

Young

[Aim: to look at the life of young people in small communities and to understand the place of young people in the life of rural village locations]

Story

A young couple, Annabel and Martin, moved into a house in a small village whose population was mainly elderly, but with a few younger married couples who tended to form a club and stick together. They had met at university, where they had been committed members of the Christian Union and were deeply committed to a Bible based Christian life. Although they were regarded (and treated) as bizarre by some of the more cynical members of the village and by some members of the church community, they persevered with church attendance and became well liked in the community. In due course they had a son, Andrew.

One day, Martin told Annabel at breakfast that he no longer loved her, had found someone else and was leaving. He moved out immediately, leaving Annabel cut off in the village with a big house and a small baby. Annabel now found herself in a complicated position in village life. First, she lost her similar status as a mother staying at home to look after the children and taking turns to run the toddlers' club in the village hall. She had to give up her part in the social circle of the village's younger affluent couples, to consider her options. Further, she felt that her faith had crumbled away leaving only bitterness at her faithless husband and envy of the couples she

still saw around her in the village daily round. Annabel found herself a good job to support herself and the baby, but this now meant that she had to find childcare. Offers came in from some of the retired widows in the village, but Annabel wanted a properly trained and qualified full-time nanny. This caused trouble in the village who saw the employment of "outsiders" as an unwelcome precedent. Annabel's first nannies found it impossible to settle in the village and none stayed long. Her life was beset by childcare problems until Andrew was old enough to go to nursery, - in a town ten miles away. This left Annabel with hours in the car going back and forth to nursery and work.

As Andrew grew older, different problems appeared. With the village having rallied round Annabel and Andrew and having cast Martin in the role of black sheep, mother and son found it difficult to throw off the shadow of "poor relation" within the village. As Annabel began to attract new boyfriends, so people within the village treated each with extreme hostility and suspicion and acted ever more protective towards Andrew. When Martin tried to negotiate with Annabel about where Andrew should go to school, Annabel was given a great deal of conflicting advice which made it more difficult to make sensible decisions. The village and church view was that the community wanted to "keep" Andrew and ensure that he went to one of the local schools. Martin wanted Andrew privately educated in another part of the country.

As Andrew grew older, he began to complain that it was becoming especially difficult for him to exert any independence. Other village children went freely to other towns and villages in search of entertainment but

Andrew felt he was constantly checked up on or his actions reported back. The village still seemed to have in mind that Andrew would be removed and sent away by his father. He also felt that they continued to treat him as if he were still a baby. Eventually, this sense of the village overwhelming him caused tension between Andrew and Annabel and they moved away from the village altogether.

Discussion

This story shows how a human tendency to categorise events and people into "good" and "bad" compartments can have a serious effect on people's lives. Christians who have a particularly close fellowship can be devastated and damaged when things go wrong and may overreact in the desire to make things better. In this case, the kind and sympathetic villagers tried to exercise "ownership" of Annabel and Andrew and actually made it more difficult for her to rebuild her life and reach an accommodation with her estranged partner. On a wider basis, sometimes in tiny village communities, young people are in such a minority that they become treated as special cases and are swamped with unwelcome attention. Consequently when the village children grow up and begin to leave for school, university or employment elsewhere their loss can be felt very acutely and even as a betrayal. The freedom to reject church, do different things, and to make mistakes can sometimes be restricted in small communities. This can lead to frustration and resentment - not just with parents, but with neighbours, friends and the whole village.

In the Church, we know that offering Christian witness to children and young people is a priority in mission. In our anxiety to reach out to a younger generation, to love, care for and to nurture them, we may forget to listen to their stories and their own accounts of their spiritual journey. Yet it is always necessary to allow others the space to encounter and be changed by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Some suggestions for Bible Study

2 Samuel 9

Luke 2: 41-52

John 8: 3-11

Choose one or two questions for discussion

How do newcomers to our locality become accepted and included? Some people might have stories to share about this.

What might have happened if Martin had been white and Annabel Afro-Caribbean?

Forgiveness is one of Christ's commands: is this demonstrated in the life of our local church?

Life in small communities can feel imprisoning to younger people in particular, - how can they be given sufficient and appropriate freedom?

How is childcare provided in our locality when parents are both at work? Is there more we could do to help?

Village communities comprise wealthy and poorer people - how can they work together in community affairs?

Suggestions for drama or role play

Imagine you are Annabel telling your Christian friends what has happened to your marriage and to your faith. How might they react? What would you most want to hear from them?

Imagine you are Martin coming to visit Andrew. What would you hope to hear from your Christian friends at your former church? How might they deal with your side of the story?

Put yourself in Andrew's position as he grows up. How might he explain to Annabel about how he feels about life in the village?

Reflection

Things can go wrong in the best Christian households and in small communities strong emotions can prevail. How do Christian faith and fellowship help or hinder reconciliation and healing and how can all parties be helped to move on? When does our desire to love and nurture those who have been hurt become stifling?

A Hymn and a Prayer

**For example, *Through all the changing scenes of life*
or *Born in the night***

God,

You stand beside us in time of trouble;

you offer us strength, courage and hope; your promises never fail.

**Help us to have trust in your love for us, so we may turn our times of trial
around.**

Amen

