

# Onward and Upward

- further reflections of a community activist

by

**John Barber**

*“A sacred burden is this life ye bear: Look on it, lift it, bear it solemnly, Stand up and walk beneath it steadfastly. Fail not for sorrow, falter not for sin, But onward, upward, till the goal ye win.”* **Frances Anne Kemble**

*“I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples”* **Mother Teresa**

*“When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist.”* **Dom Helder Camara**

*“I was always taught to respect my elders, but it keeps getting harder to find one.”*

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While the author will not commit to entering into correspondence, he would be happy to receive and respond to useful feedback concerning this paper and hopes it will stimulate helpful discussion and action.

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**Note:** it was my intention that this paper (book) will be incorporated into a later edition of a book I wrote earlier: “Outside the Camp”, as it complements what I have already written, but now it is included as part of its sequel. In this paper, I provide an update to my work as a community activist and further observations, as well as reflect on many significant wider issues affecting what I do. I have dedicated this to my mother, Violet Barber (pictured above), who died recently.

## **Onward and Upward**

### **How we won the war**

The following eulogy (with some suitable additions) was delivered by myself at the funeral of my late mother, Violet Barber (11/07/22 – 18/06/13), held 05/07/13: “I am sure my mother would be touched by you coming here today to pay your respects – thank you. We thank Father James and the people of St. Lukes church for the practical support you have given. May I refer you to the notices at the back of the program. All are invited to the graveside committal and to lunch at the White Horse after and, if you wish, you can donate in her memory to the Cardiomyopathy Association – there is plate at the back of the church for this purpose.

In a short while, an argument between a couple, begun more than 50 years ago, will be settled when the remains of Violet Madeline Barber, my mother, will be laid to rest in the grave now occupied by my father. It was her contention that she should be placed on the top and soon her wish will be granted. Besides my dad, my mother’s parents and brother and sister (Jim and Lena) are also buried in Sutton Road cemetery. Since my dad’s death in 1979, my sister and accompanied mum visiting the graves, on several occasions. At the cemetery, we would often look at other the graves, particularly the inscriptions. One that particularly comes to mind includes the words: “loving, thoughtful, kind, beautiful memories left behind”. We teased mum and told her we intended to put those same words on her gravestone. Not one for misplaced sentimentality, her response was that if we did she would come back to haunt us. While those sentiments do encapsulate some of the feelings we have, it is not the whole story and, as my mother was first to recognise, there was another side. Both mum and dad enjoyed the TV sitcom, popular in the 1960’s and 70’s, “Till Death Us Do Part”. One of the characters was referred to as “the old moo” and we later came to use this phrase when speaking about my mother. While, for us, it was a term of endearment, it also showed there was this other side.

Violet was born 11 July 1922, daughter of Francis and Catherine Woodham, in Forest Gate, a district of West Ham. Until she came to live in Southend, following the War, she lived in the West Ham and Stratford areas. She attended mainly CofE schools and West Ham Parish church. She had a brother and a sister, both a fair bit older than her, and she was somewhat spoilt. Her father had a steady job driving trams for the London Transport and, while not well off by today’s standard, the family were better off than many of mum’s contemporaries, who experienced real poverty, like going without food. She often told stories of her mother, especially,

helping folk in need and children going to school with no shoes or coat and when it was bitterly cold letting her friend wear one of her gloves while they put their non glove hands in each other's pockets. She told stories about her dad, a strong man, with a temper, and a fighter (he actually did bare fist fighting to supplement the family income), who could be very kind and loved animals, and was also mum's hero. One story she recounted was when her dad spent time in military prison, around the time of the First World War, for hitting an officer who was bullying one of the soldiers, and as a result the family suffered because his wages were stopped for the duration. I believe the examples of her parents helped give her a strong sense of independence and social justice, attitudes that were later to be passed on to her children. She became as a result a resolute, lifelong Labour supporter. Later, I was to find that our views on politics, like that on religion, would often differ.

Mum left school at 14 as did most of her peers. Higher education was not an option although mum saw the value of education and would have benefited if given the chance. It was her encouragement more than any that spurred me on to university and aspire to be a "man of letters". On leaving school, she worked in the local laundry and later she took up nursing. I'm not sure why she did not to pursue this career, although I believe she did get into a number of scrapes, along with her life long friend, also named Violet, but come the early part of the Second World War they decided to join the army. Mum's job was as a driver, including driving big convoy trucks around Britain. She also drove officers around London, being given the assignment because as a Londoner she was expected to know the area. Given my Indian connection, mum would often tell stories of driving an Indian officer who treated her like a queen but his men like dirt. I suspect she enjoyed life despite the troubles, for she often spoke of dancing, ice skating and Canadian boy friends.

During that period, mum decided to be confirmed in the CofE and it was a faith that did not leave her. Like many of her generation, the War had a profound affect on her life and shaping her values, and her profound sense of patriotism. Mum often recounted stories, often quite funny, relating to her war time experiences and the unusual situations she found herself in. She spoke of how she rubbed shoulders with daughters of the aristocracy and found them to be nice people, unlike some of the rich who had just come up in the world. She suggested that I write a book about these happenings and call it "How we Won the War". One theory was it was due to her indifferent time keeping. It was this unpredictability that confused the enemy and was a significant factor in determining the outcome of the War. On a more serious note, the spirit of sacrifice, making do with what we have, pulling together for a common purpose and doing our duty, were all values mum held, that were never to leave her, which as far as she was concerned were also important factors.

After the War, mum's family moved to Southend, having been bombed out of their London home and eventually moved to a house in Cotswold Road, Westcliff. Mum started work in a grocers shop in Hamlet Court Road. Not long after, she met Roy, her future husband, in a dance hall, which was part of the Kursaal, then a popular meeting place for young people. My dad had spent time at sea, serving as a bell boy and then as a steward (and was in-between trips when they met) as well as being in the army, including in Germany following the D-Day landings. They fell in love and married in 1950 and they lived two years in my grandparent's home. They had two children, me (the elder) and, eighteen months later, my sister, Linda. Part of the extensive post war house building program included a new estate around Blenheim Park. My sister was born in the council house they rented and was likely the first to be born on that estate. While my sister and I experienced various ups and downs, especially when my dad began drinking following his father's death, we enjoyed a mainly happy home life and were often to be found playing with the neighbouring children (often in the wood at the back of the house or in the local park). Dad was in and out of employment, which included labouring on building sites and waiting.

We did not have much money and my parents did not go in for luxuries, especially if brought on HP (hire purchase). Televisions, record players, phones, fridges, carpets, for example, did not feature until quite a bit later. Mum was a big believer in not being in debt and saving in order to buy. They spent what money they did have on food and often took us children out for the day. I recall a number of boat trips from the end of Southend pier and family outings such as visiting Southend illuminations and Never Never land, with particular fondness. I remember once our walking back from Benfleet via Hadleigh Castle because my parents somehow omitted to bring money with them to pay for the return bus journey. In the summer holidays, mum took us to Leigh beach, and it was where I learnt to swim. My parents insisted we went to Sunday School, held in Blenheim School (whether we wanted to or not), and we have cause to be grateful to the efforts of the formidable Sunday School Superintendent, Miss Raffan, and her spinster assistants.

It should be said that mum very much took the lead in the home and kept everything together, including making the most of meagre resources. In 1962 we moved to the other side of the town in order for mum's elderly parents to come and live with us and be cared for. My sister and I have reflected this was not a particularly happy period in our family's life. We were unhappy in our new schools. Tensions in the relationship between mum and dad seemed at times unbearable and the romantic image we had of our grand-parents was quickly dispelled as we got to know them better. Mum did what she did with every good

intention. In 1967, mum, dad, me and my sister moved into another council house, 138 St. Lukes Road, which she retained, and later I brought for her, until her death.

A lot could be said about our teenage years. My dad continued to have a drink problem. This, his own insecurities and a lack of a steady job contributed toward family tensions and rows. Dad did a number of jobs as a building labourer and later as a self-employed landscape gardener (I often assisted him, between my early teens and early 20's). There was nevertheless love between mum and dad and that love extended to their children. Mum continued to do what she thought was best for our family and her own parents. She had earlier gotten a part-time job as a home help and carried on that occupation until she retired. She went out of her way to help the old people in her charge and had a real affinity toward them. She supported her children who went off in quite different directions. At 15, I got religion and gravitated to further education, while my sister, having experienced an earlier breakdown and running away from home, went the other way, enjoying Southend's night life, including dancing "Thru to Two", until she met and lived with her husband, John, when aged 19, and soon after gave birth to her son, David.

Mum did not always approve of our choices, yet remained intensely loyal and supportive. As we moved away from home, mum and dad carried on normal life together, often going on day trips and holidays, sometimes in the old A40 banger mum acquired (She often did her own routine maintenance and I passed my driving test in it). When dad died in 1979, in a road accident, it came as a big shock, and mum adjusted, with mixed success, to life as a widow. A few years prior to dad's death she began to be involved in this church and appreciated the ministry of Father Leeson (who she saw as a true Christian gentleman). Between them, they even got dad attending. Mum got more involved in church life after dad's death and helped out in the Mothers Union and as a member of the PCC. She was usually involved in the fetes and carried off with great aplomb the role of Madame Rose in the fortune telling tent. Besides being a good neighbour, taking an active interest in the family (she had two grand children: David and Andrew in who she delighted) and doing babysitting duty for friends, she undertook recreational activities, like indoor bowls and art, and spent a lot of time in her garden, in which took particular pride. She also went on a number of Saga holidays and sea cruises, often with her friend Violet (also by then a widow), including one memorable one - all round the world.

A little after I moved back to Southend, in the mid 80's, we decided to buy mum's council house and a few years later I brought the house next door, where I now live. My wife, Jolly, came to the UK in 1994, having never been outside India prior to that, and we became mum's next door neighbours. She recalls Mrs Barber

(senior) (my wife being referred by mum as Mrs Barber (junior)) taking her under her wing and her infectious manner, having relentless joy, a witty and entertaining sense of humour and a “can do” attitude. Jolly still carries good memories of being encouraged by mum to “go for it girl” and to follow her dreams, despite what anyone else might say or think. For the first 5 years, mum often looked in on us to see if we needed anything and if she could help practically, which she often did without us asking, like getting in shopping, doing the ironing and later baby sitting duty. She loved darling (which is how she referred to our son Matthew) and spoiled him whenever she could. She took great pleasure in Matthew’s antics (earlier she referred to him as bumpkins) and often shared his language like “doink doink” and spoke to him in French. She often related some of her own war time anecdotes to him. We recall with amusement her covertly giving him chocolate or some other treat, while watching out if one of his parents was coming and so spoil the fun.

In the last 10 years of her life, mum had health issues, especially as her dementia worsened, although physically she was mostly quite strong. As a family, we did what we could to look after her, realising she was an independent and stubborn lady, helping her enjoy a good quality of life. We did receive good support from social care and for a few years up to 2½ years ago, when she entered a nursing home, she regularly attended day centres at Kimberly Grace and later Manor Rest Homes. However, it became apparent the care needed was 24/7 and this came to a head when we found her one morning collapsed outside her house, frozen, lying in the snow, having decided to go wandering. We did not expect her to live but she did and she spent her remaining days at Fernbrook Nursing home, where she was cared for, and between us we visited her each day, when we would usually try to feed her. By this time mum’s alzheimers was at an advanced stage and conversations tended to be restricted and revolve around pussy cats, the war, her darling Matthew and the relative merits of the Woodham and Barber families.

While her powers of recognition did diminish with time, and we could never predict how she would react from one day to another, especially her response to our helping her to feed, I have no doubt she appreciated our visits, and especially those of her grand and great grand children. I have fond memories of playing war time songs (one CD we played maybe 50 times) and getting mum and other residents to join in the singing. While some onlookers might think we had lost mum and her life had little value, we did not see it like that, and right up to the day she died, when she told one cantankerous old dear to shut up (much to that person’s amusement), we saw plenteous evidence of life and laughter. It put a lie to the notion that people at mum’s stage of life are of little worth. Mum did make a good impression on the home as some here today will testify. One memorable incident was one day when

the nursing manager suddenly became very unwell while she was helping to dress mum. Mum, who at this time had little mobility, by her words of wisdom and quick thinking in raising the alarm, helped to save this lady's life.

One of the stories mum told right up to her death related to her brother, my uncle Jim, who from what I could make out was a bit of a terror as a child. One day my grandmother had cause to go up to his school and remonstrate with the teacher. In her best cockney, mum's account went something along the lines: "*ere you, I wanna a word*", "*what mee Mrs Woodham*", "*yeer you - you 'it my son again and gawwwd 'elp yah*". I recall when I was at junior school coming home with the tell tale marks of a slapping my teacher had earlier given me imprinted on my leg. On finding out what had happened, mum quickly went up to the school to sort out the teacher. While she could be hard on us kids, she would also back us to the hilt. I recall an incident when I was around 14 and belonging a Christian youth group called Covenanters. I used to give my leader a hard time and he saw fit to suspend me for a time. My mum promptly wrote to him saying that if I had not been so bored I would not have played up. But there is a happy outcome to the story. I did get reinstated and belonging to that group was later instrumental in my becoming a Christian. Also, 34 years ago in this very place my Covenanter leader did attend my dad's funeral, and today his widow and son are here at mum's funeral.

