



The Church of Scotland

# God's Own Country

A Practical Resource for Rural Churches

**Sacred Space**



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# SACRED SPACE

I was glad when they said to me, Let us go up to the house of the Lord!

Psalm 122:1

## The Church Building in a Rural Community

Prof John R Hume

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The term 'Sacred Space' runs the risk of being a catch-all, a wrapping-up of a very disparate set of ideas and feelings – just like 'church', in fact. I prefer to think of sacred places, rather than spaces, for places have a specific location tied in with the particularities of geography, history, and past and present cultural assumptions. Spaces, on the other hand, may be completely separated from the setting in which they are placed, as witness many modern house interiors. A church in the remote Highlands, such as Strathnaver in Sutherland, may have an interior comparable with one in, say Dumfries and Galloway, like Dalswinton, but the sense of sacredness which the place has is markedly different.

In writing about the 'sacred', one is trying to capture something which is on the edge of consciousness. One in a sense knows when something is 'sacred', but it is much harder to define what makes it so. At the end of the day, it may be that the notion of sacredness is so personal that it is really impossible to communicate it. In what follows I will retreat from definition, and attempt to write about both the generality and specificity of what seem to me to be sacred places in rural Scotland.

If I look, in my mind's eye, at the many places in Scotland that I have visited over the years, I would say that what the most sacred have in common is a sense of being inhabited by unseen presences, by a 'cloud of witnesses'. Further, these presences are benign. They speak of generations of love and care, of enduring belief that these are places that matter, that counterbalance the sadnesses and tragedies of life. The places they inhabit are in, a sense, crystallised goodness; they have in a curious way a redemptive quality. By being hallowed, being associated with generations of belonging, they have the ability to communicate the thoughtful affection they have inspired to those who visit them. I do not see this property of 'sacredness' as confined purely to places created with a definite intention of being focal points for worship. In the Orkney farm museum at Kirbuster there is a central hearth, where the fire for cooking and heating is set against a wall. When the fire is burning it evokes a sense of family affection, of shared love over generations. The same atmosphere, in a different way, is communicated by the little 'black mills' of the North and

Western Isles, now for the most part ruined. These were built by individual families or small groups of families to grind grain for their own use. I suppose they have about them the feeling of sharing, and of sheltering. They have too, the notion of being an integral part of all of life, and of fundamental elements of it – the shared meal – the warmth, both physical and emotional, of life shared with family and friends. They are also completely devoid of grandiosity, with no intention of impressing.

Other places with some of the same sense of being hallowed are those associated with the sea, and especially with fishing. It has seemed to me for many years that Christ's choice of fishermen as disciples, and his use of boats in his ministry, has a particular meaning, hallowing places associated with boats and boatmen. For that reason I see such places as some of the east coast harbours as having a degree of sacredness.

Inimical to sacredness is any sense of greed, humans exploiting each other for unreasonable profit or individual aggrandisement, or putting the accumulation and display of wealth before mutual obligation and respect. This does not mean that large and ornate churches need lack sacredness, if the prime motive for their construction was the worship of God, and not the demonstration of the wealth and power of a particular congregation or benefactor. Also hostile to my perception of sacredness is evidence of neglect, or of disregard of the qualities of a place. Further, I have to say that the appropriation of what was built as a place for public worship to private use can seriously erode, if not extinguish, the sacredness of a place. Curiously, I find that a public reuse of a church is less damaging to its sense of holiness than conversion to domestic use.

The sacredness of a place can be in a way inherent. Pre-Christian examples include the stone settings at Stenness and Brodgar in Orkney, and the line of prehistoric monuments in the Kilmartin Valley in mid-Argyll, where the pre-existing quality of the place is evident. Early Christian places with inherent sacredness include Iona; St Ninian's Cave, Wigtownshire; and St Blane's Chapel, Isle of Bute. Others have become sacred by long



association with worship, such as Dunnet and Canisbay, Caithness; Lyne, Peebles-shire; and Dunlop, Ayrshire. Yet others owe their sacredness to the realisation of a spiritually-inspired intent. These include the tiny chapel at Hoselaw, Roxburghshire. A modern example is the little Scottish Episcopal Church of St Donnan's, Lochalsh. Sacredness can be enhanced by association with a burial ground, with evidence of long association with a community – especially one in which the grave markers show evidence of having been made by local craftsmen, rather than being the products of large commercial firms.

