

Bishop Graeme Knowles writes...

As the train pulled in I was catching on my journey to preach in London it was clear that it was already pretty full with pink clad passengers.

It came as rather a surprise when I reached the platform at the train station in the early afternoon recently, to find it crammed with people, all wearing pink T shirts.

Unusually for an overfull train, the atmosphere was relaxed and convivial. Everyone chatted and nobody appeared to worry about having to stand. It soon became clear where all my fellow passengers were going. They were all off to the recent Ed Sheeran concert at Portman Road! As the train arrived in Ipswich I wondered if I would make it over the bridge in time to catch my connection, as the pink clad mass headed over the footbridge.

I should not have worried. The same atmosphere extended once the crowd was off the train. Everyone looked after everyone else. It was at this point that I noticed something about my fellow travellers. This was a family occasion, children, parents, grandparents, friends all off together to enjoy their day out.

I had been invited to preach in London during the weekend of 12/13 July. I thought it wise to travel up on the Saturday so that I could be sure of actually being in London on time on the Sunday. My train to London, in comparison, was dull and colourless.

Come Monday morning, I was back in the office at the bishop's house in Ipswich. There was a particular buzz in the secretaries' office. Two of the team had been to the concert, one of the Friday night and the other on the Saturday. They were still buzzing from the experience. They spoke of Ed Sheeran's magnetism, his ability to hold his audience for hours. They spoke of the atmosphere in the stadium. They spoke of feeling safe and held secure in such a vast crowd.

They recounted hearing of a proposal of marriage made in the audience during the evening. It had been a thoroughly enjoyable evening for both of them.

The appearance of Westlife (even I had heard of them!) to sing their 1999 classic "Flying Without Wings" was clearly a show-stopper, as Ed admitted he had always wanted to sing with them. One of the staff said "It was such a vibrant celebration of music and community." Afterwards I thought about this sense of community. Since our experience of Covid lockdown I have the sense that we have lost something of doing things together, as a community.

The joy of my fellow travellers was palpable. They were happy together. It was family, yes, but it was more. It was the gathering of all ages to be together, and to experience and enjoy time spent in community.

For those of us who profess the Christian faith, we are called into a community, called in to be part of the Body of Christ.

There is a place for everyone, whatever age, background or ability. As human beings we are not made to be isolated individuals, but social beings to care for others. But we need to work at this. So, give thanks for the likes of Ed Sheeran and his ability to create and hold our community.

Bishop Graeme Knowles is the interim Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich following the retirement of Bishop Martin Seeley. A permanent Bishop is expected to be appointed later this year.