

Travellers and the Church – a Christian response



How should the local Church respond to Travellers and Gypsies?

In some communities there are already well-established Traveller sites. Other communities have to cope with a sudden and unexpected influx of Travellers.

In either case, members of the settled community may react to Travellers with concern, anger and fear. The Church feels that it ought to 'do something', but is at a loss to know how best to act.

The purpose of this leaflet is to suggest some useful responses from the local Christian community. The Church can make a real difference in a community where there is a 'standoff' between Travellers and settled residents.

The response that many local churches have found helpful is to adopt a three-part programme:

- Learn about Travellers and Gypsies. Fear is often bred of ignorance. Knowledge brings understanding.
- Make contact with the Travellers and Gypsies. They are generally receptive to an approach from local Church leaders.
- Listen to the sentiments of the settled community. Residents often have genuine and reasonable concerns.

Travellers and Gypsies – an outline history

Travellers are not a united community. Travellers we are likely to meet may be

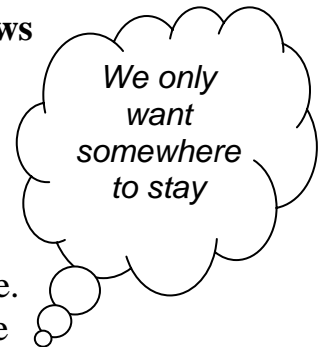
- **Roma Gypsies**, who originate in India and migrated to Europe in medieval times. They have always experienced persecution from the wider community, although they have sometimes been useful as migrant workers (for example, on the fruit farms of East Anglia). They are the only group to whom the term 'Gypsy' can properly be applied. Today they form some 85% of the Traveller community.
- **Irish Travellers**. These, as the name suggests, originate in Ireland. They probably adopted a nomadic lifestyle as a result of Irish persecution under Cromwell and the nineteenth century potato famine. Irish Travellers make up some 15% of the Traveller community in England. Today, most Irish Travellers living in England were born here and have British passports.

- **Other Travellers.** There are smaller groups of Travellers, notably 'New-Age Travellers' who are newcomers to a nomadic lifestyle. Scotland and Wales have Travellers, distinct from the wider Travelling community, who have a history that attaches them to their respective countries.

Despite the diversity within the Traveller Community, they share the same experience in their relation to wider society. Their culture is moulded by the expectation of discrimination, hostility and rejection.

A recent summary of legislation concerning Travellers shows that they have some genuine grievances.

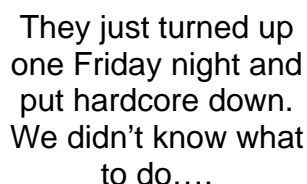
- Traditionally, Travellers led a nomadic lifestyle. This was possible because they could camp on common land and in many recognised places by the roadside. Their exclusion from such sites has put pressure on their traditional lifestyle. Society has attempted to contain them in often inadequate and inconvenient sites.
- The Caravan Sites Act of 1960 required private caravan sites to have planning permission. This was difficult to obtain.
- Recognising the difficulty caused by the 1960 act, new laws were introduced in 1968 that obliged Councils to provide sites for Travellers. In practice, this provision was inadequate, driving many Travellers back onto the roadside or onto illegal sites.
- A section of the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act gave greater powers to Local Authorities to remove illegally parked caravans. At the same time, Local Authorities were relieved of their responsibility to provide sites; instead they were encouraged to identify land for private sites on which planning permission would be likely to be granted. Many Councils have not followed this advice.
- The current situation is to encourage Travellers to buy their own sites and obtain planning permission for them. In practice, planning permission is rarely granted (less than 10% of applications are granted compared with over 80% of planning applications granted to settled residents). The Travellers have therefore adopted a policy of 'playing the system': move onto land, apply retrospectively for planning permission which is refused, appeal to a higher court where there is a good chance of a planning refusal being overturned. It is this procedure that so angers many settled residents. Nevertheless, about one third of Travellers still have nowhere to stay apart from the roadside and other illegal sites (such as parks and car parks).



