Joining the dots.

When I was a child in the 1970’s – yes, I am getting quite old – I loved doing join the dot puzzle books. We didn’t have the Internet or video games so I was easily occupied with a paper and pencil. I was eager to see what the result would be from a seemingly incomprehensible display of black dots and numbers. The result was really important to me and still is. I am at the beginning of my project, called to serve at the Copleston Church and Centre - just two months in it feels a bit strange to reflect so soon. But I have a longer history with this church, training there on placement for two years and more recently doing some work for the Trustees. It is a place for the local community, which houses several groups and has church elders, a PCC and a board of Trustees. There are many people who do not attend church, those who are of other faiths or none, diverse Christian backgrounds who all work together, mostly voluntarily, to provide a safe space for the people of Peckham.

But there is also difference. As the world is a mass of diversity of faith, of motivations, needs and evolving cultures so the ordinary workings of a community church and Centre reflects that. And when we are trying to work out what is best, how do we avoid conflict and still acknowledge those differences? There are two very different situations that highlight this for me. The first is when we try to share a space but have seemingly differing intentions – one group wants a space for refugees, another for mental health, and yet another for a menders club. There are conflicts about sharing space, resources - who will fund, how much to charge, who will benefit? At the Copleston Church and Centre the annual Gift of Christmas event provides an evening of food and entertainment for those in our community that will spend Christmas alone. There is music, games, food and fellowship for 120 local people and volunteers. But to make this happen there is a lot of negotiation about sharing the space, making room in timetables, fundraising, providing volunteers. This could put a strain on all the resources and tempers of all who work at the Centre. In reality, people from all walks of life are welcomed as both volunteers and guests and room is made for what is now an annual event. What actually matters is the outcome, and that those who are isolated and marginalized can celebrate at a time that is often difficult. Difference is acknowledged but put aside.

In a second situation, we are working for the same thing but for different reasons - that might be different faith groups, a network of organizations, ecumenically. I recently attended a Social Prescribing Network, which aims to develop a new referral system so as many people as a possible get the services they need, wherever they are available. That might mean a person with complex medical and mental health needs getting hospital care but also accessing local services that somewhere like the Copleston Church and Centre provides. The people in the room came from varying backgrounds, GPs, health authority planners, community services and local charities. We all have the same reason for meeting but different concerns and different responsibilities. What became clear is the need for groups involved to know as much as possible about each other, to make it straightforward to access those services and to be clear about a holistic approach for each individual. There is still a lot to do, but there was a clear view that the well-being of the person was most important, not how we clash and discuss how to get there!

Two fantastic community situations, with very positive outcomes, that would not be possible if we did not ‘join the dots’. For me it is about wrestling with those conflicts, not just ignoring them. Getting them out in the open and deciding how to make it work. The thing that binds us is the result of our actions, not always our motivation, which may be
faith led, occupation led or community work orientated. But in both these situations the result and the message - the call for social justice, compassion and well-being - supersede all else. Just like a child I wait in anticipation of what comes next when we have joined all those dots.

This is reflected in these verses from Ecclesiastes 4 verses 9-12, “The Value of a Friend”:

9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. 11 Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? 12 And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. (NRSV)

Working together is never easy. And I would not promote a two against one situation either! But we can be there to lift each other up when someone falls, keep those around us warm and remember why we do what we do. That can all help us to join the dots…eventually revealing the bigger picture.