

Ten Thoughts About Church...
On Leaving St Luke's After Ten Years
By Sarah Roweberry

Good morning. I'm Sarah, and I'm soon to become part of the St Luke's diaspora when I make the great migration back north.

As Martin might say, I rocked up just yesterday and a decade later I'm moving on. And as Dickens might say, it's been the best of times and the worst of times. I've sung along to Dusty Springfield on my wedding day - led by Rick, and I've cried in the office whilst miscarrying after IVF, during a service focused on the miracle of Mary's womb - and Grace Pengelly was there to hold my hand.

I grew up in a Methodist family, I spent Easter holidays at Easter People and at least part of my summer holidays at some sort of church related holiday club. I was in a dance troupe called feet first 4 god (it seemed cooler at the time) and I played my clarinet in the church music group. Church was a happy, safe place.

At uni I went to the hall of residence Christian Union and swiftly left at something they said, or maybe how they made me feel as I can't really remember what they said anymore, only that it was rage-inducing. And that was the start of a few years in the wilderness.

Later when I started as an intern at Christian Aid and started spending my summer bank holiday weekend at Greenbelt festival, Christian Aid and Greenbelt felt like my spiritual home. Faith-fuelled but not pious, justice-focused, outward-looking and full of questions, this felt much more like the Jesus movement than the Christianity I had encountered at university, or indeed seen lived out in the world. And so it was not being able to get to a talk by Dave Tom at Greenbelt that eventually led me to St Luke's one Sunday morning in 2012.

Martin asked me to reflect a little on the faith I've found at St Luke's, so here's 10 things for 10 years as part of this amazing crowd of people...I'd like to say it's the wisdom I've learned along the way, but more accurately it's mostly the questions I still have: the wisdom I'm still trying to learn.

1. Just before I joined St Luke's I had spent 3 months living in the West Bank as an Ecumenical Accompanier - being with people under occupation and trying to demonstrate that the outside world had not forgotten about their human rights. One of the many things that struck me was that at 4am, whilst queuing to cross a checkpoint, men would find a piece of cardboard, line up facing Mecca and take the time to kneel and pray. My colleague described the checkpoint that we monitored as the nearest thing to hell on earth; many days it was hard to disagree. But for me, the sight of Morning Prayer at the checkpoint was the closest I came to seeing the holy in the Holy Land. Sometimes when I'm wondering what the point of prayer is, which is pretty much every time I pray, I think about the way Muslims literally re-orient themselves to pray. What does our prayer orient us to? What is the point of us being here, in this space together and where does it lead us?
2. Despite 10 years as an Anglican, I still can't work out the flipping lectionary, and I initially thought the reading for today was the story of the Good Samaritan, one of my faves. But it turns out that's the story before Mary and Martha, and I think you had it last week. The good Samaritan is about how having the "right" opinions or performing the "right" religious ritual is useless if it doesn't affect what you do outside of those rituals. The last line is Jesus telling us to go be like the Samaritan. Doesn't matter where you're from, what religion you are, whether you're someone society has marginalised....you can absolutely fulfil the law of God, by acting out of love for your neighbour.
3. I know that notices are the marmite of St Luke's - you either love them or you hate them. But they say something about who we are after we're done with the religious ritual, about what we prioritise outside of this little Sunday morning bubble. Dan doing his nightshelter notice is a huge part of why I stuck around. Who are we the rest of the week? And incidentally, I love Marmite.
4. As part of my preparation for marriage at St Luke's, Dave went through the enneagram with me and George and I discovered I was a type 2 (if this means nothing to you I'd highly recommend checking out the enneagram as a tool for understanding yourself.) Type 2 is usually known as "the Helper" - type twos at our best love helping people out because helping people is great. At our worst, we do stuff to help because we need

you to like us, and so will resent you if you don't notice it, or if we don't feel we got enough thanks. So when I finally worked out that the story of Mary and Martha was the reading for today, it felt like God giving me a little wry smile. I very much associate with Martha, and am furious with Jesus for the way he rocks up, doesn't notice how hard she's working and then berates her for speaking up about how she feels about Mary being a bit useless. Jesus' response feels patronising - the 'calm down dear' of 2000 years ago. But actually, that's probably just my reaction to a man overlooking how hard a woman is working. After taking a deep breath, I can see that maybe Jesus is reminding Martha that she doesn't need to do anything in order to be loved. And maybe that's what we're doing here every week; trying to remember that we are loved? And not necessarily because of how busy we make ourselves. Jesus says stop being worried and distracted, just try to be loved instead. Like in the poem by Rose Cook, it took Jesus reminding Martha that's what she needs. It takes a community to help you to rest, to remind you to do it and to help make the tea so that you can. In a community, some weeks you're Martha - slightly stressed and a bit resentful. But some weeks you get to be Mary.

5. There is no number five- apart from time to take a deep breath, to be in this space, and let go of whatever you need to let go of from the week just gone. *Be still sometimes.*
6. So in the Good Samaritan, Jesus says "go and *do* likewise". In the story of Mary and Martha, Jesus says "stop doing things"! It's almost like we can't take one verse and make it applicable to everything. But all of the stories that Luke tells of Jesus are about encounters that change people. Encounters that change people not only for themselves, but for the people around them and the whole community too. If we can meet here every week and remember that we are loved, and show some of that love to each other, perhaps we can go out and show the world the sort of love it needs too.
7. People are messy and groups are complicated. Or as Kent Keith puts it; "People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centred. Love them anyway."

8. Mary Oliver's instructions for life are to pay attention, be astonished, tell about it. I can't help but think that being part of a community that gets together week in, week out, helps with all of those things.
9. While I've been here it feels like the rich world was finally catching on to the realities of the climate crisis and that white people were starting to realise the realities of racism. But since then we've faced and are facing the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the rollback of abortion rights in the States, a hunger crisis in East Africa, the continued rise of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Many days at the moment it feels like one tentative step forwards, 5 leaps back. But our job as people who have dreams of a better world is to make hope convincing rather than despair possible. Being part of a community that meets week in, week out, might just help with that too.
10. I'm a hypocrite, and this is directed at me more than anybody else. I want to encourage you to get stuck in while I'm moving on. I'm telling you community is the answer after a year of not managing to get here very often. But that's why the blessing that goes with our confession is such balm. For all of the ways in which we fail to be the people we most long to be. God Forgives you, forgive yourself, forgive others. Each week we get a new try at being those best people.

My initial reaction to Martin's suggestion that I reflect on the faith I've found at St Luke's was that I'm not sure whether I've found faith because I still don't really know what faith is.

But I have found you lot, and maybe that's the same thing.

Amen.