Reading what I have written so far, I realise that what I have been struggling towards is essentially that the sacred place is born of the serious engagement of humans with the divine. This may be a recognition that in a particular natural setting one is notably conscious of the 'otherness' of God, or that a place long associated with worship brings one in a sense into communion with those who have gone before, and through that to an enhanced relationship with God. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the future, it seems to me perfectly possible to create new sacred places, or to enhance the sacredness of an existing place. To achieve this there needs to be a real will to engage at a profound level with what has historically been involved in making a place sacred. It is also necessary to recognise that physical creation is genuinely a part of the relationship of the people of God with the divine, and that the usefulness of church buildings is secondary to their primary purpose of allowing people to engage with God as well as with their fellow beings.

### **'Sacred Space' Present and Future**

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This is all very well, but what does this mean for rural congregations in 21st century Scotland? I believe that there is still an important role for church buildings in the countryside as part of the life of the Church in Scotland, and that the 'de-churching' of rural areas is something to be resisted, and resisted with vigour. The present vogue for seeing church closure as positively virtuous seems to me to be seriously misguided. Rather than seeing church closure as 'good', it seems to me that the emphasis should be on finding ways of involving local communities in keeping church buildings open and in use.

I see the importance of the rural church as in fulfilling a whole series of roles. The most obvious is as a place for gathering for worship, and a focal point for a caring and sharing congregation. It should also be a place for individual prayer and contemplation of God and the 'good', and of remembering those we love and have loved. The role of the church as a place of pilgrimage, of interaction of members of local congregations with visitors, is also an important one, giving the opportunity for the exercise of hospitality. The interaction of the church community with the wider community can be fostered by encouraging the use of the church for 'secular' activities, without losing the sacred quality of the place.

In practical terms this emphasises the importance of ensuring that rural churches are maintained in sufficient numbers, and in appropriate places, to allow these functions to be maintained and developed. To make this happen, finding new ways of keeping churches open, accessible, worshipful and welcoming is essential. New forms of ministry, probably non-stipendiary, need to be developed, and basic needs, such as property maintenance, shared, perhaps at regional level.

Churches also need to be made fit for the variety of purposes needed in changing circumstances. Among possibilities are removing gloomy or poorly-designed furnishings, re-painting, and re-lighting. The objective should be to make the church a 'must be at' place, offering a genuine caring welcome to members and non-members alike. It is worth considering making space for displays of local creativity, and keeping doors open.

Finally, I identified the importance in sacredness of evidences of long periods of association with worship. Such features as canopied pulpits, box pews, well-designed furnishings, and interesting monuments are all worth caring for. So, too, are such small objects as Communion and offertory ware (including ladles), and Communion tokens, and the provision of display cases should be considered.

Last of all, please, please give up the notion that by closing churches we are furthering the mission of the Church. The business of the Church (as opposed to the Business of the church) is to be there for all the people of Scotland, and that means the people of rural Scotland as much as the people of urban Scotland.

## Suggested Bible Readings\*

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### Psalm 84

- 01** How lovely is your dwelling place  
O Lord of hosts!
- 02** My soul longs, indeed it faints  
For the courts of the LORD;  
My heart and my flesh sing for joy  
To the living God.
- 03** Even the sparrow finds a home,  
And the swallow a nest for herself,  
Where she may lay her young,  
At your altars, O LORD of hosts,  
My King and my God.
- 04** Happy are those who live in your house,  
Ever singing your praise. Selah
- 05** Happy are those whose strength is in you,  
In whose heart are the highways to Zion.
- 06** As they go through the valley of Baca  
They make it a place of springs;  
The early rain also covers it with pools.
- 07** They go from strength to strength;  
The God of gods will be seen in Zion.
- 08** O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;  
Give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah
- 09** Behold our shield, O God;  
Look on the face of your anointed.
- 10** For a day in your courts is better  
Than a thousand elsewhere.  
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
Than live in the tents of wickedness.
- 11** For the LORD God is a sun and shield;  
He bestows favour and honour.  
No good thing does the LORD withhold  
From those who walk uprightly.
- 12** O LORD of hosts,  
Happy is everyone who trusts in you.

