had valued learning Buddhist meditation practices. I invited him to share with me share more- what did his Methodist heritage mean to him now, could he tell me what he valued about Buddhist meditation. As he talked, we found common ground- around silence and meditation. On other occasions I have agreed with Moslems, that I too find prayer is really important, and with the person of no faith who says religion has never done any good to them, I have agreed with them that being out in the natural world can be a grounding experience. Paul, in v27 speaks of the search, the groping for God, if you like the quest for meaning. Chaplaincy is about affirming the search and respectfully allowing people to express themselves and where they are on their journey of faith.

This paying attention, listening and then affirming the journey is I think what Community Theologian Ann Morisy speaks of when she talks about how Christians need often to work in the 'foundational domain'. She writes

'the task is to work or engage with people to build their confidence in the intimations they have of an enduring reality and the non-material aspects of life'.¹

However much WLM might be known as a faith based organisation, however much it says it values people's faith and spirituality, and we seek to work holistically, it can be hard to get beyond faith as a tick box on arriving at one of our services. Or perhaps it can become just signposting to nearest relevant place of worship, unless someone has brief to embody that we take it seriously. Even those who share the Christian faith can be nervous of expressing it: one of our residents at BPH sharing his story spoke of an experience of Jesus coming to him one day in drug rehab, and following times of self harm. As he shared this experience with me he immediately caveated it, said 'You might say this was a madness I was going through, but he came to me and said 'I ain't ready for you yet'. I affirmed that this didn't sound like madness but was a precious experience for him. He went on to say how he

¹ Morisy, A. (2004) *Journeying Out- A New Approach to Christian Mission*, New York/London/Harrisburg: Morehouse. P151-152

thinks of this every time he feels down, and picks up his Bible and finds solace in reading the Psalms. I as chaplain, and my chaplaincy volunteers are known to carry, as it were, the religious tag. Our being there embodies that we do indeed take faith and spirituality seriously. Our being there opens up the possibilities of conversation and exploration together.

But of course there is then too, a right time to give voice to my faith, having first listened and allowed others to name theirs. To do as Paul did, though probably not on the whole using his words! But to find ways to speak of my faith. Paul goes from God creator beyond, to God close to, uses their poetry, trusting that truth is not unique to Christians. He then issues an invitation to decide for themselves because there is one raised from dead. The Athenian crowd, it was well known, loved debating and disputing, but there comes a time to decide. So I too am not afraid to find ways to share my faith understandings at times. I think of a resident at WLM The Haven who with his mental health sometimes has delusions, and sometimes thinks he was Jesus in a former existence. However when he was Jesus, his understanding is that he died on the rack not the cross. This can make for complicated bible discussions when he tells you he doesn't remember something happening. He sometimes will say to me 'You don't agree with me', and I will agree with that! And say what I do believe, but without the need to insist he agree with me. Notice that Paul leaves the crowd as they debate what he has said, and the Gospel of John reminds us to be confident in the Spirit, the advocate, who Jesus promised, to be at work. It is not my job to convict, or convert: that is work of Spirit. My job to be faithful in giving voice to faith when opportunity arises.

Paying attention, affirming the journey, giving voice to faith, these are the bread and butter of chaplaincy. But I suggest it is bread and butter of every Christian life as we seek to follow Jesus as disciples. And in this strange time of lockdown when many are asking questions, and my clergy colleagues in central London have all experienced increased numbers attending the various zoom and streamed services, how do we affirm the search and give voice to faith? Maybe it's easier for some to put their toe in a virtual church door than in a real one. What does this mean for us both now and whenever lockdown ends about how we share our faith in the 21st century?

As follows of Jesus, in lockdown and beyond, may God give us eyes and ears to see and hear the seeking after God in our world, and amongst our friends. May God give us mouths and hearts that are willing and confident to put our faith into words. And may God give us daily the Spirit of Truth, the advocate, to lead us on in faith. Amen