



volunteering - and encourages people to give their time helping

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The occasion was a normal hospital pastoral visit. I went in as a clergyman to see someone from my congregation, an elderly man, and a churchgoer for decades.

He'd always faced the ups and downs of life calmly, full of faith and hope. Yet I had heard that he was deeply anxious, and unable to work well with the staff at the hospital.

Over a few days, I spent a good deal of time with him. It became clear that he did not understand what was happening to him. He had cancer, and it was not the fear of death but an absence of information that was causing his distress.

I rang the consultant, whom I happened to know — a first-class doctor working every hour there was, like so many in our wonderful NHS.

'Oh, that's it!' he said. 'I knew there was a problem, but I couldn't work it out. I'll go and see him.'

He spent ten minutes with his patient, at the end of which there was calm and clarity. But the ten minutes of superb professional care had required the hours of sitting listening, trying to work out why he was so upset.

The professional care required years of training, and decades of experience. The listening was something that any person of good intention and normal human compassion can carry out, especially with some very simple guidelines.

In another place, when I was working in the Diocese of Coventry, I was on the board and then chair of an NHS General Hospital Trust. I could see first-hand and understand better the incredible complexities and demands of running a world-class health system that is free at the point of need.

There is nothing impoverished or a sign of failure in having large numbers of volunteers involved in healthcare. All large health institutions, though full of professional and highly trained people, are under pressure.

Every year, the number of patients goes up, while the demands of an ageing population mean that many conditions require longer term and more specialist care. Advances in medical technology mean that people who would previously have died are now wonderfully restored to health — but, again, after intense and highly skilled treatment.

The one thing we cannot manufacture, and members of staff cannot manufacture, however hard they work, is time.

Compassion is not the issue: they have that in bucketloads. We live right next to St Thomas' Hospital in Central London, and a member of staff lodges with us.

His profound concern for patients, which has him working all kinds of hours, and thinking about them even when he's not at work, is something at which I marvel. But it's not exceptional, it's just normal National Health Service.

Even with that kind of dedication, you cannot conjure up more time. It doesn't come from Government budgets, and it is not available to borrow, buy or steal. It only comes when people give it, out of love and compassion.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus tells of a man who was robbed on the road, beaten and left for dead. Two people (both of them religious) pass by on the other side. Then, along comes not a Jew (Jesus's target audience) but a Samaritan (a group of people hated by Jews).

Yet the Samaritan stops, binds up the victim's wounds, takes him to a local inn, pays for his care and promises to return to pay any extra after he's done his business. We admire the Samaritan for being generous with his courage (after all, he too might have been robbed) and with his money.

But he was also, and above all, generous with his time. He takes a break from what he needs to do in order to give his compassion and his time. He is a busy man, a businessman, but human need comes first.

So, here is a chance for you to make a difference. By joining the Hospital Helpforce — pledging as little as three hours a week of your time, or one day a month — you could have a profound impact on the lives of patients, whether giving practical help like picking up prescriptions, offering a shoulder to cry on, talking to patients who may be elderly or confused, or staffing helpdesks to make the hospitals as efficient as possible.

Crucially, while you spend time with patients, you are allowing medical staff to focus more of their time on medical care, and less on the little tasks that any of us could do.

What we are talking about is truly a community coming together to help each other.

The more volunteers who sign up, the more help that can be given, not just on the wards but out in the world with the Royal Voluntary Service and other charities also eager to take new recruits.

The NHS is an extraordinary example of those things that unite us. It demonstrates that what holds us together is stronger than what divides us, especially at these times of great debate and decision about our future.

The more we support the health service, the more we reaffirm and strengthen who we are as a society. If we embrace solidarity and hope, we reject division and despair. Volunteering with Helpforce is a very practical way we can do just that.

It is very evident in our wonderful country that, despite the materialism and the secularism about which some people often grumble (me

included, I fear), there is a heart of compassion and a deeply moral and Christian culture that believes in ideals like those of the Good Samaritan.