### Psalm 122

- 01** I was glad when they said to me,  
'Let us go to the house of the LORD!@
- 02** Our feet are standing  
Within your gates, O Jerusalem.
- 03** Jerusalem – built as a city  
That is bound firmly together.
- 04** To it the tribes go up,  
The tribes of the LORD,  
As was decreed for Israel,  
To give thanks to the name of  
The LORD.
- 05** For there the thrones for judgement were set up  
The thrones of the house of David.
- 06** Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:  
'May they prosper who love you.
- 07** Peace be within your walls,  
And security within your towers.'
- 08** For the sake of my relatives and friends  
I will say, 'Peace be within you.'
- 09** For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,  
I will seek your good.

## Questions for Discussion

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### In Psalm 122 we read of the Psalmist's joy and anticipation of going to worship in 'the Lord's House'.

- > What are the things about our church building which encourage us to come, and enable us to worship? On the other hand, are there things which make worship difficult?
- > Do we see our building (and possibly its grounds) as a tool which can be used to serve the wider community?
- > Is our church left open or could it be opened for some of the week, for prayer, contemplation or reflection on its purpose? How could this be developed?
- > Are there things which can be done to make the building more user-friendly? e.g. Is disabled access as good as it could be?
- > Is it possible to encourage understanding of the history of the building and the church community which uses it?

\*©

• Scripture quotations taken from *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. London: HarperCollins, 2007.

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# SACRED SPACE

Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.

Matthew 18:20

## Sacred Space: Gathered for Worship

Rev Jim MacEwan

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"Thank you very much, that was very tranquillising", said one worshipper as she shook my hand after a Communion service, leaving me wondering whether we had shared the body and blood of our risen Lord, or simply Valium. It emphasised for me – yet again – how varied are both the motives and the experiences of those who come to worship, and they are often far less profound, or even religious, than we like to think.

Why do people gather to worship, and wherein lies the sacredness? The ancient Israelites' 'sacred space' - the ark of the covenant - was portable, and there is even a hint of a question over the propriety of building a temple, when God points out that he has never asked for one. The psalmist reminds us that "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it", so there is a good Biblical basis for a sense of worship on the mountain-top, in the garden, or, dare I say it, on the golf-course. Even so, it is a deeply ingrained trait of humanity to want buildings which are set apart for worship: almost every group which starts off using a 'secular' building soon decides to seek its own dedicated place of worship.

Today in Scotland, we are both blessed with and suffer from a vast heritage of church buildings for which the original motivation for their construction appears to have vanished, and the instinct to worship in any traditional sense has largely disappeared from our midst. In today's world of multiple choices, gathering weekly in church is low on the list of preferences, so let's look at the motives for worship which we see in the Bible; at what has changed in each case, and at what some are doing to meet the changed situation.

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### Awe

... is at the heart of worship. Worship and wonder are closely related. At the burning bush, Sinai and the Mount of Transfiguration, we see worship compelled by an awareness of the presence of the living God. Today there are few who find that sense of awe in the weekly worship of their local kirk. Awe – or a substitute – is more commonly found on the football terraces or a packed concert hall, or even in the taking of recreational drugs, any of which can 'take one out of oneself'.