Thank you for listening to some of mum's story. I have no doubt many here could add their own memories and, if the occasion allowed, these could be usefully shared. Much more could be said and, while seeking to provide a balanced picture, I realise the stories and perspectives I offer are those that resonate personally. Mum did touch the lives of many, particularly in her unstinting caring for others. She lived a full life and was in many ways a free spirit. She had her bad as well as her good side. She had a fiery temper, and I was often at the end of it; she could be prejudiced (she wasn't too keen on immigrants for example) and, unlike her husband, to forgive and forget was not her particular forte. Yet the sentiment "loving, thoughtful, kind, beautiful memories left behind" is an apt one. While far from perfect, some of the values she held are much needed for today's generation. For us as a family, it is an end of an era as the last of mum's family generation will shortly be laid to rest. We want to say: thank you Lord for giving Violet to us and taking her from us in your time, and to you Violet, thank you for being here, sharing your life with us, and leaving the legacy you have – looking ahead in years to come I know you will be missed, but now you rest in peace. The words Matthew read to us (John 14:1-6) are apt as they remind us there is an eternal dimension and a hope we must not ignore. The words of the next hymn, "fight the good fight", are also apt, not just because it was a favourite of mum's and sung at the first church

service she attended after she got married, but it rather sums up how she tried to live her life and maybe at the same time it might inspire us to do likewise.”

## **Two years on**

When I wrote the first edition of my “Outside the Camp” book, I didn’t want to entertain delusions of grandeur, realising most people who write books do so at a financial loss and increasingly people do not read books, especially if of a serious nature. Unless one is lucky, famous or can touch on a subject that interests more than a few people that isn’t otherwise written about, most books will only be read by a few. But I am also mindful of Jesus’ parable of the talents and that it was the servant who used his talents that was commended by his master. We all have talents, even if we don’t think that is so, and we can all do random acts of kindness. I think one of mine is being able to set forth in an even handed and, dare I say it, engaging way about some of these important matters that don’t often get written about and provide the sort of important insights that that are not normally articulated. I daren’t bury my talent, knowing the consequence for the one who did.

My aim is to say what needs to be said without acrimony and, where I can, with kindness and good humour, notwithstanding the seriousness of what is discussed. As one who is retired and self-employed, albeit mainly unpaid, I can say it as it is without fear of recrimination, knowing I can’t be sacked, although, like any astute diplomat, I try not to offend unduly in order not to stop things being done that need doing. I am irked when people blow their own trumpet (and I tend to gravitate toward those not full of themselves or self-assured), and as for myself I hope I can also write with a degree of humility. When I took English Literature at ‘O Level’, we were given the book “the Diary of a Nobody” by George Grossmith to read and study. At the time I hated it and was glad when we switched to the swashbuckling “The Gun” by C.S.Forester. What I failed to get at the time was that all the trivia the “hero” of the book, alone it seemed, thought was consequential also provided amazing insights into societal attitudes, human nature, etc., and really was funny.

I have no doubts about the importance and relevance of what I am writing and would love lots of people to read it, yet then again the odds are that won’t happen other than with those who know me or the work I am involved or think I’m an author worth reading or have reason to explore themes in the book. I would like to think in years to come, when I’m long dead and buried, people might take heed and reflect on some of the ideas I have put forward, and find these helpful as they try to make out the whats, whys and hows of the past and deal effectively with what will still be a perplexing world that, while different from my own, will contain many

common elements. I hope it might help folk to understand better some of the issues and pre-occupations of my time, while realising “*there is nothing new under the sun*”, Ecclesiastes 1:9. I also want to do something that counts and, despite feelings of my own inadequacies and worthlessness, I felt I should persist in penning my thoughts in order to encourage and enlighten future up and coming community activists. Having managed to sell, or give away all the copies I had of my earlier book, I needed to produce more plus some updates. I also felt I should cater for those who only read snippets and follow the trend to read in electronic form.

While I was mostly satisfied with what I wrote first time round, I was not entirely so and, besides, all sorts of new thoughts, profound and otherwise, came to mind, especially as a result of getting feedback and ideas from readers of my book, my ongoing work in the community and what has arose subsequently out of some of the, usually brief, encounters I had with all sorts of folk. While much of the original text of my book remains intact, other than the customary tinkering, I have added *Onwards and Upwards* (this paper/book) and *Theological Musings* (also produced as a separate paper). I am mindful of the diverse readership and realise it is nigh impossible to cater for all. I also realise some of the names and places in my earlier book won't mean much to those not in the know (after all, that book also contained my own personal story). I hope readers will bear with me and realise I wish to meaningfully engage with people representing a range of worldviews. I realise I can spend my spare time exploring new avenues and feeling better for it, but there has to be balance. The needs are urgent and the need now is to do rather than say.

Besides wanting to make it easy for people to read what I have written, in electronic form, there are other reasons for going to a second edition of the original book plus these new books. These provide important updates and further reflections as a community activist. While this would seem more relevant to people living at this point in time, in my small corner of the world, I wanted to leave something of value for future generations. I also wanted to make this more widely available, in particular in the land I have grown to love over the years and where I know and am known by quite a few folk, many for several years, and more often than not they don't quite know what I do or why I do it. That land is India! I reflect on my Indian adventures and observations in this paper. While there are many similarities when comparing the Indian culture (bearing in mind huge variations in that great land) and my own Southend, UK culture, there are important differences too. Some of the things I do and relate to in the UK would not be possible for folk living in India.

But to amend radically my writings in order they resonate more with Indian people would not only be time consuming but it would also be unnecessary. I realise the

image some people have of me there, as a sound, conservative Christian, may be dispelled but that is a risk worth taking. Just as I believe in a God and a message that does not change according to time and place, I also believe the same is true with many of the principles that lie behind community activism, and which are laid out in this book. The challenge always is to apply those principles to the situation that happens to be prevailing at and the pre-occupations of the time. As a keen historian, I can reflect how different things must have been in the past. It wouldn't have been that long ago that I would have been tried and condemned for treason for expressing the views I have and the only alternative would have been adopting a different approach or adapting to what is taking place. While it is easy to dismiss our less enlightened forefathers, many were prolific and effective community activists, whose example we do well to follow and commend to future generations.

When writing the first edition of my original book, much of it during my last visit to India, I was able to reflect on a number of things that I had hoped to do upon my return to the UK. Two years on and looking back, I can see that to some extent it has happened as I had envisaged, but with the ongoing sorting out of my affairs and taking care of my family still being among the most important matters I need to attend to more. Things have not entirely worked out as expected for as is often the case tasks and goals do take longer to complete and achieve than one might expect and none of us can predict the future and how we will react to future events. The depression that has been a reoccurring feature of my life since I was young has for a significant part of this period returned, along with a sense of failure and at times anger and frustration at being overlooked despite having much to offer, sometimes directed at God, and therefore I recognise the need for healing and repentance.

There have been significant happenings such as the death of my mother who I helped care for, and the closing of the church I have been associated with most of my life, that didn't quite happen as expected, as well as coming across unpredicted opportunities to serve, with exciting prospects of making some of those differences I long to see. One also sense changes of mood in the culture making, if anything, the ideas expressed in my writings even more timely and pertinent. Also, my own circumstances have changed as I am now seen as a retired person and, as is often the case, with potentially more to do than ever. I have been more selective in choosing what projects to take on, one of the luxuries that comes with not being paid. I can see God's providence and I can reflect with gratitude that I have been able to do what I have, not least in continuing my work as a community activist.

Increasingly, I am aware of my own frailty, including a physical and mental slowing down, and finding that toward the end of the day I am often exhausted, and

with some of the tell tale signs of the onset of dementia, but I believe God, whose ways are perfect, keeps me here so that I can continue to serve. While I can see many possibilities around me, I realise many of these are for those that come after to take up and, as for me, I need to do what I can to encourage others and make a difference where I can, including encouraging others. For these reasons, I have added new material partly to account for my ongoing activities in the community but also to reflect on the issues of the day. I realise that people, especially those who are older, can pontificate on all sorts of things *ad nauseam*, often to the irritation of the younger generation and, while I am conscious I need to spare folk that agony and cut to the chase, I do want to relate my experiences of and insights from journeying outside the camp, to help others see more clearly the possibilities.

After I began to write this section (to return to it some months later), I learnt of the death of someone who I particularly admired – Chuck Colson. Chuck was best known as President Nixon’s “hatchet man”, who gained notoriety at the height of the highly publicised Watergate scandal and was sent to prison for his part in the cover up that took place, during which time he experienced brokenness and found God. Upon his release, he started a fruitful ministry helping prisoners and their families the world over and became a prolific and profound cultural commentator, who had a deep understanding the world as it is, what the main influences were and wise words as to how it might be influenced for good and for God. Listening to a radio tribute to his life, I was struck by his answer to the question: “what is it that motivates you when you get out of bed in the morning?” His response was that it was the thought he could do something that day to advance the Kingdom of God. Such a thought also enthrals me and is one that I would commend to my readers.

## **Building community**

As I reflect further on how to build and improve communities, there are a number of things that came to mind, based on observations and discussions I have had over many years and especially in the last two. One of my many failings is my tendency to want to fully analyse everything (realising what goes into building healthy communities is complex), looking for the perfect solution, and this can lead to procrastination. I think of the advice of a friend, who reminds me “we are where we are” and we “do the best with what we have”, and of my wife, to simply do what needs to be done without talking about it. It is also easy to get disconsolate, if we don’t see the results or people ignore what it is we can offer, but one has to do what one can and encourage others to do the same. We ought to aspire to do what we do because we believe and hope it will lead to improvements overall and because it is doable. While it is good to take a long term view and see the bigger picture, we

sometimes need to get on with the tasks in hand and avail ourselves of the opportunities that we have. It is also important to think about what needs doing and act smartly, for if we don't we will find ourselves going around in circles. We need more doers, for these are often in short supply yet these make the real differences.

One encouraging feature of community life is the number of charity organisations that exist, which in my own town number several hundred, each tackling important issues from an enormous range. The vast majority of those involved are volunteers, who devote their time and energy and do what they do without expectation of remuneration. In addition, there are individuals or small groups of people who get involved with their communities, often on an ad-hoc, informal basis, without ostentation. I have seen many groups, wanting to help, come and go and have reflected on some of the factors that lead to success and failure. While much can be done where there is the will, often there are limitations due to lack of resources, as well as lack of vision or taking the sensible steps needed for effective continuation.

I have often seen when it comes to allocating funding that some organisations miss out while others who know how to tick the right boxes and present what they do in a favourable light get funded, yet deliver less. One of my gripes is when individuals and organisations just do the bare minimum, whereas the reality, especially when dealing with vulnerable people, is often a lot more needs doing and sign posting is usually not the answer. Some of this is to do with sticking to boundaries, which is important to do providing it is not a cop out. Another gripe is the cosy cartels that seem sometimes to exist between voluntary and statutory groups, where money is a factor, yet the focus should be on meeting peoples' needs. I try to help redress the balance and help people to put aside agendas and work together; and also to help fledgling organisations overcome the challenges to thus best serve the community.

I ask why it is often the same few that get involved in voluntary activity and carry the greatest burdens. The reasons may be many: those who work long hours to support their families, or as carers, and diligently fulfil their responsibilities, may be more inclined to spend any remaining time available for rest and recreation. Those with demanding jobs, especially if working with the public, such as teachers, may have little spare capacity to be volunteers. It is all a question of balance. Some who are particularly family oriented, especially if part of extended families, as with some minority ethnic groups, are maybe less inclined toward voluntary activity, but their contributions may still be as valid. Some are ignorant of the possibilities. Some are more intent to satisfy their own selfish desires or feel disempowered. Some just need a little encouragement. I hope what I write will help to dispel ignorance and encourage people to be more involved with their communities.

The breakdown of the family has been a particularly poignant phenomenon in recent years. This is sad, not just because of the pain that often results for those who belong to the families affected, especially the children, but because of the detrimental effect this has on society as a whole. Perhaps one of the greatest services anyone can perform is to encourage strong family units and support the casualties of family breakdown. I am also conscious that if I neglect my own family it will negate a lot of the good achieved by my community activism. While I have in mind the traditional family unit (mother, father, children) as being the ideal and the norm, I also recognise that families take on many shapes and forms, including those in same-sex relationships. Families are healthiest when taking responsibility for elderly relatives and the vulnerable, including others in their activities, in particular by showing hospitality to single people. I have had cause to be grateful to a few families, particularly when I was single and had no-one from my own family around me, who did just this. It seems a long while ago now but Richard and Adrienne Wilson and Arthur and Bea Christian were two such couples, along with their amazing children, that performed this much appreciated service for me.

