

Bill Shankley famously said, "Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I can assure them it is much more serious than that".

Seeing the reactions of followers of Bury FC over recent days gives credence to that point of view. We have seen tears, anger, passionate outbursts; and when words have failed, a lot of shaking heads and faces reflecting a feeling of despair. Fans, young and old, have spoken in terms of bereavement akin to losing one of their family. It comes home to you that football supporters do have a great sense of community, of belonging, of common identity, of being in fellowship, in a family.

I came to live in Bury in 1978 and started attending Gigg Lane around 1980. My son joined me not long afterwards and has been a loyal home and away supporter ever since. My stepson told me yesterday that he remembers the day I first took him to Gigg 31 years ago. He too has been a regular attender since then. Barbara recalls watching Bury FC when she was a teenager and when we married in 2008 she joined me as a season ticket holder. It has all been a big part of my life - of our personal family life. So we too relate very much to the emotional outpourings of recent days.

All this has reminded me of another family of which we are a part – the church family. A family of which I have been a regular member since 1983 – the year I opened the door in response to Jesus' knocking! It got me thinking what if our church wasn't there any more? What if we couldn't meet together? What if there weren't enough of us to keep going, to keep our buildings going, to finance our activities?

The parallels aren't exact with the Bury FC plight, but look at our shrinking congregations. What if through neglect, or ambivalence, or lack of interest our churches on Walmersley Road disappeared? Are we in danger of heading the way of our local football club? Is it time to look at ourselves and take steps to fix things before it's too late? Is this a wake-up call?

Jesus tells us what we need to do – perhaps we need to take heed. Speak to our community of God's love and care; reach out and help those in need; share what we have with those who have not; live in love and peace with our neighbour; give hope to the hopeless.

In doing these things we will build up the body of Christ, which is the church. If we don't we may well find ourselves mourning the loss of something which we took for granted would always be there and suddenly it isn't.