Only rarely, perhaps in the celebration of Holy Communion or at Christmas or Easter, do we capture, or are we granted, that sense of awe. Some of us feel it in particular places. I made a pilgrimage by bike and on foot from Nethy Bridge to Iona, stopping for a time of prayer at every church on the way, and in some of the remotest found a deep sense of worship and an awareness of the small worshipping community which met there. Somehow, either in our usual places of worship or by visiting other places, we need to make space for the Spirit to 'overawe' us. As ever, people differ in what touches them, which is why in my own church in Nethy Bridge we emulate some much larger congregations by offering two morning services of very different styles.

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### Rites of Passage

Jesus' presentation in the temple, and presence at the marriage in Cana, remind us of the centrality of rites of passage, though Jesus' involvement was more with the party than the service. Today, church marriages are fewer and the number of baptisms is in free-fall. Only church funerals are still the norm, especially in rural areas. Those uncommitted to the faith now realise that they do not need a baptism as an excuse to party, and a sense of occasion can be engendered for a wedding in the Caribbean or by a registrar in a local hotel.



The increasing practice of blessing or dedicating infants, seen by some as creating a two-tier situation, can equally be recognised as an honest way to welcome the children of uncommitted parents. Similarly, willingness to conduct weddings in a variety of settings can be a real opportunity to speak to many we will reach no other way. I have written a preamble to the service which seeks to speak to 'where people are' – or at least most of the younger people attending – and I am sure many others do the same. Honesty at funerals is also important and it is essential neither to assume nor pretend that those present have all come to worship. They haven't – they are there to 'pay their respects' to the deceased and/or support the family. A few may even just have come "for the bylt ham"! At the same time we have one of the best opportunities we will ever have to share the Gospel by our words and our attitude. To paraphrase Oliver Goldsmith, those who come to scoff may stay to pray, and the space will indeed be sacred.

### **The Done Thing/Habit**

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Worship varies through the Bible, but the temple sacrifices were regular, and we are told that Jesus went as usual to the synagogue. Habits are not to be despised – there are good as well as bad ones.

Today, regular worship is only the habit for a small percentage of people; it is certainly not the done thing. On the contrary, there is a widespread scepticism, and a real suspicion of religion, bordering at times on fear or hostility. Although there is as yet little sign of the tide turning, attempts to tackle this are not lacking. They usually involve either small groups – Alpha, house groups, Cell Church and the like – or larger events like the ecumenical 'Unite!' gatherings, bringing around 500 people together in the Aviemore Highland Resort.

### **The Word**

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The reading and exposition of 'the Word' was at the heart of the worship Jesus grew up with. At twelve, he was in the temple, questioning and learning. He 'took the scroll' early in his ministry, and based his work on the passage he read. Later on we read that 'the common people heard him gladly'. Scripture was at the heart of sacred space.

Today the vast majority care not a jot for the scriptures. Perhaps that is not surprising in view of the Church's very public disagreements over how the Bible is to be used and understood. We should be clearer and more up-front in pointing out that the Bible itself is full of disagreements – we are simply being Biblical, unpalatable as that may be. We should acknowledge that in the course of the Bible the understanding of many subjects changed (marriage, sacrifice and the law, to name only three), and that since the Bible was written many other beliefs have changed (e.g. our attitude to slavery and the place of women). We should proudly proclaim that these changes are legitimate for 'Biblical' Christians (is there any other kind?), not least because Jesus said that he had more to teach his people, but that at that time it would be too much for them, so the Spirit would come, to lead into all truth. God is eternally the same, but we are not.

This approach would allow a much more open and guilt-free exploration of controversial topics, and go some way to counter the fiction that Christians should always be unanimous. Our commitment is not to agree, but to love one another.



## Fellowship

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Part of the harvest worship of Israel centred on a lavish feast, and Jesus not only attracted criticism for his sociable habits but left a shared meal as the sign of his presence among his followers. It has been well said that we are called individually, but into fellowship.

Our usual Holy Communion services bear little resemblance to Jesus with his friends coming to the end of a meal. I read years ago of an American who spoke of finding understanding and warmth in his local pub when it was singularly lacking in the Church. I winced when I read his comment that “they’ve put the cross on the wrong building”, and it still rebukes me.

