



Ruth Radley

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Location: Britain



What I do: Providing spiritual care and support to children and families as part of the multi-faith chaplaincy team at Birmingham Children's Hospital.

Dear All,

You may recall me saying that over the last few years our chaplaincy team have been providing support for staff and families in the community palliative care teams. This includes visits to families in the community, both during the palliative phase and continuing with the bereaved phase of their journeys, as well as debriefing staff after a child they have been caring for has died, twice monthly drop ins, training sessions and retreats! We have got to know the staff really well over the last few years and it is a total privilege working with them. Of course, many of the children are our patients as well, so the crossover into hospital works well for us too.

I thought I would share with you about our retreats last year. We hold them at The Woodbrooke Centre, a fantastic place run by the Quakers, as it was once one of George Cadbury's homes. It is in beautiful surroundings with amazing grounds, and for both days we were grateful for dry weather – despite the forecast saying something different!

For the days, we always assure those coming that this day is for them to reflect and recharge before going back to their busy and demanding jobs. If they need to leave a session for a walk instead, or to sit quietly with a drink, that's all absolutely fine too – though no one has yet taken us up on that offer.

We usually have a theme for the retreats, and this one was no different, with the theme being “cups”! Liz, my colleague and friend, always creates a centrepiece as a focus and dug out about 30 mugs her family have collected over the years. Cups come in different shapes and sizes, can hold a lot, not very much, overflow, be half empty, chipped or totally broken. So much we can identify with, especially in the NHS at this unprecedented time of the toughest couple of years and now the serious failings (not, I hasten to add, the fault of the amazingly dedicated staff who continue to work above and beyond to give the highest care to patients and families).

During the retreats, we have time to reflect on recent months, engage with tools to help us look after ourselves in the tough areas where we work and time to relax, chat and simply “be”. That might sound like an unimportant part, but so often the teams work so hard, they actually never have time to sit and enjoy a simple



A photo of myself and Emmanuel (!) with the reindeer – so much fun (and a lot of poop!).

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cup of tea together, which can also intensify a feeling of being alone in the tough work. In the afternoon we give a variety of options of things to do: craft things, we also introduced the concept of Kintsugi and had some activities reflecting that, a hand massage (during which people often also share how they are really doing), time to start a journal, go on a nature walk or use the labyrinth outside, or sit with a drink. There is often much laughter coming from the creative tables, which is so lovely to hear.

This year, the community team have extended this work for us to include support for those working in schools with children who have special needs, so we look forward to developing this part of what we do.

How was your Christmas? With many of the COVID-19 restrictions we have known for the last two years removed, we were able to celebrate a little more in the hospital with fun things. We even brought in reindeer to some of the wards. Yes, we did have a robust risk assessment and had worked closely with the chief microbiologist on this, but the joy they brought to all – children, families, staff and visitors – was quite simply something we would not have been able to do ourselves. As we rounded corridors with the reindeer in tow, the look of surprise then joy on the faces of those seeing them was incredible. But the best bit was the children and how much they enjoyed having them around.

We once again worked with the play workers on the wards to create a manger scene outside the front of the hospital. This year it looked even better, so we have high hopes for next year! The play workers on the wards are really good partners to chaplaincy, we work together so much and look forward to doing so more over the coming year. We are hoping to hatch chicks again this year, and are currently investigating whether chicks can be hatched with bird flu – if they can, then it's a "no go" for us once again. But if that is not a risk, and we can find a good home, they will be hatching with us once again at Easter. We hope to also launch a new programme called "nature at the bedside" and will have a meeting about what we can do where in the hospital for this. Knowing how much animals and being in nature helps our mental health, we see this as a really important programme to help our children recover from the illnesses they are going through.

My final news is that Paul, my manager, has managed to raise enough money for me to be on a permanent contract for 2.5 days a week. This is amazing news indeed, especially since my support through churches has declined. CMS continues to support me for 1.5 days a week, so this will sit alongside your generous gifts to allow me to continue my work. I must say, it was strange being interviewed by two people I have worked with for the last six years and count as friends not simply colleagues, but I survived!

I trust all is well with you and thank you for your continued support.

Take care, Ruth x



Photos from top to bottom: The centrepiece of cups; Some of our kintsugi; The stable outside the hospital by day...; and by night.



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