I see work as an important activity for all of us. I do not believe any of us should be idle, even if the work we do is unpaid. While helping people to find work (paid and unpaid) has usually not been the primary goal of my community activism, it has invariably been an important issue and longer term goal. While I agree people should aspire to do work that is conducive and rewarding, both in terms of job satisfaction and financially, I realise that in many cases this does not happen. In one of my early conversations with JobCentrePlus, I was told that the aim is for people who can do so, to find work and, for those who can't *e.g.* because of a disability or illness, to be supported *e.g.* through receipt of benefits or support in the workplace. In my experience, there are too many instances of this not happening. There are those who want to work but they can't find a job; those who are resigned to not working, possibly because of their failing to find a job or going through the charade of looking for a job that does not exist, those who feel they would be better off on benefits and those who could only work with the right support or flexibility *e.g.* those with disabilities or carer responsibilities, but that support is not forthcoming.

The welfare system, despite efforts of successive governments to reform it, does not always help, and too often I come across those frustrated as a result. I recall as a boy my dad, who had periods of unemployment, bemoan the fact he might be better off not working than working. I realise these matters are far too complex to fully unravel here and a deviation from the main themes of this book, but I can't help feeling there is a huge untapped potential of those not in full-time paid employment doing "work" for the benefit of the wider community. The current government's

Big Society aspirations (although as usual things move on) can be deemed as being successful if there is a major shift toward getting people working (paid or unpaid) for the good of the community. Also, while its austerity inspired welfare reforms could be commended as making best use of limited resources, *e.g.* allocating money by way of benefits to people whose needs are greatest, there seem too many examples of indiscriminant nastiness to those who most need help and have the most to lose if benefits are reduced, to make me anything other than sceptical.

One of the challenges that I am confronted with regularly is how best to deal with peoples' unmet needs. On a weekly basis, usually more often, I receive a phone call or email from a professional representing one of the statutory or voluntary agencies whose remit includes dealing with needy people, describing a harrowing situation where they are confronted with a need and don't know where to turn. One of my ongoing activist roles is to provide information, the latest being a leaflet aimed at rough sleepers and their helpers on where to go for help. One of my concerns is there are too many sign posters and not enough doers (like the Good Samaritan) and too often when people are sign posted that service does not exist or fails to deliver, sometimes lacking the flexibility to deal with "wicked situations". While I feel honoured that people should want to seek my help, I am all too aware that there are no simplistic solutions and too often the service being sought after is not available. I do my best to know the facts and pass on what I know. If I can help, notwithstanding my own limitations, I try to do so, but often with an air of disquiet as I contemplate the underlying human need, especially when the people with the needs have nowhere else that is obvious to turn and even if they are doing their best to co-operate with those trying to help and "engage with the system". Often the key is to empower people to do what they need to do in order to help themselves.

Many professional colleagues go out of their way to help, but are limited by way of resources and remit. There are those who want to do good and this would be what they could and should most usefully do, but their jobs and bosses do not allow them. While I try not to come down too hard on organisations that fail to deliver in real terms, I regret often caring is another industry with monetary considerations and fulfilling the minimum requirements as the bottom line, with those in charge desensitised when it comes to addressing real needs. Mercifully, there are many exceptions. Too often people are signposted, like the ball in a pinball machine, between services, with the underlying need remaining unmet. While it is right to put an emphasis on helping people to help themselves, there is also a need for more joined-up working among the relevant agencies and, more radically, for "one stop" shops that can help to resolve pressing problems. Most of all, there is a need for people, with the heart to want to help, to provide the help that is most needed.

Many of us who work with the needy and vulnerable have observed that there are those who are determined and have tenacity to find ways out of their predicaments yet too often folk are too apathetic or disempowered for this to happen, sometimes as a result of earlier set-backs that leave the person discouraged. This is not helped by a mentality that feels it is for government to somehow sort out problems. One of the experiences I, along with many, have found is that people come for help but are selective in divulging relevant information or play one helper off against another. While this might be to the frustration of those who want to support and can see the way forward – if only, we need to continue to plug away, helping where we can.

Having seen a lot of money directed to a sticky plaster approach to tackling issues, often determined by the agenda of whatever government is in power and what is the flavour of the month, I lament when the funding stops so does the work and people are back to where they were instead of moving on to better things and empowerment. The arguments over state intervention (advocated by the political left) and facilitating individuals taking action by way of less regulation and lower taxes (advocated by the political right) is an interesting one, and although I try not to take sides, I do despair at times when it is politicians and bureaucrats who decide what happens. We need stronger communities and for people in them who are intent on making a difference and who can last the distance (i.e. don't get discouraged and burnt out in the process), responding to ever changing situations and being part of support networks that are robust enough to provide support to those doing the work, operating as it were at the coal face. Because I have sometimes seen them come to terms with all these factors, I see faith groups having an important part to play, including often taking the lead, despite external reticence.

We are all members of many communities, often not realising it, and we all impact for good or not (regardless of our activity). To what extent we build or unbuild is often down to us. It starts from within (attitude, mindset etc.) and then manifests itself to those nearest to us: family, friends, neighbours, colleagues etc. in ever increasing circles. What we do or fail to do has a significant bearing on the building community issue. Yet having said all, the bottom line is that we all can and should make a difference. I write this after having recently chaired a community meeting with only a few from my community attending (knowing that if more had an interest, more could be done) and putting Christmas cards in the doors of my neighbours and realising how little I knew many of them and what their issues are. I conclude there is a long way to go for all of us and that also applies to me.

Those reading my book will detect that a good part of my community activism is about dealing with poverty in its various guises and the challenge deciding which

one to address? While “poor” may be defined as “*lacking sufficient money to live at a standard considered comfortable or normal in a society*”, I see it in a wider context: “*of a low or inferior standard or quality*”. Most can think of people with lots of money who are deeply unhappy (and vice-versa). Both are poor and helping both, within our limitations, is a legitimate undertaking for any community activist. People who seem ok in these areas shouldn’t be neglected either, as they often give community heart and direction. We all need affirmation and encouragement. I felt I also needed to revisit what community means also and where better to start than with the Oxford English Dictionary definition. It defines community as “*a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common*”. It occurs to me that often in order to build such a community there has to be some agreement around what are the values, aims etc. we wish to promote and whether we are interested or empowered enough to carry this through. While it would appear rather sanctimonious to suggest a purer motive than this, I would want to point to the golden rule that we should treat others as we would like others to treat ourselves and of course the great commandment “*to love thy neighbour as thyself*”.

Finally, I write having just learnt of the death of my fellow community activist, kindred spirit and friend, Brian Efde. He had come to my aid on a number of occasions, when I was organising events. Brian was in the business of building communities, although some saw him as a scaremonger and a proverbial pain. As most who met him would soon discover, he was into improving sea defences in case of flooding and fought long battles with officialdom campaigning for this. I don’t claim to understand all the points he made but I feel there will come a time when his valiant efforts will be vindicated, as now seems set to happen. Intense and belligerent are words that might describe Brian, but I found he had the best interests of his community at heart, especially when advocating on behalf of the underdog, and he was a true gentleman, with a wicked sense of humour. He will be missed.

## **One foot in the grave**

*“In the first episode, the cantankerous Meldrew is forced into retirement as a security guard, even though he is only 61 years old. The series follows Meldrew as he attempts to fill his new-found leisure with odd jobs, unusual idiosyncrasies, or to get a new working job. However, he regularly finds himself mistreated, misunderstood or simply the victim of bad luck, which regularly leads to his complaining heartily ...”* I begin with this Wikipedia quote regarding the fictional character, Victor Meldrew, from the TV series “One foot in the grave”, because I see quite a bit of Victor in me! Victor saw life as it was, speaking plainly about what he observed and deduced from what was happening around him, often with

cynical grumpiness in the light of all the foolishness and villainy he encountered, frustrated no doubt that his ability to change things was somewhat limited.

It has dawned on me in recent years and it is now an inescapable fact that I am growing old, now with one foot in the grave but, while empathising, trying to replace the cynical grumpiness of Victor with winsome graciousness (although my wife will have a view as to what extent I have been successful). There is not much time left for me on this earth but, like us all, I don't know how long that is. When a few years back I met some former class mates at a school reunion, most for the first time since leaving school, who were soon to retire or had retired. Instead of the vigorous young men I knew and could remember - full of energy and undaunted by the challenges they were about to face, I saw wizened and world weary men, somewhat mellowed, physically pale shadows of their former selves. I realized then just how quickly time had passed. All this has helped make me appreciate more than ever that life is a precious gift and it is beholden on me to make the most of what time I have left and leave a worthwhile legacy for those who come after me.

I have a certain admiration for those who retire (early if they can), having managed to secure their family's future, then spend their time doing the worthwhile things they couldn't do when having to work to earn money to support themselves and their families, like looking after grandchildren, furthering their outside of work interests and using their skills and knowledge by being involved as community volunteers. For many, it may not be quite as idyllic as this, for all sorts of good reasons - such as ill health, impoverishment, family bereavement or breakdown, but we all need to adapt to the fact that we are getting older and to coin a popular phrase, play the cards that life will have dealt us. Sometimes we are not given the respect or recognition we would like, simply ignored, humoured or cast aside and it will dawn on us in varying degrees that our physical limitations will have become increasingly greater and debilitating, restricting what we can do. Despite all this, there is much that can and needs to be done and we do well to face up to the reality that we are the people to do it or at least some of it, for if it is not me then who?

Lots of what to me are profound thoughts are spinning around my head as I write this. It occurs to me that older I get the more I think about what it is to be old and my ideas change, sometimes subtly, in the process, particularly around the question of what really matters and what can be done. It is true that as a young person I was brought up to respect the elderly and to an extent I did. Even so, I look back with some regret that I have been more dismissive than I ought on some older person's irritatingly quaint ways or inability to adapt to a changing world or think outside the box. Some of that regret stems from the discovery that those older people were

once young, full of ideals, ambitions and vigour and have often achieved significant things for others. Not a few have been war heroes or pioneers in their fields of interest or achieved much in a particular area, such as sport or the arts.

One of the shifts in culture is that the respect that was generally once shown, in particular toward older people, may be eroding. When I first visited India in 1983, I was struck by the honour that was bestowed upon the elderly. They usually lived in the same house as one of the sons or daughters and, if they needed care, it was provided for, not by professional carers but by family, friends and neighbours. Invariably they were addressed with respect and their place as head of the family was unquestioned even when their powers were limited and the children had become the main economic bread winners and responsible for most of the day to day tasks and practical arrangements. There were exceptions but what I saw back then was in contrast to what I observed in the UK. Sadly, probably as a by-product of globalization and westernization, that situation applies less now than it did then.

In my time as a community activist (and before) I have seen many examples of discrimination based on race, disability, sexual orientation and religion, and my earlier book reflected on ways I helped combat this. It strikes me that something that is often overlooked, yet is every bit as insidious and hurtful to those who are affected, is discrimination based on age or at least a lack of dealing with situations where age related issues, in particular old age, can be a barrier. Many, and here I will include myself, have felt discarded because of their age and feel hurt and surplus to requirements because of being rejected. Sometimes it is outright discrimination but usually it is more subtle. While recourse to law is sometimes available, usually those affected have to find other ways to come to terms with this.

Clearly, older people hanging onto position or power when there are more able, innovative and energetic younger people who can do the job, is usually not a healthy situation and one that has been allowed to happen all too often. Equally, younger people pushing aside older people who have much to give by way of experience, wisdom and work ethic is not a good thing either. Somehow the ideal of balancing the qualities we associate with the two ends of the age spectrum is what ought to be aimed for and this should be based on respecting and honouring one another, something that too often is missing. While it is stereotypical to say so, the old have tended to condemn the young for their waywardness and if that is true it should be tempered by understanding and a desire to help rather criticize. I don't feel I have easy solutions - for society is what it is. But I would say to older people, don't carry a chip on your shoulder and get on and do what you can do, despite any rejection or misunderstanding you may face, and to the not older people, remember

the older folk, respect them, for it is quite possible the privileges you enjoy now is down to their past efforts, and especially so if they are frail, as that is what healthy communities do; recognise and value what they may be able to contribute.