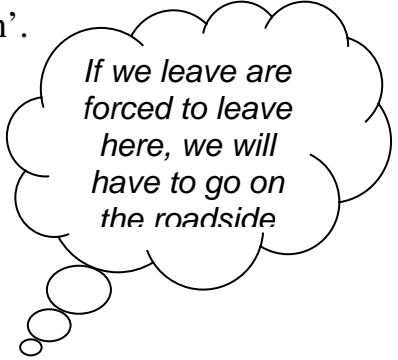
Because of the history of conflict between Travellers and the wider community, Travellers generally wish to live a separated life. They want good relationships

with settled dwellers but do not wish to be assimilated by the wider culture. They are proud of their cultural traditions and do not want them to be swamped.

- They want to maintain their option to live a nomadic life. Although about half of ethnic Travellers now live in houses they still cherish their roots and will often return to travelling for a period.
- Travellers often do not read and write. They recognise this as a disadvantage; it is for this reason that they are tending to look for more permanent sites while their children are of school age.
- Many Travellers are practising Christians. Irish Travellers are Roman Catholics (often of a rather conservative nature); many Gypsies are born-again Christians. They might use the traditional Churches for baptisms and funerals.
- Travellers have no formal authority structure. However, in any Traveller community there will be 'elder statesmen' who wield a great deal of influence.
- Travellers often live with strong morals and a strict social structure. However, like any section of society, they include an element corrupted by drink and drugs.
- On all statistical indicators, Travellers suffer worse health than the wider community.
- Travelling culture has high standards of cleanliness. Much of the rubbish associated with illegal sites is due to the refusal of Local Authorities to provide rubbish skips (which would give legitimacy to the site). Well established sites are immaculately clean.
- Individuals in the Travelling community are as varied as in any other. Most are honest and reasonable. The community also contains more difficult elements. They should not all be 'tarred with the same brush'.



They just turned up one Friday night and put hardcore down. We didn't know what to do....



If we leave are forced to leave here, we will have to go on the roadside

Making contact with Travellers and Gypsies

Travellers and Gypsies are generally receptive to the approach of the local Church. Many of them are practising Christians. They will respond to anyone who treats them respectfully and will listen to their concerns.

There should be no risk in visiting your local Traveller site. Try to find who are the 'elder statesmen' and talk to them. Travellers are usually very hospitable people. Travellers want a peaceful life, but they are often as frightened of the settled community as the settled community is of them.

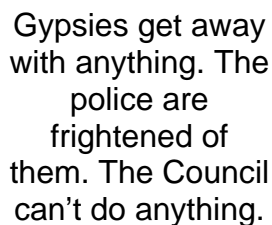
Travellers invariably receive a bad press. They are therefore wary of the media and will not welcome large groups of strangers wandering onto their site for fear of them including reporters. They dislike cameras.

It might be possible for the Church to set up meetings where settled and Travelling community members can meet and share ideas. Mutual understanding and friendship is a great healer.

In any contact with Travellers, the Church has to work hard to overcome a culture of mistrust between Travellers and the wider community.

The Church needs to recognise that the friction between settled and Traveller communities derives largely from laws that are grossly unfair to both sides. The current law (and the way it is implemented) needs to be challenged at every level. This is an issue of justice.

The Settled Community



Gypsies get away with anything. The police are frightened of them. The Council can't do anything.

Local residents often genuinely suffer from the close proximity of a Traveller site. If the site is transient it will often be in an inappropriate place. Where a site is established on private land without planning permission, the settled community becomes resentful that Travellers are circumventing the law. There is a fear that a small unauthorised site will grow in an uncontrollable way – which often happens.

The arrival of Travellers can put great pressure on local services (schools and doctors' surgeries).

Travelling communities (like any other) have their inconsiderate members who might be guilty of anti-social behaviour, bad driving, arguments and crime. Gossip often inflates the fear of such activity.

The Church needs to listen to such concerns. But it can sometimes address them through conversation with the 'elder statesmen' of the Travelling Community. Travellers can be effective (and sometimes ruthless) in policing their own wayward members.

This leaflet was produced by the Revd Michael Hore, Rector of Cottenham and the Bishop of Ely's Advisor on Travellers. He can be contacted by phone on 01954 250454, or by email at mrthore@yaboo.co.uk