The sacred space may sometimes be where the boundaries of worship and fellowship are blurred, or where one leads naturally into the other. It may even be in the midst of a fundraiser - not ‘junk for Jesus’, as I have heard it scornfully dismissed, but a venture which brings us into contact with many who would not normally darken the church doors. I spend a good deal of time during our annual week-long charity shop simply talking to people, and the conversation often goes beyond the weather.

Whatever brings folk together for worship or fellowship, the spirit of God can make the space sacred, and bring blessing to the people.

## Suggested Bible Readings and Questions for Discussion

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### Psalm 100, Psalm 117

- > Why do we come to Church?
- > What benefits do we derive from attending worship and participating in Church organisations?
- > Do we see the Church as being there primarily to benefit the core group or the wider community?

### Awe

- > Is there a sense of awe in our worship - at least at times? How is it desirable (and is it possible) to enhance the element of wonder in our worship?

### Rites of passage

- > How do we develop the marking of rites-of-passage to enable people to engage with their spiritual life? Recognising ‘where people are’, how can we communicate gospel truths through such special family events?

### Habit

- > What alternatives could we offer to Sunday-morning worship, to encourage people to ‘get the habit’ of worship?

### The Word

- > How can we use Scripture in worship in a way that is faithful to our consistent God, yet open to the promised leading of His Spirit into new truth?

### Fellowship

- > Often worship and fellowship are seen as distinct and planned separately. How could we more often combine them, as in the Old Testament harvest celebration or Jesus’ Last Supper with his friends?

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# SACRED SPACE

As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The Kingdom of Heaven has come near'.

Matthew 10:7

## The Dispersed Church

Rev Christine Sime

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The sacred space of Church enfolds us for worship and offers support, encouragement and the security of like-minded people. At the end of a service the gathered are 'blessed', the doors open, and we spill out into the world – dispersed to different homes, different work places: into a 'secular' world where we are perhaps best to keep our Christian heads down!

The 'world out there' however, is as much God's and therefore 'sacred space' as anywhere else. This is in accord with the Celtic understanding which denies the existence of a secular world because it ALL belongs to God, who created it – every living creature, every rock and stone.

Our role as those blessed in worship, identified with Christ, is to take him and the blessing he gives out into the midst and let the faith pervade conversations, work and social events. We need not necessarily preach at folks, but show them through our word (language), action and perhaps even more by our re-action, what it means to believe in God. Thus the faith can be naturally dispersed along with the congregation.

In his book, *Courageous Leadership*, Bill Hybels writes, "the local church is the hope of the world". It makes sense, and while Mr Hybels' local church is vastly different from those around here, the truth remains. If local Christians (the dispersed Church) are not going to help local people hear and see God's life-giving love and hope, then who is, and how better to help them know than to be amongst them?

Jesus gives us the best example. He himself lived and worked in rural areas where he started sharing a new revelation of God, offering a wonderful opportunity to return to him. His stories, parables and teaching are, in the main, rural based, where he went out to the people. Jesus did not wait for them to come to him. He walked the countryside and met people on their land, in their context. That, it seems, is the best way to spread the gospel and share the faith. Jesus was himself 'the dispersed Church' – getting alongside, non-judgmental, never giving up on anyone, always open to listen, giving of himself in time and skills.

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## What Does it Mean For Us To Be 'The Dispersed Church'?

As we reflect upon the practicalities of how we act as the Dispersed Church, do we perhaps feel our spirits ebb? Let me offer you a glimpse of what the people in my own church try to do. No-one who is involved would see this as anything special, most would be quite surprised to think that their efforts actually counted, let alone were noticed. Yet the one reality in rural areas is that YOU and YOUR ACTIONS will be noticed, be sure of that!

I serve two parishes, both rural, and the context here is broadly similar to many rural communities. The best strategies have – we have found – come from looking at the positives and developing and using them to outweigh and drive out the negatives. Rural areas have many positives, for example:

The pace of life tends to be less frenetic than that of cities – which is not only very pleasant, but the way life was surely meant to be. That does not mean it is not a busy life – dairy farmers, shepherds, all sorts of people work long hours, every day, but there are often more opportunities to encounter each other. Social life also tends to be buzzing. The joy of rural communities being that church and community mix readily. Folk tend to be involved in more than one group or committee, and so the community is permeated naturally with the Christian faith.