One of the tragedies of modern society and a sign of its deep malaise is the number of old people living alone, having very few visitors, often forgotten, lonely and unwanted (if the lack of family visits and other social interaction is anything to go by). Their socio-economic status and limitations such as health make it hard even for the more determined to change this. There are many older people living in care homes as they are unable to look after themselves and their children are unable or unwilling to look after them. Care homes vary enormously but evidence of neglect, even in the better ones, is worrying. Usually, neglect is not about overt physical or mental abuse but rather ignoring the needs, hopes and aspirations of the elderly and not doing the little things and paying the attention that is all to do with making a needed difference. Caring for the elderly, even if it merely amounts to making short visits or doing small practical tasks, is of value. Often, what the elderly appreciate most is having someone take an interest and who will listen. While those living in western society can point to the welfare state, even when effective in providing help, it is invariably not enough to cater for the older person's holistic needs.

My own record on involvement with old people with a compassionate aim in mind is a mixed one. While I have done a good deal of visiting and helping out over the years, often arising out of links made through and activities run by the church, I feel I could have done a lot more. In the church I spent much of my life being part of, I valued the fact that we did try to cater for the needs of the elderly, even if to the exclusion of other groups, and possibly that was one of our main contributions to the life of the community. Interestingly, the church I now attend, while being blessed with young people and the prospect of future growth, also has several old people, many living alone and full of character. As a family, we see this as providential and an opportunity to serve. One dream, that will unlikely come to pass, is to start a care home or similar such facility for the elderly, where the ideals mentioned here are fully practiced (for I have no doubt the need for such is great).

Finally, as I reflect on growing old, along with the care aspects that have already been discussed, there is a need for the older people to feel loved and valued and be given hope. They are not a burden and shouldn't be seen as such. They do have worth and for those who are not elderly, we must believe it and say this is so. For me personally, and when I can, I will share these things with those who care to listen, especially the elderly, that there is a prospect of life beyond the grave that is of a far superior quality than we will have ever known on this earth, when all that

past youthful vigour and absence of sorrow and pain will be restored with interest, when the exuberance of our youth will be pale reflection of what is to come.

### **Whistle while you work**

Those who have read thus far may have noted my belief that work is one of the most important and worthwhile activities we can be engaged in and is something we all should be encouraged and able to do. It is what the good Lord intended when he created us in the first place. Realistically there are many things people do that pass as work, some of which may be highly rewarded, that do not benefit others, and many things that do benefit others yet go unrewarded and maybe unrecognised. And when work is rewarded often that reward is not commensurate with its real value. Whether paid or not, work is what we should be doing and while through the circumstances of life we will be limited in what we can do, it seems appropriate that we should do useful work if we possibly can and as best we can. We may not whistle, like Snow White and the seven dwarves, but we should be working.

Ideally, work should also provide the worker with a decent livelihood that will support the worker and his/her family and people should be less rather than more reliant on state benefits or charitable support (as is often the case now), although how to achieve this has long perplexed and challenged successive governments. It is understandable why particular attention is often paid to choice of career, especially early in life. One practical reason for making good career choices is that it will allow one to engage more in community activism by earning enough money and gaining the experience so that one can be of service outside of paid work. Sadly, too often people are prevented from work, typically because there are not jobs for them to do or they are not qualified and there are too many doing jobs that do not satisfy and seem to serve little useful purpose and for some this cannot be avoided. Sometimes, in the case of immigrants, discussed elsewhere, they are not allowed to work. Sometimes, people need support in order to work at an optimum level or flexibility given family circumstances etc., and while progress has been made, more could be done. Despite the best intentions of successive governments, enabling people who can work to be able to do so and for those who can't work to be adequately provided for through welfare benefits, often fails to happen.

Even before I became a Christian, I was influenced by the Protestant work ethic which particularly emphasized hard work, frugality and diligence, yet now I observe that regrettably too often this ethic is missing, particularly among the young, in today's society. One new immigrant recently shared his observation that British people are nice but also lazy. Peoples' experience in the workplace will

vary considerably and one might envy those who do work they enjoy, find fulfilling and benefit others, and, if it pays well, that is a bonus - for many are not in that position. I remain adamant that we should judge people more by the content of their character than by the status of the job they do and work should be valued not so much by the remuneration that comes with it but by the quality of its output and how it benefits others (clearly, on that score society has got it completely wrong).

Now my paid working days looks like coming to an end. I can look back on my working career, especially what happened prior to my starting to work in the community, which while I see as not being that illustrious was often rewarding in terms of job satisfaction and remuneration. I feel some pride that I did do some useful things such as deliver successful projects, design robust and reliable software systems and taught the next generation, and while it is for others to judge how well I did, I did try my best. While I am by no means wealthy, I am a lot better off materially than many, and part of the reason is because of the work I have been able to do in the past that has provided me with the wherewithal to have what is compared to many, a decent standard of living and invest for the future, as well as to do those things that have benefited others, where there was no financial reward.

While I was a student, I did a number of part time jobs: paper boy, factory worker, building labourer, gardener, postman, dustman, demolition worker, assistant in an amusement park. I found these were in the main positive experiences that helped me see how the other half lived and toward making me the person I have become. I suppose the job that I felt to be most worthwhile is that of a teacher and while I have not been employed as a teacher, other than on an ad hoc basis or in a church setting, for many a year, the idea of being able to help impart new ideas and knowledge, and being an influence and instrument for good in young peoples' lives, is something that continues to enthuse me. While at school, when it came to discussing careers, those in which I expressed an interest in pursuing included air force pilot, research chemist and history teacher, yet by the end of the time of my studying for my first degree I still wasn't clear what it was that I wanted to do.

I drifted into teaching. My first job was to teach secondary school children, of all ages and abilities, chemistry, because there were plenty of jobs available and it was something that appealed to me more than any of the other alternatives that presented themselves at the time, and it was where I felt I could make a difference. As an inexperienced teacher, I was full of enthusiasm to do well in my new profession but quickly realized there were obstacles to overcome, such as getting the pupils attention, and working in a system with many bureaucratic constraints, before I could really teach to the level I aspired. I realize that some teachers come

to terms with these challenges but for me the tensions became nigh unbearable and, with regret, after three years I decided to cut my losses and do something else.

Going into the computer industry was for me a natural career change and I was able to get paid training to help me make that transition. Having been exposed to computers at college, being of that mindset that meant I could come to terms with working with computers, specifically in the software arena, and that this was a new profession with enormous scope one might develop were all factors toward my making this move. I started work as a programmer and then went on into system / software design and project management and team leading. I did some work abroad, memorably in Switzerland and Burma, including as a trainer. I ended up specializing in quality assurance, technical authoring and system testing and, in the last 12 years as an IT specialist, I worked freelance. The job paid well and gave me the scope for doing lesser paid community work in the latter part of my career. I also continued my studies, including for a non-related Open University degree.

While there were many colleagues I would rate above me in terms of their abilities and contribution factor, I do have a sense of pride in some of the things I achieved, for example, my involvement in helping to deliver: traffic control systems, message switching (pre internet / fast data link days) systems, network management systems, applications involving satellite communication and various data transfer protocols, banking and insurance applications, fixing the “millennium bug”, some pretty nifty examples of programming (even if I say so myself) and at the end work around e-commerce. I feel grateful that for some 25 years I was able to work mostly continuously in this industry and was financially well rewarded. Of course, I can reflect on the enormous changes I have seen. Just before I started, the industry was dominated by large main frame computers and writing programs was done on punched cards that were fed into the computer, and ideas like computers talking to each other, unlimited and fast data access and powerful personal computers in every home were on the radar of very few, but I will contain myself.

I suppose the advances that were made and the way the industry began to be run (for example: the days of long haired, hippy type mavericks types giving way to a different type of working environment, more regimented, commercial, organised and politicized, and the creativity needed for writing systems from scratch giving way to an emphasis on being familiar with and integrating off the shelf packages), not having a desire to adapt to the changes that were happening or learn about the latest of a continual string of short lived computer applications or fads just didn't interest me, a sense that what I was doing in the later stages of my career had little or no social value and the opportunity that arose of doing things in the community

activist area that seemed to be considerably more worthwhile, a change in the tax regime that made the way I worked at the time less lucrative and jobs harder to come by were all reasons for my getting out of the computer industry (IT business).

In all fairness, it had given me a good living and some sense of achievement and independence, but I was never to return to it or want to return or even follow developments in technology, which these days I leave to my son. My later, more rewarding but less rewarded work in the community required every bit as much skill, albeit different (although surprisingly, skills I picked up previously did come in handy), and in the main demanded more effort than when I worked with computers and, while it is difficult to make comparisons in terms of usefulness to others, but for some creative highlights as a computer professional, my community career benefitted more people. I have no regrets making the change I did but wish I could have done more. Still, it is not yet all over and maybe the best is yet to come.

### **Education, education, education**

In 1997, the then prime minister, Tony Blair, delivered his now famous “education, education, education” speech and set this out as his priority for government. Tony did put his (or rather taxpayers) money where his mouth was by significantly increasing government spending on education, although critics would point out that in terms of improving the overall education attainment of the populace the results have been disappointing. I have come to see education as an emotive subject with wide ranging views being put forward on what the purpose of education is or should be and how best to go about educating people and in what, especially the young. Some, including me, would add it should apply to all ages as education should be a lifetime activity. I also have concerns that the system continues to put too much emphasis on doing well in exams. These are all important issues and, without wanting to sound scornful, ones that society are far from getting right.

While I am a long way from being educated to the level I feel I ought to be at, and have no doubt squandered many opportunities, I am better educated than most and see it as my duty to learn on a wide ranging front on a daily basis, often through extensive reading, and in doing so think through the issues, make balanced judgments, act according to knowledge, as well as satisfy my curiosity - and as a result serve my community better. If academic achievement is anything to go by, I score higher than most. My earlier education journey through schools and college culminated in my obtaining a B.Sc. (Hons) degree in chemistry and soon after that I was to add a post graduate degree in education (in order to support my teaching career). Besides lots of informal learning, I have since gone on to take numerous

courses in a variety of subjects (some with and some without qualifications at the end), in both work and non work related subjects. The most significant one culminated in my obtaining a B.A. (Hons) from the Open University, where subjects studied included history, literature, philosophy and religion and were chosen out of pure interest rather than in order to advance my career. In addition, I remain a prolific reader on a wide range of subjects.

While earlier in my life I learnt and obtained qualifications to help be established in my career, later I did so in order to better understand the world I live in and the people who live in it and, as a gospel preacher, as well as a community activist, I felt I would be more effective in what I did as a result. Yet there are salutary warnings too. We are reminded: *“of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh”* Ecclesiastes 12:12. It is all too easy to pile up knowledge and fail to do what needs to be done, whether it is in the performing of great tasks or in the everyday ones that constantly present themselves and many an educated and well qualified person have for whatever reason been failures in life. While I oppose the utilitarianism that has dominated the educational thinking of successive governments, I have no doubt that a person that is truly educated (and that includes, for the sake of balance, aesthetic, physical, ethical, social, spiritual as well as academic and vocational aspects), even if only according to his/her limitations, will be useful in the work place as well as many other area of life.

Like many who read this, I have a child whose welfare is a high priority. This obviously includes his educational attainment and I want it to match his needs, abilities and interests as well as wanting him to get a good job and make a positive difference in the world he lives in as a result. I am aware a lot of his education has been entrusted to schools, for such is the way society has deemed it should be, yet I do not wish to renege on my own responsibilities or belief that parents should be the main educators of their children (and is why I have sympathy with those who home school their children because they feel they can provide a better education). I realize as children get older they will likely become more independent of parental influence and will often have their own ideas of what and how they learn. Even so, I continue to urge the importance of dedication, balance, rigour, excellence, etc. The school system is mixed in terms of how good or effective it is, with all schools being somewhere along the spectrum, ranging from excellent to bad, in these aspects. They are also often faced with child discipline problems, lack of support by parents and bureaucratic constraints, all of which impact on their teaching.

Frustratingly, there seems little one can do to change matters, for schools reflect society and they have been hijacked by government and the education elite, (aided

by apathetic and non pro-active parents) that to a significant extent wants to further its own agenda, some might say by trying to churn compliant citizens that can do jobs and hold values government wants. I get the impression that many a good teacher knows and wants to do what he/she sees as best education practice that will benefit the pupils most but is constrained by the system and a lack of leadership to support and encourage him/her doing what needs doing. One key issue is that of changing society - but what values do we want, how to change and how best to influence young learners? I cherish the values I hold dear and feel should be important to society, and have shared many of these in this book. Yet some of these values are not commonly held and therein lies a dilemma. Besides wanting to make a difference, I would want to challenge people about fundamental questions like what is the purpose of education, what should the goals of teaching be and how best to achieve these? As a parent, I would want my son to share my values, but I can't impose them on him, but I can influence him by being a good parent.

