

Keeping others afloat



Waterways Chaplain Andrea Hopkins (Hednesford) talks to Shanelle Manderson about her work

WHEN imagining life aboard a boat some may envisage sailing into the sunset on a superyacht or cruising blissfully in a Rosie and Jim-style narrowboat. However, there are thousands of people living on the water across Britain's network of canals, rivers and coastlines. As of 2018, an estimated 15,000 people in the UK are afloat full-time, and that number is increasing. Waterways chaplains are committed to serving these boaters, who are often isolated from mainstream resources and cut off from other pastoral support.

Andrea Hopkins (below) has been a probationary chaplain for two years and was officially commissioned this year. Living near the Staffordshire and Worcestershire canal at Gailey with her husband, she is fully immersed in the community. As well as owning a share in a private boat, Andrea also volunteers on a community boat that takes disabled and older people's groups on day trips.

Her role as a chaplain involves walking a minimum of a mile of the tow path each week offering help, companionship and a listening ear to individuals.

'We have a few liveaboards, but not many. We live directly opposite a boat yard, so it's mainly holiday people,' she explains. 'They don't really need help but we still try to support in any way we can.'

'There are a couple of locks near us. If you're a single-handed boater, working a lock takes about three times as long as it would if you had some crew. I can sometimes help to open a gate. I just try to help where I can.'

The Salvation Army has a long history with waterways ministry. It started in the Fenny Stratford area in 1908, praying with and talking to bargemen and their families in their cabins. During the final years of commercial canal carrying, The Salvation Army continued to minister to the dwindling boating population.

In November 1950, a narrowboat called *Salvo* was launched, fitted with accommodation and a meeting room for up to 14 people, complete with cinema equipment to show Christian films. Majors Fred and Ivy Fielding spent the next 14 years living on board. They constantly moved around the canal network giving lessons to the boat children and acting as social workers and health visitors, until they were appointed overseas.

Life on a boat can present many unique challenges.



'People think it is cheaper and that they can escape all their problems, but it isn't and you take your problems with you wherever you go,' says Andrea. 'You always have to be thinking about three main things: water, electricity and toilets. You have to fill a boat up with water to be able to take a shower, electricity only works if you run the engine to charge the batteries, and there's no plumbing so you have to empty the toilet.'

Very few permanent residential moorings for boats are available, and British Waterways guidelines do not allow continuous cruisers to stay in the same spot for more than 14 days. This naturally makes maintaining a postal address difficult.

'Something as simple as not having an address means people can't receive parcels and can cause communication issues with formal institutions and agencies such as banks, HMRC and the DVLA,' says Andrea. 'There are ways around it. You can have post sent to the post office and held there for six weeks. I also personally take in parcels for a number of boaters.'

Other support can include: helping with laundry; getting fuel; signposting those in difficulty to local services and food banks; acting as an advocate when a boater needs to unravel issues such as paying licences; claiming benefits; providing a hardship fund for fuel, food and emergency boat repairs; offering assistance in emergencies; providing support with bereavement; or simply having a coffee and a chat.

During the coronavirus pandemic she has picked up food donated to Hedgesford Corps and distributed parcels to people stuck on the canal because they couldn't move.

Waterways chaplains get together monthly in teams to encourage each other, pick up tips and ideas of how they can help the diverse communities along the country's tow paths and share what they have learnt to help them be more effective.

No two days of chaplaincy look the same for Andrea. She says what she enjoys most is the opportunity it gives her to meet new people: 'I like talking to people, finding out about their stories and who they are. I think we all have to show God's love however we can. I may not be able to evangelise the first time I meet somebody, but through



Major Fred Fielding



Major Ivy Fielding

conversations and friendships, I might eventually get opportunities to share the news of God's love. So I just try to be the best, friendliest person.'

'There are people who have lost touch with family as they've been continuously cruising for so long, and other sad situations where people are just on their

own on a boat and they don't know who to turn to,' she adds. 'I hope that I can be supportive to those people and that God will show me the best way to do that.'

- If you are interested in finding out about becoming a waterways chaplain visit waterwayschaplaincy.org.uk