If the opportunities exist, the question is whether the Christian faith is allowed to permeate. Does the Dispersed Church have an effect as dispersed Christians? Our experiences seem to indicate that it is possible. We have members who take out Meals on Wheels – with the chance to make sure all is well with our older neighbours, to ask about family, or tell them news of the parish. Talk may include the Church if asked, and many do ask when they realise their visitor is involved in the Church.

Meetings, wherever you are, can decline in dignity at times, but the people around know who are church folk. They watch and listen to how these people react in such circumstances, and then a patient word, an attempt to reconcile or even silence can speak volumes. On the other side of the coin, when a church member is first to join in with the rancour and backbiting, that also is noticed and marked up against the Church and the Faith. In rural areas, Christians are known – there is no hiding-place and neighbourhood watch is nowhere as observant as in rural areas.

Another positive is in being observant ourselves, noticing where there is a need – personal, or for a group – a meeting place required, a venue for a concert or sale, some help with transport, or young families needing a place to gather with pre-school children for chat and rest. Having seen such a need, our church initiated a Toy Library where young families swarm in for an afternoon of play in a safe environment. Some church ladies help out, mainly playing with the children and nursing babies (they love it). As it is in church premises, the minister can also drop in, play with the children and if there is time chat with the parents or carers. This gives the minister the opportunity to be around for anyone who wants to ask a question, being seen if anyone wants to ‘suss out’ what the minister is like!

Such activities give the opportunity to invite someone to a church-organised event, whether social or spiritual. New neighbours, old friends. Church-organised film nights for the community and fund raising for community groups are much appreciated, as are reading groups (church-member organised) with ‘secular’ novels to be discussed. The development of a shared new venture such as hand bell ringing can enable a 50/50 mix of church and non-church. The group here has just bought their own brand new set of bells to play at church services and concerts. They are now involved with the next community’s drama group production – being put on in one of our churches.

Social events are great ways of being the dispersed church as folk get to know you for you, and then somewhere along the conversation realise you are a Christian – even though you do laugh, do enjoy life, even when you are an elder, even when you are the minister! Everyone likes to know you are human and when they do, it does not negate the faith, it underlines its power. Being seen as human makes us all more approachable, allowing others to see that God’s love could be for them too, and makes the faith something that perhaps they could have.

Dedication in care and love are also give-away signs that will eventually point to God. Not giving up on the folk who are awkward; not stopping visiting the people who are rude, or even nasty; not giving up the visits to a bereaved person after a set time. Not judging. All noticed and noted.

It is quite simply being the yeast in the dough. Yeast doesn’t make a lot of noise about its work. It starts slowly with a getting-to-know, settling-in phase, before the exponential growth occurs and a difference is seen. The yeast is itself changed in the process of growth. Sometimes it stretches as the cells prepare to divide, before each cell starts again. Being a proactive Christian takes effort, and can stretch us in many ways.

In a resource like this, it’s important to realise that truly there is little that is ‘new’, nor are there any quick-fix answers. The Dispersed Church needs to take time to get alongside, get to know and be known. It does demand consistency, vulnerability and commitment, or as a wise old shepherd advised when I asked him about training my collie – patience and perseverance.

## Questions for Discussion

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### **In rural areas, everyone tends to know everyone else –**

- > Do ‘they’ know of your faith?
- > Do they know how important it is to you?
- > Have you ever shared with anyone locally either how you came to faith, or some difficult/uncertain time when your faith was very important?
- > In what ways are church members involved in service to the wider community – both through paid employment and voluntary service?
- > In what formal or informal ways can we build bridges to the wider community?
- > Is it possible to develop our relationship to people in the community with whom we have occasional contact and to make them feel welcome?