One of my publications is "A Parents Guide to the 11+", written five years ago, and while not a best seller has helped a good many parents. The 11+ is a strange quirk that exists only in some places in the UK. It is an exam that 10/11 year olds can take and passing or failing will determine whether they go to a selective (grammar) school or a non-selective (typically comprehensive school). Grammar schools tend to be geared up for more academically able children. One of the things I argued in that book is too often this is linked to social selection and the gap between grammar schools (often seen as excellent) and comprehensive schools (sometimes seen as mediocre) can be unacceptably wide. The book was written in order to encourage ordinary parents of modest means to help their child, provided able and willing, to pass this exam. Whilst having qualms about the rights of selective education, I had none about getting my child into the best school that happened to be available.

The biggest thing to hit me about the schools system is that it is geared toward children passing exams and this can be detrimental to fulfilling educational ideals, irrespective of whether a child is academically able or not. While I see a place for exams as a test of what has been learnt, something to aim for and one way to measure achievement in a competitive world and, cynically, establishments that score highly can then be seen more favourably, I fear it may do little for creativity and could work against those less academically able. The ability to pass an exam doesn't make someone educated and things like independent thinking, striving to become, as exemplified by Dr. Samuel Johnson, "men of letters" - understanding all disciplines, innovation and creativity, allowing children to pursue their interests and fulfil their talents and studying and wanting to study for reasons other than passing exams, such as having true understanding, should all be encouraged.

I feel I must end with something that is often overlooked. It is what the ancients called wisdom and this might be defined as the ability to discern or judge what is true, right, or lasting; insight, common sense; good judgment; and is often seen to have a strong moral element. As far as the Bible is concerned, wisdom comes from fearing the Lord and is something that should be highly sought after. It is salutary to ponder that there are those, who are so called educated, who are not wise, and those who aren't educated, or at least without qualifications, who are! As I ponder these things, I recall a few days back teaming up with an elderly gentleman, William, to clear the leaves in our church car park. William told me that he did not learn to read and write until he was in the army, having then the motivation to do so, and at school he was looked upon as a dunce. What struck me in the time we spent together was that not only was his approach to the job in hand an appropriate one but he had insight into a range of topics, ordinary and profound. I conclude that William is a wise man. The question my book also asked but didn't fully answer (after all that was not its main purpose) is what should education be about and how we can achieve it? Might I suggest that somewhere in the answer should be the gaining of wisdom? The question continues to be begged but I need to move on ...

## **Asylum seeking revisited**

In my previous book, I reflected on what I see as an important part of the Christian remit - to serve the poor and lowly, as well as making the observation that those who have stood out among the Christians (the saints to borrow from another tradition to my own) have paid particular attention to these matters and have given of themselves sacrificially in order to serve such folk. I also made the point that there are people without faith who do much the same thing. There are some non-believers who are motivated by the idea of achieving fairness or sheer compassion and others because of their personal experience as an asylum seeker, homeless person etc., understand what is needed and makes it happen. I have no pretensions of sainthood but I do see serving the poor as an important part of my community activism and an essential part of the outworking of my Christian faith. My text for today happened to be: "*plead the cause of the poor and needy*" Proverbs 31:9.

When two years ago I tried looking into my crystal ball in order to predict what my current involvement in the community would be, it seemed that of all the poverty issues it would be asylum seeking and homelessness I would be paying particular attention to. And so it has turned out. Helping the homeless is dealt with in the next section, and my experience has been there is often a link between asylum seeking and finding adequate housing, especially when the wherewithal to pay the rent is

missing. For the purpose of this discussion, I define an asylum seeker as someone seeking refuge from oppression in their country of origin and a refugee as one who has been given refuge and the right to remain in the place they seek refuge, often following a period of being an asylum seeker. While I intend to focus on asylum seekers, similar concerns arise with immigrants who outstay their welcome or simply find for whatever reason their hopes of finding a good life dashed.

Immigration is a highly charged and emotive subject if news reporting is anything to go by. There is a tendency by some to blame our country's woes, including the hijacking of the British culture, on an influx of foreigners that has accelerated in recent years. This is a truly complex and many faceted subject with few sufficiently understanding the issues, including those who make the laws. It seems the major political parties vie with each other to outdo the likes of UKIP and the BNP, with their particular anti immigrant and populace appealing stances, to be seen to be tough on immigration. Most are in agreement that it is acceptable to invite the brightest and the best into the country, in particular professionals where there are shortages, on the basis they would give more to the national good than what they would take by way of welfare benefits or free services. At the same time, it is felt that those that do not fall into that category should be made to "go home" or at least severely restricted as to what benefits and services they can receive.

The problem is compounded because according to EU directives we need to allow into the UK those from other EU countries, and when countries like Poland and Czech Republic entered the EU in 2004 there was a big influx into the country with a severe strain on services as a consequence. Most would have entered because they were attracted by what the UK could offer, economically. While my own experience of meeting such folk is often of decent, hard working people, I do understand the concern that many appear to take from the economy more than they give to it. Something similar is anticipated by some in 2014 with a similar scenario being played out with Bulgarian and Romanian nationals coming into the country and already it can be seen there are moves by government to tighten the loopholes for such people claiming benefits and having unrestricted access to services.

One of the effects of all what is happening, especially when it comes to notions of foreigners jumping various queues, e.g. social housing, at the expense of those born and brought up in this country, or are milking a benefit system with its decreasing pot of money from which to hand out, is that the overriding sentiment tends to be opposed toward our accepting immigrants. This includes asylum seekers, whose particular needs are often misunderstood or ignored and are rarely covered in media reporting. Most recently this antipathy has been evidenced by the UK government

not allowing any of the large number of Syrian refugees fleeing from the recent crisis and uprisings in that country to enter the UK, and the ensuing international condemnation along with the UK government justification for its actions, although this reluctance is shared by many other countries.

The Immigration Bill going through the UK Parliament now, expected to become law Spring 2014 (with few amendments despite issues raised), is widely supported by all main political parties. It is intended to make it more difficult for those who are in the country illegally or with restricted entitlement (reckoned to be over a million), to receive benefits and services they are not entitled to. The idea is to reduce and eliminate such benefits and services, with the onus on service providers e.g. employers, landlords, banks, health services, to ensure they do not give such people more than they are entitled to and be penalized if they do not comply. The attraction of the legislation is that it will make it difficult for people to break the law and thus encourage those in the country illegally to repatriate. The downside, which shockingly has too often been overlooked, is that it will likely penalize the innocent, e.g. those simply wanting to help and foreign nationals who are actually entitled to these things and, more worryingly, the vulnerable, e.g. those who are already destitute. It also feeds into the hands of those who may exploit the plight of the immigrant, who in extreme cases sell themselves in order to survive. Significantly this bill will likely create further destitution among immigrants, in particular asylum seekers with no recourse to public funds, not allowed to work.

Even though asylum seekers are only a minority of those immigrants who are targeted by the Bill, it is a significant one nevertheless. Besides those actively pursuing an asylum claim and conforming to all the regulations, often quite onerous and arguably degrading, it is reckoned there may be over 250,000 failed asylum seekers or those have placed themselves outside the “system”, sometimes for good reasons, and it is this I wish to particularly address. It should be added that for many of these asylum seekers, returning “home” is often not an option given the conditions they seek asylum from remains, and the process of adjudicating such claims has often been found out to be inconsistent, lacking in transparency, taking a lot of time to process, difficult to access and unjust, with some of those who are most needy, with good claims finding themselves destitute and losing out, often because of their inability or a lack of an advocate to plead their cause.

Regarding immigration, I am of the view we allow too many foreigners into the country to live and settle, and is one more reason I am a euro-sceptic, given our membership of the EU virtually compels us to do this. While in a utopian world people should be able to live, work and travel where they wish, realistically the UK

is lacking the infrastructure and resources to realistically sustain the levels of immigration of recent years. Yet I believe in traditional British values based on our judaeo-christian heritage, and these are worth maintaining along with respecting other cultures. One value is offering hospitality and showing kindness to strangers and foreigners, something the current climate seems almost to be discouraging. Whether or not the “British culture” is undermined or enriched overall through immigration remains a moot point, although my instinct is there other factors afoot that we should consider when answering such a question.

As for asylum seekers, the issue is compounded because countries are not the same in how these are treated (many are even less sympathetic to welcoming asylum seekers than is the UK) and, strange as it may seem, the UK is often looked upon as particularly attractive to such people. I believe we should welcome genuine asylum seekers and deal with their claims in a just and speedy manner and not allow them to become destitute. I confess my own understanding of the true position and the arguments of “the other side” are limited yet the current situation makes me more than uneasy because of the distress and destitution I have seen. As for suggestions of what can be done about it, I feel I can do no better than to cite the Oxfam report “Coping with Destitution” (February 2011 but still relevant) for articulating some of the issues and reproduce what has been suggested by the “Still human, still here” campaign (and lifted from its website) as to some of what needs to happen at national level. But as is often the case, community activists like me have to focus on working within the system (however broken or torturous it may be and in these respects it is) and do so at a local level and by responding to local needs, sometimes trying to help those who find themselves in harrowing situations as best we can:

- *“Provide asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute with sufficient support so that they can meet their essential living needs until they are returned to their country of origin or are given permission to stay in the UK;*
- *Provide free access to healthcare for all asylum seekers while in the UK;*
- *Grant asylum seekers permission to work if their case has not been resolved within six months or they have been refused, but temporarily cannot be returned through no fault of their own ;*
- *Improve decision making and ensure all those in need of protection receive it.”*

While I do not work with individual asylum seekers on a regular basis, I have tried to understand some of the issues and have sometimes brought together those with an interest in the subject e.g. by way of organizing conferences. I have tried to encourage those working on the frontline that are helping these people. I have

sometimes provided practical support to those affected, even if only by providing a friendly face and a listening ear, whatever words of wisdom I can impart and the power of networking that comes from my experience as a community activist. I remain a member of Southend Zimbabwean Network (SZN) and Communities and Asylum Seekers Together (CAST) who are faced with these issues given the people they serve. I am also grateful to the likes of the Immigration Advisor at our local Citizens Advice Bureau who keep up with daily developments and are important points of reference for those with immigration concerns. I am often amazed at their patience and tenacity as so often services that ought to be there aren't and the large number of hoops that need to be negotiated. While it is tempting to be overwhelmed by the need and be in a quandary as to how we can make a difference, I have been encouraged by these local initiatives as well as those happening on a national level or in other areas, such as the sterling work that is being done by the Boaz Trust, who lead by example. Their idea of and success with a hosting scheme whereby those with spare rooms in their home let these freely to asylum seekers, is presently being taken up locally by CAST.

While asylum seeking is just one of many issues that are to do with social justice, it is one I have particularly chosen to focus on because of the need on my doorstep, I don't like jumping on other people's bandwagon but would rather support less popular causes and I do not understand and cannot accept that the country I love should treat asylum seekers so badly. While I recognise that only some will share my beliefs, it seems clear what we should do, or at least the principle that should govern what is to be done: *“and if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself”* (Leviticus 19:33-34).

## **Helping the homeless**

While I try to understand and find solutions to homeless issues at a high level, when I attend meetings and chair the Southend Homeless Action Network (SHAN), I am also able to do hands on work on a regular basis. My roles within SHAN, managing a night shelter, going out as a Street Pastor, being part of the SOS men's group and dealing with individual cases and specific projects, are all opportunities to help homeless and other vulnerable folk. Nothing I like better than interact with these, whose company and insights I value, although as with asylum seekers it can be frustrating that some of their fundamental needs remain unmet, either because that is the way the “system” is or because of the issues the homeless can't or won't deal with that prevent them moving forward, and often it is a mixture of all these things. My own experience dealing with rough sleepers are that many are just as

agreeable in character as anyone else, sometimes more so, and are grateful for any help they are given. I have often found listening to their stories and insights most enlightening; although frustratingly sometimes there isn't enough time and one's power to do positive things, like improving the situation, may be limited.

In the case of the homeless, while some find themselves in that position as a result of a relationship breakdown or because of financial difficulties, I would reckon that the majority have one or other form of mental health or addiction problems (frequently both) although sometimes this is brought on or accentuated because of homelessness. It is one reason why I particularly concerned that such folk are helped as early as possible. The thought "but for the grace of God go I" seems particularly pertinent, given many a homeless person find themselves in that position due to circumstances outside their control and some, prior to becoming homeless, were pillars of society with good jobs living in a stable home environment. Sometimes these changes occur quickly and while it is best to be prepared we cannot rule out it happening to us. But we are where we are and we do what we can, and what we do can be significant and we can all make a difference.

In my earlier book, I reflected on how I became interested in homelessness. I began working full time in the community because of my interest in mental health and having the opportunity to make a difference. As often is the case, circumstances played a part, and it was later coming across homeless people, often single men without dependants, who the statutory services couldn't or wouldn't help, that alerted me to the issues. At that time, the Council were looking to close some of its homeless hostels. Sensing a need for a concerted approach to tackle these issues, SHAN started. I have already reflected there is often a link between homelessness and mental health. When it comes to what is important in sustaining a reasonable quality of life, that link extends to areas like education, employment, relationships, lifestyle, poverty, health etc. All of these areas need dealing with in order to get the best outcome. The lack of social housing and decent, affordable accommodation in the private sector, coupled with restricted benefits also remain big concerns. Even in the case of a homeless person that might make a good tenant (many won't because of their issues and their need for support) these issues present a big barrier.