There are so many such people in this country, especially when it comes to healthcare. It is estimated that up to three million people volunteer in the NHS, and churches in particular play a vital role. We have chaplains, of course, who are paid and do a marvellous job. But each chaplain recruits volunteers who support them.

And that is only a small part of what could be done. Imagine the impact if everyone who was able to could be a Good Samaritan.

It is not that those who do not volunteer lack compassion.

Some may, but the vast majority are simply caught up in the busyness and difficulties of life, raising families, caring for relatives, holding down difficult jobs. But the thing about this sort of volunteering — of spending time, especially after a bit of necessary training — is that you come away with far more than you gave.

Time invested in other people, particularly strangers in need, is an investment that repays itself many times over.

What we get back is personal satisfaction — and the privilege of being with people who suffer. We, in turn, become more determined and more courageous.

There's another thing Jesus said. In Matthew's Gospel, chapter 25, he talks about the last judgment (in the Church calendar we are in Advent, when we think especially about these things). Jesus describes the last judgment as being a division between two groups of people.

The judge (Jesus) praises one lot because they did things for him, such as feeding the hungry, welcoming strangers and — most importantly for us — caring for the sick.

They cannot remember meeting Jesus, but he tells them, 'when you did this for the least important person, you did it for me'.

The other lot are condemned for neglecting Jesus. They, too, are baffled, and he replies, 'when you neglected the least important, you neglected me'.

Volunteering brings joy, purpose and belonging. It does not suffer from boom or bust; it is simply a gift that we give that goes on giving back to us.

More than that, it is fundamentally a good action, and when we do good, without expectation of reward, we express God's love — and incidentally, surprisingly, we benefit as well.

That is the reason I am supporting this campaign by the Daily Mail and Helpforce to encourage people to volunteer in the NHS.

It matches those in need with those eager to give the best gift of all: their time. And it doesn't cost a penny. You don't need to trawl the shops for it and, even better, it can actually enrich your own life.

The NHS is one of the most extraordinary achievements in our nation's history. It is an expression of the deep value we place on caring equally for everyone in our society.

That's why, when I look at the health service, I'm reminded that God's love is not only unconditional it is especially available for those who are most in need.

If we are to follow the example of Jesus, it is our responsibility to offer love in that same way.

This is one of the reasons why there are more than 900 chaplains working in the NHS who provide emotional and spiritual support to patients and families at what are often the most difficult times of their lives.

The majority are Anglican, but as the fabric of our country has evolved, they also include chaplains of other faiths. They conduct visits to more than one million patients per year — an extraordinary number.

That is one of the reasons the NHS should be treasured by all of us. It has certainly been there for my family in times of great fear and pain, as well as in times of relief and joy.

Let me declare an interest. I use the NHS. The family use the NHS. Our children were born in NHS hospitals, relatives have been cared for in NHS hospitals, as have I and my wife. Like most people in this country, although we do not take it for granted, we know it will be there when we need it.

I remember comparing notes with a friend who'd had a child about the same time as we did. They'd been in the U.S., and the dangers of a large bill as a result of unexpected needs during the birth had weighed heavily on their minds.

For us, though, it had never crossed our thinking that we would get a bill, because it's the National Health Service.

When I was ill with pneumonia a few years ago, I was admitted to the Royal Liverpool Infirmary.

As anyone who has had pneumonia will know, I was not exactly chirpy, but the one thing that never worried me was the bill.

Yet I saw the staff working so hard, and when I was discharged, my gratitude to them was boundless.

We can all help make this great treasure of our nation even better. Look up the story of the Good Samaritan and spend a few minutes thinking where you are in it.

Be imaginative. It’s only a short story (Luke’s Gospel, chapter 10, verses 25-37), but it’s one of the foundations of our values.

Now imagine yourself into the mind of the Good Samaritan. And then imagine yourself into the reality of being part of Helpforce.

Have a wonderful Advent and Christmas.

9 min read

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