



MP and the significance of the Great Get Together weekend.

Peter Williams/WCC

“Keep Calm and Carry On” is a message from wartime Britain that has enjoyed a second wind over the last decade. And while we probably don't need any more mugs, posters or tea towels, those five words still sum up something essential about our country.

We are rightly proud of our resilience, which we have demonstrated on many occasions down the centuries. In the last two or three years alone, we have suffered some extraordinary shocks to our system.

One of those was the murder of Jo Cox MP in June 2016, which has had a profound and lasting impact on so many – myself included.

Jo was a young mother going about her work on behalf of her constituents, in the place where she had been born and raised. In her previous career in international development she had been to many conflict zones, including Afghanistan and Sudan; tragically she met her death outside a library in West Yorkshire.

It was not just the manner of her death that resonated so widely, but the way in which she had lived. Jo's words reminding us that “we have more in common than that which divides us” have become a rallying cry for those of us who share her belief in stronger, more inclusive communities.

Her death was a moment that forced us all to reflect on the kind of nation we want to live in. The question, then, is how do we do that reflection – and then what do we do next?

In the Bible, St Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

That kind of reflection is so important. Today's fast moving and uncertain world presents too few opportunities to pause and reflect. But when we do it can help us appreciate that in a thousand little ways we can move closer to the society that we – like Jo – would want for our children and for everyone.

But St Paul's advice doesn't stop there. He has some very practical instructions on what to do next.

When we recognise values we hold dear, he writes, “keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen... and the God of peace will be with you.”

That “keep on doing” part is what the Great Get Together weekend is all about.

The way that Jo lived showed us that it's not enough just to say that as Britons we believe in respectfulness and tolerance. Our values aren't reflected in what we say, but through what we do.

Last year, on the first anniversary of Jo's murder, thousands of get-togethers took place all over the country – from street parties to community picnics, fun runs and musical events. This year her parents Gordon and Jean, and her sister, Kim, have decided to move the date to what would have been Jo's birthday weekend, June 22-24. Rather than remembering how she died, they want to celebrate how she lived.

Recently I've been talking about my concern that we could be doing more to nurture our common values – such as compassion, generosity and solidarity with one another. These values may have grown out of our Christian heritage, but they are no less important as we embrace today's religiously plural and multi-ethnic society.

But greater than my concern is my passionate belief that each of us can help shape our local communities and wider society. I never lose that hope in our country – not for a second.

It would take many more articles to even hint at all the things that convince me we are, at our heart, a nation rooted in love and care for each other, despite our differences.

Each year during Ramadan I get to visit mosques who welcome me to share an Iftar meal to break the daily fast. A few weeks ago I was welcomed with great warmth by a mosque in south London. When we weren't too busy eating and laughing together, we had a chance to share and celebrate what we have in common – and learn from each other.

For this reason, I want to pay tribute to the family of Jo Cox who, while still struggling with grief and loss, are creating countless such opportunities for people of all faiths and none to unite as part of the Great Get Together.

If we want our country to be strengthened we cannot leave it only to politicians.

As we are seeing with programmes such as the Church Urban Fund's Near Neighbours – where local groups work to bring together neighbours from across diverse faiths and ethnicities to improve their communities – all of us can reach across divides to support and care for each other. All of us can work together for the common good.

The Great Get Together, inspired as it is by Jo Cox, is a great place to start because it need involve no more than sharing a cup of tea and a sandwich with your neighbours.

Today's fast moving and uncertain world presents too few opportunities to pause and reflect. But don't be fooled by the simplicity of that – because when we do, it can help us appreciate that in a thousand little ways we can move closer to the society we, like Jo, would want for our children and all those we hold most dear.

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