What is the extent of the problem, no-one truly knows, although there have been attempts to quantify this, e.g. as part of regular government statistic gathering exercises (although in my experience the results are far from convincing). Even if we discount those living in poor, sub-standard accommodation, we are still left with many rough sleepers. Those typically we encounter sleeping in shop doorways may only be a small portion, and sometimes the reason they are there in the first

place is to beg money from the passing public. During my patrols as street pastor in particular, I have become aware of all sorts of places where people sleep rough, where there is some shelter at least from the elements. A bigger number are the hidden homeless, e.g. those who sleep in empty buildings or sofa surf in someone else's home. More recently, I have become aware of people sleeping in cars or tents. Many do engage with the services and helps that are available (some just to get hand outs, others for a lot more) but some don't, and therein lays a challenge. Because some rough sleepers have anti-social behaviour traits, other rough sleepers may try to avoid them and thereby lose the chance of hostel accommodation.

I have reflected on the downward spiral syndrome. When a person is homeless it is often difficult to escape that condition. Issues like addictions often become more apparent and the obstacles that need overcoming remain. Sometimes, the longer this situation remains, the harder it is to break free. Often we come across cases when help is provided e.g. providing hostel space and material support by way of food and clothes and even finding the homeless person accommodation, yet he/she is unable to handle tenant responsibilities and finds him/herself back on the streets. It would be easy to say we have done what we could and should but that would be excusing ourselves from our responsibilities to show compassion and practical help. Even so, the need for wisdom, particularly in how best to deploy limited resources, is always needed and one needs to recognize one's own limitations.

Sometimes, people with a heart are seen as soft touches and right now there is a local campaign to deter people from giving money to beggars as it might be spent on drugs or alcohol (which in principle I support) but instead give to the homeless charities – but rarely is the situation that straight forward. As often happens, the police have to deal with some of the complexities around rough sleeping. In wanting to move on vagrant beggars, some may be over-zealous. Some rough sleepers do not engage with homeless charities for good reasons. Usually the charities themselves lay down rules that need to be kept. Most insist on no alcohol or drugs on the premises or no anti-social behaviour. While this is necessary if the charity is to survive and help those who do follow the rules, the net result may be that those who are most needy are excluded. While I do not give money to folk who beg, if I can do something practically or engage with or at least acknowledge them (most, I find are courteous), I try to do so, but then again there are times I pass by because I'm too busy or not in the mood. Sadly, some of these folk become the target of gangs and attacks are not uncommon. Another concern is for church ministers and community workers. They are often seen as easy or sympathetic targets by vulnerable persons seeking help. Those who do respond need to be honoured and supported, and often there is a need to pastor the pastor.

In my own town, there are many who give to local homeless charities and of those a number are volunteers and help in various practical ways. This is heartening as it demonstrates there is human kindness being shown close to home and directed toward those who need it most. As I write, I believe it is true to say that any homeless person in my town can find somewhere to get a free meal every day of the week, they can receive other practical helps such as clothes or access to washing facilities or advice on a regular basis and often there is a safe place available to sleep at night. Services to do with health and overcoming addictions are often readily available. Yet there is a dilemma in that many a homeless person will accept their situation because they see no way out of homelessness or they lack the determination or the knowledge to change, sometimes because of their addiction, mental health or anti-social behaviour issue and, frustratingly for those who try to help, they do not do what they are supposed or expected to do.

Sometimes the homeless person cannot find suitable, affordable accommodation, especially when, as does happen, he/she has insufficient income or whatever welfare entitlement there is, it doesn't cover the cost of accommodation and, besides, landlords may be reluctant anyway, preferring to focus on getting what they perceive as less high risk tenants. Given the strain on social sector housing (many more want it than get it), this will naturally have a knock on effect on the availability of private sector housing. An area I have looked at in the past and this has yet to be taken up on a larger scale is that of starting rent deposit schemes and acting as guarantors to high risk tenants. There is still mileage in this idea. There are many good landlords but most would want a decent return on their investment. There are a few, who I look on as social landlords, who are prepared to take the risk and take on needy tenants even if at a loss. The need to work with the good and the socially motivated landlords is an important one. One of the big needs is to find a way out of homelessness and for there to be the right level of support, which for some can be quite high at times. I applaud those who provide this basic compassionate response and this is a significant part of what I do when I help the homeless, yet the need for a permanent solution that will give homeless folk a greater quality of life is all too apparent and is something I hope will happen.

For some, appropriate, timely help, even if small, is all that is needed. It is why when I come across people new to living on the streets, sometimes as a result of unforeseen and unfortunate circumstances, I will often try to make a particular effort to help ensure it will not be for long. Besides simple acts of human kindness, I try using my networking acumen to point them in the direction, sometimes holding their hand while doing so, to get the help that is needed. I am often

humbled by those who do this and more besides. The fact that there are others who are doing something similar makes things a lot better and gives me hope. Getting more people involved with practically helping the homeless is important, for getting people off the streets is usually not easy, given the lack of suitable, affordable accommodation. What is needed is people with the heart for the homeless, prepared to go that extra mile, with a can do yet realistic attitude and sensible enough not to burn out, and for there to be joined up services that can provide the best outcome for these folk, and a more compassionate and enlightened response by government in order to make the necessary changes. One service that could do more to help and engage more with partners is statutory mental health.

At the other extreme on the rough sleeper continuum is the hard core, who often have been rough sleeping for a long time and are wised up in how to survive yet humanly speaking it is difficult to see how their circumstances will change. Some have deep addictions to alcohol and drugs and this may be coupled with a mental health and behavioural problems. Sometimes their behaviour bars them from getting the help they need, not necessarily because of callousness on the part of the service provider but they are not equipped to help. If they are helped, e.g. by being provided accommodation, they might blow their chances by misbehaviour that will typically get them evicted. Too often in these cases that person has been set up, albeit unwittingly sometimes through lack of appropriate support, so that he/she will fail. How to help such people, and there are I reckon at least twenty I am aware of who fall into that category in Southend, remains the big question. Some have been helped by simple acts of kindness, although that barely begins to address all the needs, and what is often needed is a radical change in life style and attitude.

While I suspect some reading this might feel I have flipped, I would like to hark back to what General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, sought to achieve in the late nineteenth century, when he came across a client group not so dissimilar to what is being considered here, and despite the enormous changes that have take place since is still relevant as an approach. Besides doing the equivalent of the compassion stuff we have discussed, he felt it was important to save the souls of the people he was trying to help. After all, without a purpose for living and the power to live, such that a faith may help to provide, it is hard to see how progress might be made. But significantly, Booth felt these people needed to be put into a rural and well regulated environment where they were less likely to revert to their old ways and be away from former temptations, and be given meaningful work, remuneration and needed support. Part of the legacy of what Booth sought to achieve is Hadleigh Farm, near to where I live. I doubt we could or even should reproduce what Booth did but it does serve as a model of what could be done.

When it comes to helping the group of people that I call “problematic rough sleepers” because of their life issues, what is often needed is an appropriate level of interaction, which at times, particularly in the early stages, could be intense, and a regime of tough love and clear boundaries. This depends on the willingness of such folk to want to be helped and a level of trust in place to start with, which is why engaging with such folk on human level is so important. As many who have gone down this route have found, if that doesn’t happen the best we can do is to provide drip fed compassion although without confronting and dealing with the demons progress can be painfully slow. It will require there be those around them who are prepared and able to mentor, help and do what is needed etc. to tackle problems, preferably by empowering the one being helped, and the provision of interventions such as helping people to cope, vocational and life skill training and the opportunity for doing meaningful work, even if on a voluntary basis and, of course, some form of accommodation, possibly a hostel with appropriate supervision.

Part of the challenge faced dealing with such people was brought home to me during the first night of my managing one of the winter night shelters. There are many individual stories I (and others) could relate but I will concentrate on one. I decided on our first night to turn away one of the would-be guests on health and safety grounds due to his inebriated condition and reports we had received. The experience has often been that accommodating such people does put strain on the volunteers and other guests, for which we have a duty of care. It was not an easy decision and understandably this person felt rejected and reacted untowardly. Moreover, his health condition was such that it was not good for him to be on the streets and a little prior to that he had been accepted by another night shelter with no problems. Two weeks later he turned up again and this time we let him stay, after having first taken him to one side to read the riot act, for the circumstances and his condition had changed. There were few problems that night and I recall one surreal incident of playing chess with this guest and in the background Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata was being played by another guest on our piano. We both agreed this was a lovely piece of music and got this other guest to play an encore. While clearly there had been a breakthrough, I knew we were some way from being out of the woods as shortly before closing I saw our problematic rough sleeper on the bench outside drinking alcohol from a can that he had smuggled into our premises and, while there were further positive reports, two weeks later he turned up at the night shelter blind drunk and had to be turned away yet again, much to his dismay.

One encouraging development though was that the homeless charity we were partnering with later managed to convene a multi-agency case conference on how we can best serve this person and the upshot was he was offered and took a place at

a rehabilitation centre to help deal with his alcohol and other issues. Sadly, while progress was made, there was a later relapse and sorting this person out remains work in progress. This “problematic” group will continue to give problems, evidenced when one came in to our night shelter, drunk yet needing care. While we had hoped we could help, it was not possible because of the anti-social behaviour that ensued, and if we had persisted other needy folk, who were prepared to obey the rules, would have suffered. After seeking medical advice, we had to exclude her on health and safety grounds. While many an organization tries to solve such problems by setting out clear rules and tight boundaries, with zero tolerance policies for those who don’t comply, it is not that simple for folk like me, who believe in tough love yet are beholden and indebted to the grace of God

Some of my recent discussions have been with those who recognize such needs, and while there have been some small evidences of breakthroughs, a lot more needs to be done. Often people need support as well as work and accommodation. I do not decry services, sometimes government funded, that do some of what I said but I do question sometimes the effectiveness of what is done and whether some of those things I feel are necessary to fully come to terms with the issues have been done. Often, especially when funding is involved, outputs are measured by the number of ticked boxes but what is really needed are transformed lives. As I write, I am assisting someone interested in starting a “wet hostel” (i.e. one that is best suited to those with issues around addiction who wouldn’t fit comfortably in a “normal” hostel), and with those who would like to take over a house of multiple occupation, financed by housing benefits and other social funds - to be used for some of these more difficult people, including providing appropriate supervision and help. As with my work with night shelters, for example when guests present themselves worse for wear because of alcohol, I see pitfalls. We want to show grace, given the type of people we wish to help, but there is a need for law: strict rules as to what is acceptable or not and what can or should be done and what can’t or shouldn’t. As always with these things there is a need to find the right balance,

There is a story in the Bible that I particularly like – it happened when Mary and Martha entertained Jesus in their home. Martha, the practical one, put all her energies into being the perfect host, doing all the practical things that needed doing. Mary, on the other hand, sat at Jesus feet and listened to what he had to say. Martha was somewhat miffed that her sister wasn’t doing her bit regarding the chores yet Jesus commended Mary for what she did. It seems to me that when we are entertaining homeless folk we need both a Mary and a Martha. For me personally, helping the homeless remains very much work in progress. Even when I stop there will be much work that needs doing, but at least I would have made some

difference and help lay some foundations for those who follow. Just as when I worked in the mental health field, change can be painfully slow, yet showing compassion can never be wrong, although wisdom is always needed. I don't have a magic wand solution and as with asylum seeking it is necessary to work in a system that is not always sympathetic to people who find themselves in these situations.

I have long learnt that there is no simple solution to helping homeless and the folk and well understand the frustration of those who try to help, who often have to go round the houses to make some sort of progress. We are sometimes hampered because "the client" often doesn't tell the whole story, doesn't do the things we think and say they should do to help their situation and there are some we can't help because of their attitude and condition. Often, for those who want to make a difference, it is a matter of patiently plugging away, helping where we can, who we can and being non-judgmental. I dream of a single stop shop where there will be help on hand to guide and support such folk around these complexities and do what it is needed to support their holistic, including spiritual needs. It is for these reasons I will continue my work such as with SHAN looking at the bigger picture and working toward solutions within a partnership paradigm. I hope also to continue my work with night shelters, including trying to move people "onward and upward" and having gained the trust of guests, explore with them and the relevant agencies how best to proceed. I will continue to support our local food banks and other agencies that help the homeless by offering those skills that might be needed. I will continue to engage with agencies like the police and statutory mental health, which have important roles. I will try to encourage those helping at the front line, knowing all too well the pressures. I will use my theological acumen to encourage Christians to be active in these areas, while maintaining truth and balance. In the final analysis, we need to do what we can and encourage others to do likewise, and to work together, and in a way that seeks to provide the best possible outcomes.

