

# Mission to the Waterways Communities

Rev'd Paul White

# Confession & Working Assumptions

- Academic vs Practical Theology
- Christianity is:
  - Apostolic / Missional / Evangelistic
  - About reaching and serving the marginalised
- Other assumptions are available

# What are 'the Waterways'?

C. 2200 miles of navigable canals and rivers

Under multiple ownership / control:

The Canal & River Trust (majority of canals)

The Environment Agency (e.g. River Medway)

National Trust (River Wey and Godalming Navigation)

Private ownership (Bridgewater Canal)

Local authorities (Basingstoke Canal)





The Waterways in 'culture'



And some more...

Before it was trendy



The eyes of a  
holiday-maker



The  
developing  
eyes of a 'local'



nb Waiouru





# The genesis of a question

- Who, and how many, are living on the Waterways?
- How is 'the Church' present to these people, both in service and in witness?
- "The Church's mission to the Waterways communities: A marginal mission to a marginal people?"

# Historical Communities – The Navvies

- Those who dug the canals. Usually rough and far from home, digging and drinking through local communities.
- “A Lancashire clergyman preached a sermon on the subject, though there is no record that any navies came to listen. He began with a half-hearted welcome to the newcomers, then got down to the main business of a tirade against navies who ‘cheat and steal and drink and swear and fight and do all kinds of mischief to themselves and others.’”

# Historical Communities – The Boatmen

- The Boatmen and families who worked the canals.
- Wharfside missions (1820s)
- Floating Church in Worcester (Rev'd John Davies 1842)
- Navy Mission Society (1877)
- Incorporated Seaman and Boatmen's Friend Society
- London City Mission
- Canalside mission halls.
- Sister Mary Ward (Stoke Bruerne)

# Who is currently using the Waterways?

- **Holiday makers renting for a week or two** – unlikely to have significant pastoral needs.
- **People with permanent moorings in cities such as London or Birmingham** – still part of 'mainstream culture' incl church
- **The retired or independently wealthy continuously cruising** – all looks well but query issues of loneliness, alcoholism, growing infirmity
- **The poor who have dropped out or taken refuge on boats.** – multiple deprivation issues

# The challenges of life afloat

- Isolation
- Access to benefits – no fixed abode and possibly no internet
- Poverty – fuel poverty (coal and logs) & food poverty
- Access to a GP or a vote
- Diesel – expensive
- Water – Heavy to transport if not by a waterpoint
- Sewage disposal
- Out of sight, out of mind

# The challenges for the 'mainstream' church

- May be simply unaware of the issue
- A large cultural divide? Vocabulary and experience...
- Low population density of boaters in any one parish
- The poorest likely to be most remote

# How many?

- We don't know!
- Canal & River Trust – 33,000 licensed boats (+3% unlicensed?)
- Environment Agency – 30,704 licensed boats
- Bridgewater Canal, National Trust, Basingstoke Canal, Wey Navigation – no response
- 70,000 boats? 100,000 people?
- c.f. 'travellers' – between 58,000 & 300,000
- But – the need seems significant

The image features a white background with two large teal geometric shapes. On the left, a teal triangle points towards the center. On the right, a teal trapezoid is positioned. The text is centered between these shapes.

Who are the Christians  
on the Waterways?



# The Boaters' Christian Fellowship



- 600 Members
- Primarily fellowship for existing Christians (e.g. group 3 the independent cruisers)
- Occasional outreach events
- [www.boaterschristianfellowship.org.uk](http://www.boaterschristianfellowship.org.uk)

# Canal Ministries



- Explicitly evangelistic
- Canalside missions
- 19 evangelists living on their own boats
- 'Ethnographic' research sadly thwarted.
- [www.canalministries.org.uk](http://www.canalministries.org.uk)

# The Waterways Chaplaincy



- Founded c.2010 from an ecumenical partnership, incl Diocese of St Albans (but see later)
- 77 Chaplains
- Wish to grow to 200 during 2020
- Chaplains are both 'liveaboard' boaters and other volunteers
- Walk a mile a week
- Deal with both practical and spiritual issues
- [www.waterwayschaplains.org.uk](http://www.waterwayschaplains.org.uk)

# Narrative interviews

“Another guy moved into the marina who had a job but had an alcohol problem. Lost his job. Eventually met with him as a chaplain. Went onto his boat – the bottom of the boat was full of water, so he was walking in water. Bottles all over the place. No working fridge. No heat, not much food. We pumped his boat out a couple of times. Put some lights in. Helped with food. He was desperate...He had fallen in the canal twice. Once between the pontoon and the boat. Had to help pull him out. I think the Chaplaincy has literally saved lives.”

# Comparison with other travellers

- Lots of parallels in terms of both the numbers and the challenges, both of lifestyle and discrimination.
- BUT
- Disparity in legal responses from both Church of England and Government.

# Church of England

- February 2019
- General Synod 2123:
  - "...Every Diocese to appoint a chaplain to Gypsies, Travellers and Roma, to provide pastoral care, harness the potential for church growth amongst those communities..."
- Dr Elizabeth Henry:
  - "We have not discussed whether only travellers who are land based are included. However it would be fair to say that we refer to people who share an ethnic identity."

# Parliament

- House of Commons Committee report by Woman's and Equalities Committee (5 April 2019)
- Included 'boat dweller' within the definition of 'traveller' (*contra* Church of England who did not consider it)
- BUT still excluded boat dwellers from specific consideration or protection (*contra* land based travellers).


# Conclusions

- Boat dwellers (especially the poor) are a highly marginal and largely invisible group
- Even within the world of 'travellers' they are marginalised and receive less favourable treatment
- The ministry to this group is highly marginal and largely invisible ministry!
- Even within the world of chaplaincy the waterways chaplaincy is largely unknown
- BUT if our theological assumption about the marginalised is right then this is an important ministry.



# Final Thoughts

- St Albans has withdrawn a lot of support.
- Missed opportunity for Church of England with GS2123 to support an existing ministry
- Further research (PhD?) into chaplains as the 'entrepreneurial future' of the Church of England and the intersection between chaplaincy as presence and chaplaincy as mission.



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