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Our local shops are great places to meet people. It often takes me twice as long as it might to get the items I am buying. I chat to people I see regularly in church. I talk to people who rarely manage to get to church. Then there are people from the other churches in the village and people who perhaps never make it to church for a whole variety of reasons. I know clergy who work in a large market town who book in their diaries the whole morning of the market for just wandering around and talking with people. You would be surprised the conversations that can take place away from the church building.

Recently I had a chat in Budgens with someone who has started coming regularly to St. Edmund and St. Mary Parish Church. She said she felt guilty because she enjoyed it so much! I talked with someone new to the Ingatestone Parochial Church Council who said they really looked forward to the meetings. Yes, I was surprised as well! I also met someone from Fryerning Parochial Church Council who said how they laughed more at the PCC than anywhere else. The Bishop of Maidstone, when he was Principal of the theological college I attended, said that you could judge the spiritual health of people by how much they genuinely laughed with each other. Not facetious laughter, or laughter at the expense of someone else. But laughter based on an enjoyment of the gift of life given to us by God. We can so easily become downhearted over all kinds of matters, often simply a culmination of the trivial. Life is a gift to be enjoyed. What more enjoyable and rewarding life could there be than one where the focus is on God?

The same person, in our chat in the supermarket, commented how being part of the church made her feel that she was suddenly part of a big family. Of course, not everyone's experience of family is positive. The word 'family' could be associated with arguments, abuse and pain. If that is so, then the church family should be somewhere to relearn how God

intended family life to be, with people supporting and encouraging each other. A visitor to the church on the evening of June 26th, Sue's first celebration of communion, commented how wonderful it was to see the church family celebrating afterwards. So many people from both churches brought food. An hour and a half after the end of the service the church was still heaving with people. Fantastic!

It has been wonderful too how our idea of the church family can embrace those from the other denominations in the village. It was great the Msq. Chris Brooks and a group of people from the Catholic Church came to Sue's first celebration of communion and gave her a card. It has been a pleasure to work with Chris as a colleague in Ingatestone and Fryerning Churches Together. We wish him well with his new post in Chingford, starting in October.

Nowhere better are we able to see our church family growing than in the confirmation classes. Four young people, and a real mixture of ages amongst our older candidates, three of whom are regular attendees at Fryerning. Here are people excited about developing their relationship with God. People who wish to take that step of faith to be confirmed. This is a public statement of their faith, together with their commitment to the church family. And there is much laughter at the classes.

When I was in Israel some back in 1996, a professor pointed out to me how funny much of the Bible is in its original languages. The use of 'plays on words' are everywhere. Jesus said many funny sayings, the humour of which is lost in translation. I have a drawing in the study of Jesus laughing. When things get too serious, it reminds me of the apparent absurdity of so much we consider important. An immediate crisis can often blow over as quickly as it arose. Life is a great gift from God, to be celebrated in ourselves and others. Even when someone passes from this life, we can focus on the positive impact they have had on others.

I look forward to chatting with you in the shops!

Yours in Christ, *Patrick*.