## **Money makes the world go round**

*"Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can ... Earn all you can, give all you can, save all you can ... Do you not know that God entrusted you with that money (all above what buys necessities for your families) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and, indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind? How can you, how dare you, defraud the Lord, by applying it to any other purpose? ... Not, how much of my money will I give to God, but, how much of God's money will I keep for myself?"* John Wesley.

Strangely, as one who has had a fairly cavalier attitude to money for much of my life, the issue of money has cropped up a number of times already in my books. While it need not be an issue to affect one's community activism, it often is. And while charities can do good without money, often it is the lack of money that restricts what they can do. When there is a squeeze on public money (as is the case now), often it is those services that affect the vulnerable that suffer first. I have been lucky insofar that while (I think) I have lived modestly, I have generally had enough to do what I want, support myself, my family and those who I felt I needed to support. Having good paid jobs and being single until my forties helped. When it came to charitable giving, I usually maximized this by reclaiming tax relief.

While I have made some wise investments e.g. paying into a pension plan, I can also look back and see missed opportunities to maximize my income by wisely investing and, while it has never been a priority activity, I can see that my own experiences can help others to manage their own finances. I've lived through an explosion in the number of those who are home owners and, on a lesser scale in terms of financial outlay, moves toward a shareholder democracy. While buying a house with a mortgage and buying shares can be good investments (certainly when viewed with the benefit of hindsight) these can also become millstones. The overriding consideration should be to find a place to live that is affordable where one wants to be and to make sound, and dare I say it ethical, long term investments.

In a strange way, those without money are often those who serve the community best – just maybe they see something important that bucks the trend. There are those who find ways to live without money, and as one who elsewhere has advocated on behalf of the asylum seeker who has no recourse to public funds, I realize for some it is a necessity. The title of this section, which could easily have been something more mundane like “money, debt, investments and economics”, is from a song, from the musical *Cabaret*, which in a subtle way also reflects a profound truth relating to the world as it is rather than how it should be. Another idea, expressed in song, is that money is the root of all evil, although the truth is it is the love of money that is the problem and this can so easily become one's god.

I mentioned Wesley earlier in my book because his attitude to money influenced me in my early years concerning my own giving. I was touched by his resolve when, as a young clergyman, having worked out his income and expenditure, he would give to good causes whatever the difference happened to be. His income rose in the years that followed but much less so his expenditure, meaning he could increasingly give more, having more to give. Personally, I find this approach to giving more satisfactory than the tithes (to the church) and offerings (to good

causes) notions favoured by some well meaning Christians. Unfortunately, Wesley's attitude to money management and careful budgeting is not something I can say I practically shared, even though I have no doubt Wesley was right. As one who has found it difficult to face up to this matter, I understand more than many those who are in a similar position. Yet unless we know exactly what is happening with our money, we are unlikely to be able to control our affairs as we ought.

One of the nice things about being a community activist is one gets to rub shoulders with the highs and the lows of society and while money is not the only factor that determines one's place along that spectrum, it frequently is. For me, it would be entirely wrong to court and favour the high and not the low. The songs of Hannah and Mary in the Bible make it clear which side God is on! There are many texts that support the notion of God having a particular affinity to the poor. As for money, it should be merely a commodity to get things done that needs doing and what we have (much or little) has been entrusted to us, as with any steward, to use wisely and in our master's interest. I am impressed by the attitude of my father-in-law, who never had much yet gives away a substantial amount of what he has, and trusts God to provide when there are needs to be met. He is a generous man. Pertinent here are words I once saw on an auto-rickshaw in India: "Man gets and forgets; God gives and forgives". Methinks, here we need to be more Godlike!

The implications of Wesley's teaching includes trying to maximize our income through appropriate enterprise activities and employing shrewd business acumen, providing our other duties are discharged correctly. His teaching includes being in control of the money we have (e.g. knowing exactly what comes in and what goes out), investing prudently, not incurring unnecessary debt (especially if to buy non essential things), spending (in the main) on what is necessary rather than on personal pleasures and giving generously (there being no end of opportunities for doing so). Regarding spending our money on those things that are not bare necessities, I suspect we all do it and some more than others! My intention is not to judge on this matter but rather to exhort us to do what is right before God and man.

The number of those who do have financial worries is considerable. Such is the societal stigma and sense of shame, people tend not to say when they are facing money problems. But these are the issues that ought to be faced full on, and while debt counselling is not my particular forte, helping people to deal with these issues can be an important service as is providing safety nets e.g. by way of food banks and other practical ways, if as can happen (sadly, all too often) people do have financial problems that are not covered through employment or investment income, personal savings or welfare payments. There are many who get into debt because of

their own foolishness, often spending what money they do have on things they don't need. The power of advertising and peer pressure is such that people too often go after what they can't afford, as is the lure of easy finance and organizations making it easy for people to part with their money. Sometimes if advice is offered, this is not received, as too often people only listen to what they want to hear.

There are others who get into debt, due to circumstances beyond their control, e.g. losing a job, ill health, family breakdown, leading to all sorts of misery, for themselves and their families. The number of pending re-possession and evictions from homes is evidence of this. For some folk, especially where there is a history that includes self-imposed deprivation, there is a need for a supportive tough love regime, although this rarely seems to happen. Often there is no obvious answer for those who find themselves in this dilemma of having insufficient wherewithal to meet necessary outgoings, such as rent and mortgage payments, other than urging them to maintain hope, budget carefully (it is possible to live remarkably cheaply) and to find creative ways to raise income. Yet this alone may not prevent these things happening and it is the intervention and practical support of those who do go out of their way to help find ways to escape the worse that may be crucial.

There has always been a need to practically support the poor, and opportunities to do so, in almost every way a need happens to be manifested. Besides responding with compassion, wisdom and intelligence is needed, including empowering those who are in need to deal with those needs themselves, where that is possible. The rise in the number of gambling outlets, which might suggest a way of escape from financial woes, is a blot on our culture and promotes a perverse illusion. As a grassroots activist, I am obliged to help where I can, doing so in a no nonsense way yet non-judgmentally, and supporting others who might help, e.g. debt counselors, benefits advisors, informal mentors, food and clothes banks. The causes of poverty are many and complex and, while I will not go as far as Marx and Engels by advocating replacing capitalism with control by a benevolent state subject to the will of the proletariat (communism), I agree there is a need for systemic changes.

I have reason to be grateful to my own High Street bank for recently helping me and my wife when we had money issues. It resulted in our being able to manage our money in the most cost effective way that suited our needs and circumstances. I realize there are many who are less fortunate and banks are often reluctant to deal with those who are at the bottom of society's heap. It was not long ago when there was a sudden (although the signs had long been in place that this would happen) global financial crash, that affected many of the world's main financial institutions, with banks being rightly criticized for their culpability in the crash. But for

injections of huge amounts of money (a lot of it borrowed) from government, many would have folded, with catastrophic consequences to the economy and untold social ramifications. While a crisis has been averted, the underlying issues, such as the horrendous debt burdens of the so called advanced economies that led to the crisis, are still there. This is a huge subject, outside the scope of this book, showing if nothing else how the future welfare of the world is precarious and beholden to forces over which we have little control. The fact that the poor seems to have come off worst from the recent financial meltdown is nothing new.

My hope, alongside dealing with some of the social justice issues raised in this book, is that government finds a way to address these all-important economic issues that affect us all, which will likely overshadow most other things, but I am not confident. As is often the case, those of good will in the community will have to pick up the pieces. I am disappointed though that an opportunity to make banks more accountable to the social good, as one of the conditions of the bail out, and do more to deal with the culture of greed and doubtful ethics. While the nature of a capitalist economy is to be beholden to shareholder interests regarding profitable returns, in this case there are other principles that should be taken into account. I fear that some of the conditions that led to the crisis remains will not be dealt with. I am aware of course that we are beholden to global forces we don't control and while I have no party political preference, the type of nation we are to be, e.g. in taking a moral lead on such matters, is an important question to ask our politicians.

Sadly, the rich poor gap seems as big as ever, and this is most notable in underdeveloped nations, where poverty is at a different level than here. I am saddened though that the poor and vulnerable often don't have access to banking services (which as I say have suited my own needs) because of their situation and there are often little in the way of alternatives. When it comes to borrowing, too often they resort to far less favourable avenues, including, as is often the case, resorting to loan sharks who too often charge exorbitant rates of interest. While I am often adverse to over-regulation, in this case more regulation is needed. I have no magic wand solutions and wish I did. One that showed promise of being able to help this needy group, in my own town, was a credit union, but the project eventually folded. I return by commending the wisdom of John Wesley and that of the scriptures as well as reiterate the need to face up to our own responsibilities.

Finally, I would reflect that the economic system we operate, in the West, tends to favour organizations that are motivated purely by financial gain and not enough practical recognition is given to businesses who view giving to the community, including to the third world, as important elements of their business plans. In my

earlier book, I have already considered how social enterprises, and I have something more relevant to the charity than charity shops in mind, could help charities fulfil their charitable objectives on a bigger scale, including involving the vulnerable people that are being served. What I want to encourage though are pure, sound, ethical businesses that are also looking to make a profit and meet a need.

I feel uncomfortable we are over-dependant on and beholden to the interests of large business organizations, especially when it involves those with doubtful ethics or who ride rough shod over small local businesses. I also fear that some of the individual touches, like having personalized services and meaningful conversations between customer and business, or producing robust, reliable products that can last and be repaired, are these days being sacrificed in order for companies to maximize their profits. I worry we are too beholden to international forces outside of our control. One of the reasons why the tone of my writing has been so forthright is that to act in the way I feel businesses ought to be acting does need stern resolve and a strong reality check in order to succeed, yet I feel it can be done. While I am sceptical about and ambivalent toward our capitalist system, even with state imposed checks and balances, I am more so regarding communism, given it is based on a false notion of human nature and has always failed to deliver. I see the role of the state includes encouraging responsible capitalism with only those controls that are necessary, and when it comes to welfare provision doing more toward facilitating grass roots action rather than further state intervention. While ensuring all the people who live here do not have to be destitute and the need to work toward social justice, I remain sceptical that there are political parties out there that notwithstanding their rhetoric will make such a dream come to pass.

One dream I don't expect to play much part in personally realising, given I am too old and I won't have my time again, but if I were a lot younger I would seriously consider - it would be to grow sound, profitable businesses that have the welfare of the community, including that of the people who are employed and those who are served, as well as the surrounding community, at the heart of all it does.

## **God's own country**

At the start of my book, I reflected on the important part the land and people of India have played in my own life and in shaping my values and priorities and what Indian people have given to me in terms of friendship and encouragement. One of the advantages of being a single man, without financial worries, and too many other commitments outside of work, was that in my twenties and thirties I could travel, and in those days I had the time. I also had the energy, freedom and desire to do so,

away from the main tourist trail. Having ended one job, later to start a new one, I decided to visit a country I had read much about and was drawn to (it was a country that my own father and grandfather had connections with). I visited India for the first time in October 1983 and was to return many times after that.

I still remember my first visit arriving at Mumbai (Bombay) airport in the middle of the night and being struck by the humid heat, something akin to London's Kew Gardens, and the putrid smell from nearby decaying food, discarded rubbish and open sewers. Soon I saw people sleeping under tarpaulin in the nearby streets; hundreds I could see and there were many more besides, alongside impressive buildings and signs of opulence as I travelled by taxi from the airport to my hotel. Next day, I walked in the downtown area of Bombay, along bustling streets amidst a multitude of men, in dhotis in the main, with a few in trousers and shirt, and women in colourful saris, elegantly attired and with long hair and adorned with jewellery and the bright red dot on their foreheads. (Thirty years on, this is still so, but western attire is much more evident and churidars are taking over from saris.)

I had found myself in a business area with lots of offices and commercial activity going on, including street selling. A few men walked along holding hands but it was never thus for a man with a woman. There were beggars and street traders and people went swiftly about their business. Because this was the monsoon season, umbrellas were quickly raised when there was a sudden shower and lowered as soon as the rain had stopped, unless to provide shade. The roads were full of vehicles, including buses, taxis, auto-rickshaws, bicycles and motor bikes. Later when away from the city centres, I saw all sorts of commercial vehicles, lorries and animals, typically oxen and cows, that could be added to the list, and there were lots of what appeared to be stray dogs to be seen. Most roads looked in need of repair and, in the cities, there was often congestion and a semblance of chaos, but little evidence of speeding, which was hardly surprising given the state of the roads, although more recently fast roads have been built joining the main centres. While there were some nice looking green spaces and pretty and imposing buildings (some a legacy of the British colonial days), my impression was one of dust and dirt and a culture that knew little of litter bins, and of course dingy shacks from which people sold stuff, and the smells, unfamiliar to where I had come from, and the humid heat. Often one would come across a religious building, in particular dingy yet ornate Hindu temples, and the odd church or mosque, sometimes quite close, rarely seeming out of place, and this would be true wherever I was to go.

