

What ringers offer – one shared commitment with many gifts

The second part of an article on ringing and the church
by David Grimwood

Robert Lewis noted in a *Ringing World* editorial (26th April 2019) that “*Bells do have an extraordinary ability to bring people together and deliver a message of hope, particularly in the shadow of bleak events*”. The evidence of the ringing to mark the Armistice, the Millennium, the fire at Notre Dame in Paris and other major events reveals the willingness of ringers to commit to one another to ensure bells are rung to express powerfully the significance of shared public moments.

In the same issue of *The Ringing World* was a comment about the Oxford Diocesan Guild Handbell Day – “*It never ceases to amaze me how some 30 + ill-assorted ringers of vastly different experiences and abilities can be brought together to produce a cohesive whole*”. The act of ringing does require a shared commitment, whether that be on a Sunday, for a special event or for a bit of fun, or just for the personal reward it can bring. It means looking beyond personal ambition and self-indulgence, recognising that ringing depends on relationships, and dealing with our own strengths and weaknesses as well as each other’s.

Interpreting this in terms of Christian faith, St Paul expresses this with his metaphor of the body: each individual has value within the whole, the weakest being the most important (1 Corinthians 12; 14–27). This principle can be a source of frustration and disappointment on occasion when there is a desire to ring something advanced or flawless, but that only underlines the truth of Paul’s metaphor. When the ‘body’ works together well, it can be a transforming and memorable experience. In a letter to *The Ringing World* (2018 p.445), Andrew Beckwith identified the reason why he rings as ‘fulfilment’. He writes of the experience of ringing when “*a sense of complete unity is established ... these will be wonderful and life-changing moments which I am quite happy to describe as spiritual*”.

Making music together is a powerful and inspiring experience. Ringing involves many different elements: physical effort and perseverance, physical skill, mental agility, attentive listening, willingness to work with

and fit in with others, thorough preparation – the list goes on. Mainly, it requires not only an awareness of one another but support and encouragement as well. The resulting sound may sometimes be disappointing, but the experience nevertheless involves a deep sharing. It may or may not be pushing the concept to say it resonates with the Old Testament ideal of ‘shalom’, a sense of a shared completeness. The importance given by ringers generally to the social interaction, whether over the meeting tea and cake or in the pub, does support the idea.

An ingredient of this relationship element is the often-made insight that ringing is an effective leveller. Social rank or status means nothing in the ringing room. Mistakes and who makes them are usually fairly obvious, whether in learning to ring or at the most advanced level of change ringing. What earns respect is enthusiasm, commitment and skill, as well as being able and willing to contribute positively. It is worth noting that ringing together requires a high degree of unspoken co-operation and mutual support, unconsciously forming a bond between ringers, with the potential for friendship and shared respect. It frees up the capacity and desire to offer hospitality, and a warm welcome (usually!) to ringers visiting or joining local ringing. More than that, there is often an effort made to support the visiting ringer in making progress, or vice versa. Being offered such respect and hospitality is a very affirming human experience.

These reflections are not confined to the local and particular. A world-wide network of friends and memories link ringers together in ways that are rarely understood beyond ringing. Tower grabbers, peal ringers and those who read *The Ringing World* and social media know vast numbers of other ringers, regardless of distance or time. Grabbing a random tower in Australia on a fleeting family visit led to catching up with a ringing friend last seen over 35 years before!

However, this is more than a shared pastime for its own sake. Although ringers persevere with the activity for many reasons, personal achievement, visiting obscure villages, failing and trying new things, there is a sense of commitment to a cause beyond the immediate and personal. Ringers respond to requests from church and state to celebrate or mark significant public anniversaries and events, requests that acknowledge the power of bells in the public soundscape resonating with deep human experience. The CCCBR website lists public anniversaries which might be noted by bells, from the Treaty of Versailles as the formal end of World War One to the first appearance of Enid Blyton’s Noddy.

Yet the overriding purpose of bells and ringing is to proclaim faith in God, present and



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Dove's Guide
for Church Bell Ringers
can be found at:

dove.cccbr.org.uk/home.php

Updates to your tower's information (such as change of practice night) are really helpful to potential visitors.

Also – do please supply full details of your bells and frame if not already shown.

welcoming, particularly on Sundays and for church services. It is the reason why churches have bells! The commitment of ringers to Sunday ringing is remarkable, to be applauded, and persists whether the ringing itself is advanced or basic, whether there are enough ringers or not. Although there is no evidence available, it is highly probable that ringers turn out more regularly and reliably on Sundays than many of the congregation members.

Church allegiance involves a wide range of skills and activities, none necessarily of themselves religious, but are often offered because the activity itself is rewarding and enjoyable – from flower arranging to making music. Worship itself, however, enables people to come together to offer their gifts and interest, to be stimulated to develop them within a setting that speaks of a faith and hope that unites humanity with awareness of God. Ringing is no exception.

The Taylor Review “Sustainability of English Churches and Cathedrals” (published in 2018 by the Department for Culture, Media & Sport) noted that “*many people enjoy the social capital and unique sense of community contributed by their local church*”, adding that “*some may take the building for granted as a fixed part of their local landscape and might not immediately see the necessity for deeper involvement in its present or future*.” Ringing is an activity that can and does enable that deeper involvement of local people, and in doing so, widens the use of church buildings, contributing to, rather than demanding from, the life and community of local churches.

Human dignity can be recognised and fulfilled through the shared commitment that ringing involves. The commitment to Sunday ringing, because of what it expresses, may engage ringers in a deeper search for personal meaning and experience beyond anything any other hobby or pastime alone can bring.

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