

# 'Farming Minister': No need to feel alone at Christmas

By Fiona Sloan

CHRISTMAS time... a time for celebration, no diets, relaxing, catching up with family and friends, endless family meals and Cliff Richards. Also, it can be a time for loneliness, stress, anxiety and financial worries.

Growing up in the 1960s and like many farming families of that era, Chris Blackshaw - the Church of Scotland's Farming Minister - was brought up in the Church where Christmas was a celebration of the birth of Jesus and Santa Claus delivered one special present to every child on the nice list.

Sundays were days for a family meal together and was considered a day of rest, except for feeding livestock. While for some, it was also a time for a 'Sunday run' in the car round the local parish to see what was going on, as a teenager Chris would get on his bike and pedal off to church.

Growing up on a farm on Chassworth Estate, in Derbyshire, where his father was a hill shepherd to the Duke of Devonshire, while running his own small mixed farming operation, was a joyous time for this fifth-generation farmer.

Like all farming children, he did his fair share of childhood chores on the farm, which his brother still farms to this day but unlike most young farmers, Chris had no ambitions to be a farmer and from a very young age he wanted to be a policeman.

"I blame it on Dixon of

'After retiring from the Police, the road to becoming a fully qualified minister, despite having been qualified as a lay preacher since 1993, was not an easy one and was clouded by scepticism from the church'

Dock Green!" he laughed.

You could say that this was his first calling and he succeeded in his vocation from the age of 17 until he retired from the Derbyshire Police force as a sergeant in 2011, having held many posts within the force and wider community.

During this spell, issues such as depression, stress, illness, addiction, and isolation, were a regular part of his day-to-day job and this would ultimately stand him in good stead when he had his second calling to become a rural minister working within the agricultural community.

The road to becoming a fully qualified minister - despite having been qualified as a lay preacher since 1993 - was not an easy one and was clouded by scepticism from the church. Despite some challenges, Chris persevered - with support from those around him - and ultimately succeeded in his ambition to follow his calling to where he felt God wanted him to be.

In 2013, he became the minister at Lazonby, Kirkoswald, and Alnstable, in Cumbria, and began by

visiting the well-known Lazonby sheep sales, soon becoming a well-known face around the local markets and ultimately becoming someone farmers knew well and found easy to talk to about both farming and personal concerns.

In this work amongst the farmers and the sheep pens, he formed some long lasting relationships, with many of the local rural communities around Cumbria. Such was the success of the role that he also encouraged more voluntary local chaplains to join him.

Having sold up in Derbyshire and moved to a small-holding with his wife, Jan, it was then he saw an advert on the Church of Scotland website, looking for someone to head a 'Pioneer Ministry', in Ayr Presbytery, supported by the Church of Scotland. He applied and got the position and the rest as they say is history.

Five years later, the Ayrshire ministry had been a great success with connections through the whole of Ayrshire and expanding into Dumfries and Galloway in the coming year.

Farmers attending markets know that they can talk to Chris and that he is approachable and knowledgeable on many things. He has a quietness about him that makes you feel comfortable when you speak to him but he is forthright and easy to have a conversation with, which allows people to speak openly.

The markets, for their part, have embraced his carol services at Christmas, as well as other events and the auctioneers and staff will often call him up and suggest that he makes contact with people they are concerned about.



JAN AND Chris Blackshaw are devoted to their Ellwood Longhorn herd



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Chris Blackshaw with his Ellwood Longhorn herd sire



## Chris and Jan's farming life ...

THE couple's Ellwood Longhorns was founded with three head of cattle five years ago and they now have 13 head.

During this time, they concentrated on the quality of their stock and this year, in the North-west and Scotland herd competition, they took a cup for the best senior Longhorn heifer, and the best Longhorn steer and third for best bull calf born in 2022 - so they are clearly on the road to success.

They also farm Dorset sheep, which they cross with a Charollais tup and keep a few weaner pigs in the spring. Recently, they have diversified into goats. So being a hands on farmer enables him to really understand what others go through ... especially all that form-filling!



THE ELLWOOD herd of Longhorns tucking into their afternoon rations

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"People, particularly farmers don't ask for help, you have to reach out to them," said Chris. "You have to go knock on doors but once you are there, they open up to you and people are always welcoming, even if they have no faith.

"Not going to church on a Sunday nowadays is not a lack of faith thing, it is a time thing. Farmers have more pressures now than ever, with fewer people working on the farm.

"It is difficult to evidence the mental health issues in farming as farming people have only recently begun to talk about it. It is still a difficult thing for

many to admit but the stress and sometimes loneliness, involved on a day-to-day basis takes its toll.

"Accepting you may have a problem and discussing it with someone you can trust, is the start of the road to recovery," he pointed out.

For the first time in more than 1000 years, there are fewer than 50% of the UK population who would describe themselves as

Christians. For Chris, that's a worrying statistic, not because people have turned to other faiths but that many people have no faith at all.

His passion for farming and his faith, which he carried with him from those early years, ultimately directed him into working

within the farming community, in an industry which he knows so well.

He understands the pressures on farmers and their families better than most, and in an industry that has a sad record of a high rate of mental health issues and suicide, it was

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Chris Blackshaw

easy to see why his previous police work together with a conversation starter on farming would be an advantage in his quest to help the community's health and well-being.

"The Church of Scotland has been hugely supportive of the post as have the Presbytery of Ayr and we have been able to establish new rural chaplains all over the country taking on similar tasks," said Chris.

The position is clearly a credit to the foresight of the Ayr Presbytery and its understanding of the local community and position is set to expand further.

"I am proud of what we have built here and would always encourage people to come and say hello and know that I'm there if they have concerns for themselves or other people or just for a chat about farming. That's the way it should work," argued Chris.

Hopefully, this Christmas those amongst us who need our help or time, will find the strength to ask, either through Chris, or their friends.

You don't have to go to church to be a good Christian, or a good farmer, you just need the faith to know that we can all help

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