

The bare necessities - why Christians go naked

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IT IS ONE of the hottest days of the summer, and I am on my way to meet the chaplains of the country's largest naturist camp. It's a perfect day to strip off, but I have been promised "you can remain clothed, and so will we."

Passers-by would be forgiven for missing Brocken Hurst (a rural oasis in the wilds of Kent, not the well-heeled New Forest town). Set behind locked gates the entrance to this 50-acre clothes-free zone gives no indication of its membership, and is not easy to find.

The Naturist Foundation has been on this greenbelt site for 40 years although its origins date back to the 1930s. It boasts the largest and best-equipped facilities for naturism in Britain, as well as links to national and international naturist organisations

EXPLAINING that I have an appointment with the chaplains, I get through the gates, and am directed to a large car park. Apparently there can be hundreds of vehicles parked at the weekend, but during the week the grounds are much quieter.

On my midweek visit there are only a handful of cars. This means that I later pass only a couple of women ambling to the lavatories - as well as a man who is wearing nothing but workman's boots, and is mixing cement by the newly covered swimming pool.

At Brocken Hurst, members can choose to participate in a variety of sport tournaments, use the swimming pool, or relax in the pavilion - where there is a cartoon of hundreds of vicars all vying to take the next Sunday's naturist service.

During naturism's heyday in the 1970s, more than 1000 people regularly bared all here.

In 1981, the Foundation became a charity and is now run by trustees and series of committees. And while there are still hundreds of members, the decline in naturism's popularity is, in part, due to increased awareness of skin cancer (everyone here is very brown - and very brown all over). It has also been affected by a change in "social conditions", including child-protection issues; but for those who still enjoy naturism, its main attraction is the feeling of liberation and freedom, and of being among like-minded people.

The Naturist Foundation's lay chaplains, Trevor and Elizabeth Humber, have been linked with the Foundation since the late 1980s. "We feel that we are not only serving the Lord by maintaining a Christian presence here, but that we are also serving the people who enjoy the [Foundation's] marvellous grounds and facilities," says Mr Humber. The couple also help to lead the Christian Naturist Fellowship (CNF) founded in 1999.

CNF was set up in Southampton by the Christian naturist Bruce Cowan, who wanted to create a forum for other Christian naturists to get together. Apart from an annual meeting, which now takes place at the Foundation, CNF helps to keep its 100 members in touch.

Mr Humber's official interest in naturism started while he was working in Africa, although he admits it probably goes back much further. For two of his years there, he worked as head of a mission school in Tanzania, and during this period was sent a Christian newspaper with an article about the nudist beach at Brighton. "Despite its being rather a taboo subject, the article was encouraging brave Christians to bare all," he says. "It struck a chord with something I had often thought about."

When he returned, he spotted an advert in the Sunday papers for the Naturist Foundation, and contacted it. "They put me in touch with a local group in Telford, where I was living," he explains. "It was just wonderful, shedding all those inhibitions, all those shackles that Church and society had put on me. Elizabeth Humber, his second wife, whom he met at a church in Telford, said "He really was a different person. He had the freedom to be who he wanted to be." Such was the transformation that Mrs Humber was happy to follow her husband's lead.

In 1988, the Humbers relocated to Kent for a new job. They say that the Foundation became more their home than a local church, as they discovered – to their cost – that not all Christians are tolerant of the naturist minority. In fact, some of the clergy were, they said, distinctly unwelcoming.

When, in 1989, Mr Humber was diagnosed with cancer, and then successfully treated, the couple decided to offer their services as lay chaplains. "The support we received from our friends at the Foundation was astounding, and we wanted to give something back. We approached the trustees, and they were very happy to use our services," says Mr Humber, who is a Bachelor of Divinity from what was the London Bible College (now London School of Theology).

"We thought that with my Bible College training and lay-preaching experience, and also because I have worshipped in many different denominations chaplaincy was something we could usefully offer."

They became the Naturist Foundation's chaplains in 1993, and the Humbers now run monthly services, host get-togethers for the CNF, and carry out pastoral work.

"Many people value the confidentiality and prayer, even if they do not want to come to a service," says Mr Humber, who last year featured in a BBC programme "Going to Work Naked".

Services are held in a small chapel in the woodlands, a functional room that is used for other meetings. The cross and altar cloth were designed by a member of the Naturist Foundation. As chaplain, Mr Humber has also led funeral services and conducted a naturist marriage blessing.

THEOLOGICALLY, Mr Humber believes that naturism, for some, is part of God's

calling. "I think God can put something in our mind that becomes a calling even when it might seem out of character or even non-biblical. But suddenly you realise you are developing a ministry."

He is a great enthusiast for the Grove booklet "Naturism and Christianity: Are they compatible?", published in 2000. The booklet, which remains a Grove bestseller, concludes that they are.

Naturism and Christianity begins with the premise that naturism is often misunderstood by non-naturists, "being treated either as rather amusing or as a dangerous opportunity for sexual licence".

The booklet looks at the origins of naturism; considers the meaning of nakedness (and its place in the Bible and Christian tradition); and reflects on the actual experience of naturists, and how Christians might respond.

A co-author of the booklet, the Revd Karen Gorham, Priest-in-Charge of St. Paul's, Maidstone, was brought up in a naturist home. Although not a naturist herself, she is a supporter of the movement. "Being brought up in such a household - my parents are still very involved in the naturist movement – made it a natural subject to study. Many naturists are Christians, and I wanted to help that taboo, as many of them feel they are not accepted."

People who do not understand naturism (seeing it as something sexual or perverted) often make sweeping statements, equating nude with rude, she says

She believes it is important to have a Christian understanding of the human body, and that every part of the body is pleasing to God - including the sexual parts.

"For many it is about accepting their own bodies, which Christians can be very bad at. If this is something you enjoy, then there is nothing wrong with it."

THE HUMBERS both believe that many Christians object to naturism because they view the sexual parts as shameful - they should be covered up – and nakedness as leading to temptation.

"It is wrong to me that the Church seems to imply being naked is sinful; yet God communed with Adam and Eve when they were naked. He covered them with a fig leaf because they were feeling shame. It was not because they were naked, but because of their shame and disobedience, and the fact they wanted to hide from God," says Mr Humber.

He adds that there is nothing strange about a naked service, if it takes place within the confines of a naturist camp, but says it would be inappropriate if it took place in a parish church: "We are not about being exhibitionists."

When it comes to men's behaviour (what to do if a man gets excited), the etiquette is to jump in the swimming pool or cover up with a towel. Such incidents, he says, are treated with good humour not embarrassment.

The Humber do not like the word nudist: they prefer naturist. "As Christian naturists we believe we combine body, mind, and spirit. Christians often tend to ignore the body, and focus on the spirit and mind. When we are wandering in the woods at the Foundation, or at one of our services, we feel totally at one in mind, body, and spirit."

Both see naturism as a calling, but not at the expense of other people. "You would rarely find Trevor with clothes on at home. But, of course, if we have guests or got invited out, he would dress. We would never want to cause offence to others."

Over 5-6 August, the Christian Naturist Fellowship is holding a retreat weekend at the Naturist Foundation. For more information about the retreat or the CNF, contact Trevor Humber at

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