For many a visitor to India, it is a place they either love or hate. Many, as I was to discover personally more than once, will experience some form of stomach upset,

even when taking precautions. I would generally urge caution and adopting a mindset of adaptability and to free one's mind to enjoy the amazing contrasts and fascinating people, who could be so different and often in my experience pleasantly engaging. As one who enjoys traditional English fayre, eating typical Indian food, much of which is vegetarian and spicy, given the culture and religion, did not particularly appeal, but I found later I could survive quite well on chapattis and bananas, along with bottled water. Often eating in squalid looking roadside cafes became an experience I liked. Another discovery was the toileting arrangements but this is a country that in order to thrive one must adapt. I fell in love with India. The country, its culture and history, and its people, have grown on me ever since.

Later that day, I found myself inside Bombay's Victoria rail station, still undecided whether to start my India tour by going northwards or southwards – as I was to discover, India is a seriously big country with over a billion inhabitants and despite highly populated cities, was and still is predominantly rural based. The South won, likely on spurious grounds, but it was a decision that was to affect the rest of my life. Early that evening, I found myself in a second class a/c carriage of a train. The destination was Trivandrum, the state capital of Kerala, sometimes advertised as “God's own country” and with some justification given its lush greenery and countless number of palm trees and tranquil inland waters – a full two day journey away. It was the first of many train journeys I was to undertake. Second class a/c is considered relatively posh but I did get to speak with fellow passengers. Later I travelled in the lower classes; at the cost of giving up some comforts it brought me closer to the real India. I generally found train travel an enjoyable and fascinating experience given the range of Indian life that might parade before one's eyes, although other means included coach, car and airplane which, as I became more affluent and time became more limited, I was tending to opt for air travel, given the distances involved, and, when visiting locally, hiring our own car and driver.

As I was to discover, Kerala had its own distinctiveness as do all the Indian states. One was its highly educated populace but under-developed economy, which is why many younger folk work outside the country if they can. I recall a tour years later visiting and speaking in assemblies and classes in many of the secondary schools, (many of which were church run and separate from government, in Kottayam, a place that, unlike in the UK, that can boast 100% literacy. Kerala is also highly political, ranging from BJP (strongly Hindu) to Communist as well as Congress parties - all active. It was later to be interesting to observe the number of strikes and demonstrations and these often were quite effective in disrupting services. Kerala also has its own particular beauty: hills, jungle and enticing inland waterways, plus some beautiful beaches, all of which I would later visit and greatly appreciate.

Back to my first train journey, which despite being the longest I had undertaken up to then, was also agreeable - it happened that living not far from the Trivandrum rail station, where I got down, was the brother of the husband of the wife of a friend I knew back in the UK. I stayed in his house and got to know his family. We have been friends ever since and keep in touch. Visiting, a day or so later, was what seemed to me to be a somewhat eccentric and rather animated evangelist from a similar church setup to what I was familiar with in the UK. He invited me to stay at his home; in a small village some twenty miles or so from where I was staying, and made the attractive invitation that he would show me more of the real India. My new friend was very much a Plymouth Brother (having similar roots did help) although he got on remarkably well with Christians from other denominations. As I was to discover, the number of these was considerable and while joining for some things, like conventions, they all tended to do their own thing on Sundays, and seemed set on maintaining their doctrinal distinctiveness, and denominational oddities and hang-ups inherited from the West, something I would later get to learn.

We travelled by an over full bus to his humble abode. The culture shock I had experienced when I left the airport was about to intensify. It seemed I had been cast back 50 or more years and that I was the first white man to have visited these parts given the number of stares I received. Everything looked basic, such as the lack of electricity and at night lighting was provided by small oil lamps, giving minimal light. The buildings were usually individually built and colourful on the exterior but most had a dishevelled look. Along the road was what appeared to be no more than shacks selling a variety of basic items. Later, I came across what one could describe as mansions and more came as more prospered, often as a result of working abroad, particularly in Middle East countries. Because this was a rural area, there were many coconut and banana trees as well as other exotic fruits and all sorts of vegetation I don't normally come across. It seemed tapioca was a staple crop, along with rice and dahl (and of course hot chillis and spices) although, when it came to individuals using their land, rubber trees tended later to replace tapioca, as it attracted more income. My new host's house was basic too, with none of the mod cons taken for granted in the west and basic outside toilet and washing facilities. Water was drawn from the well. Electricity, telephones, television and electrical devices like fridges were to come much later (although even now power cuts are a regular occurrence). Yet the hospitality was outstanding, and I was treated like an honoured guest, and this more than compensated for the lack of amenities. It was there I met my future wife, my host's daughter, although it was some years later that we were to marry. Given cultural sensibilities, it was to be an interesting merge between a traditional arranged and a love marriage.

I saw something that I was to see many times after – the extended family in action, in particular the way the elderly were regarded as important and honoured members of the family, and a closeness that was quite evident with the neighbours. I came across my first of many impromptu games of cricket often in out of the way open spaces. There seemed always to be lots of children around, often running about in bare feet, happy and curious, having the most rudimentary of play objects. I have happy memories teaching an eager entourage of children some English action songs! I saw Christians, Muslims and Hindus, peacefully co-existing. Not everything was idyllic though, and I was to learn of many sad situations in the neighbourhood I was staying in as well as later when visiting wider afield, including issues I was to encounter later in my community work in the UK, around alcohol and depression (including sadly witnessing one suicide). I came to witness many instances of real poverty, official corruption and religious hatred. And with little by way of welfare benefits, real poverty was there to be seen everywhere. As I was later to reflect, I could understand why my future father-in-law was keen to spread the light of the gospel message into what he considered to be a dark place.

During my few days stay, I got to meet many of these neighbours and was introduced to people my host knew, of which there were many from all walks of life. Most seemed genuinely interested in what I was doing and were keen to know more. Some spoke good English but often translation (of varying quality) was needed. Encouraged by my guide, I might share a thought or offer a prayer. I was invited to speak in Christian meetings, including preaching in the open air in the village centre, a novelty for the hearers (and me). One of the people I met during that time, O.J. John, offered to be my guide when I left to embark on further travels to explore other parts of Kerala and its neighbouring state, Tamil Nadu. I ended up in Bangalore, meeting some of the folk mentioned by my UK contact, and there we parted and my further travelling continued. I kept and still keep in touch with OJ and his family. I was to visit India many times after that, usually with Kerala on my itinerary and staying at the home of my, later to become, father-in-law, Varghese Mathai, and later in our own house we had built, or at the homes of friends I met or was to meet. Each time, I found myself meeting more people and maintaining contact with them, some continuing to this day, and taking an interest in various Christian ministries, including supporting orphanages and being invited to teach in Bible schools and preach in churches (not just Brethren but other denominations also and being careful not to share some of my more radical ideas) and teach in cottage meetings and occasionally in the open air, often in out of the way places.

Over the years that followed, I was able to visit many other parts of India, as a tourist and increasingly to meet and stay with people and sometimes preach. In

some of these places, especially outside Kerala, the atmosphere was anything but Christian and it was always good to be cautious. While I have been in situations where I felt intimidated, I have generally felt safe. Even so, I usually travel with a companion that knows the area but in those early days I often travelled alone. In the early days, at least, most people I met were respectful, possibly in deference to my white skin. A few spoke some English, and usually this was enough to get by. I can now reflect that despite now being a seasoned campaigner when visiting India (often advising newbie travellers), there is still so much more to discover. In encouraging the Christians, I have been mindful that, for some, practicing their faith has come at some considerable cost, especially in those areas where fundamentalist Hinduism has held sway. I met with a number of Dalits (traditionally, members of the untouchable castes) and listened to their concerns and grievances, both with the high caste Hindu and Syrian Christian hegemony and, without wanting to take sides, this had some bearing on my later thinking. I also came to appreciate the work of western missionaries of an earlier era, uplifting the lower classes. I also recall many acts of kindness by our Hindu neighbours.

I tried to visit India annually following those early visits although that was not always possible. Some years back we had a home built very close to where all those years previously I had stayed (it seemed the whole village helped build it) and this is where some of my Indian family now live, and where the hospitality I had experienced on that first visit continues to be practiced. I look forward to staying in our home and meeting friends, old and new. Nothing I like more than is to sit on the house roof, surrounded all around me by the tops of trees, reading books, drinking mango juice. I am mindful of my limitations in terms of being able to help and the need not to raise expectations in people who have little compared with me and I continue to take an interest in what is going on in India and supporting individuals where I can, although always mindful not to create a dependency culture. I have seen many changes in India as globalisation intensifies and the gap between east and west narrows, and a growing, confident middle class with materialistic aspirations, with modern buildings and infra-structure sprouting up all over the place along with advanced technology, especially in IT, although some changes like dispensing with the simple life and going after material gain and losing some of that strong extended family ethos I tend to view in negative terms.

India, and in particular Kerala, has also come to us in the UK, and we have managed to befriend a number who have come to work here, particularly at our local hospital. One of our involvements as a family has been with the Southend Malayalee Association, who lay on regular cultural events and seek to better relate with the host community. I have been particularly taken by the song, dance and

acting competitions for children and have sat through a number of performances. Understandably, and notwithstanding the qualms that have been raised over immigration (discussed elsewhere), many an educated Keralite, usually for economic reasons, has decided to build a life here in the UK, keeping their culture but adapting to what they find here. Most of my Malayalee (the language spoken by those living in Kerala) friends have turned out to be model citizens (often taking on British nationality) who contribute well to the host community.

As I write, it is difficult to figure out where my Indian adventure that started when I was a young backpacker all those years ago will end. I would love my son, who is after all half Indian, to take over, but it will be his decision. I have sometimes thought I would be happy to end my days in this country I love and I would love to give something more to it, especially in supporting those involved in preaching and compassion ministries and encourage a new generation to be community activists, who are not beholden to tradition or prejudice but love the people and want to serve them. As with everything in life, it will be the Almighty who will have the final word. I sense that there may be still more to come and I look forward to it.

## **Passing the torch**

My fascination with the Olympics, held every four years, goes back to 1960, when as a 9 year old I was able to snatch glimpses of recorded highlights of the Rome games on a friend's black and white TV (most folk on the estate I grew up on did not own a TV set at that time) and I have fond memories of taking part in our own Olympics along with other children on the estate where I lived. I like the idea of single-minded dedication and being at your best to compete with the best, although then, as subsequently, my sporting prowess was modest at best, even though I have maintained a keen interest in sport and participated in many different sporting disciplines. 2012 was a significant year for my own country as the UK were hosts of the Olympic Games and this was the event that dominated the news and peoples' attention for several weeks. Unlike in 1960, it was possible to watch on television or the Internet any event, live and recorded, and alongside it full commentary, wide ranging interviews and, with it, considerable supporting information being given.

One of the iconic moments of any Olympic games is the passing of the torch, culminating in the lighting of the Olympic flame, that burns in a prominent position throughout the games, after which the torch then takes a long convoluted journey to the next Olympic venue, four years later, when a similar series of events occurs. As the torch was passed from one to another in the long relay that took place prior to the games throughout the towns and cities of the nation, there was speculation as to

who would actually light the Olympic flame. In the end it was a group of unknown young athletes, deemed to be possible future sporting stars, rather than the well known sports stars of the day, who lit the flame, and this had symbolic significance. One of the many fascinations I have with the Olympics is this whole torch shebang, which is how I see my own community activism and what I would want to pass on.

While I was mesmerised by what went on, watching live or recorded action on television, I got glimpses of just two live events that took place: the mountain biking at nearby Hadleigh Castle, feeling this was something my son needed to see (observing with friends and the aid of binoculars from the ruins of the castle itself), to soak up the atmosphere so, in years to come, he can tell his children, and the tail end of the swim marathon in London's Serpentine, as part of my regular excursions showing overseas visitors around the sites of London. We experienced some of the Olympic fever being played out around the city. In the lead up to the games, and at the games themselves, there were opportunities to take part as a volunteer and, while I saw this as a worthwhile activity, I felt I had more than enough on my plate with the things that I do that is not on most peoples' radars. But I was delighted so many new to volunteering did sign up and played an important part in what turned out to what has been generally seen as a superbly staged and successful games.

The Olympic Creed: "*The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well*" and the Olympic Motto: "*Citius, Altius, Fortius (faster, higher, stronger)*" are both inspirational, as is the total dedication of the athletes to give and sacrifice their all in order to gain their prize or merely to take part and do the best they can. One of the attractions for me, and no doubt many others, is that the Games often bring out the best in people, as they seek to be and do their best, and respect their opponents. People from every conceivable background, and from countries that are otherwise at enmity with each other, can put aside their differences and unite in implementing the Olympic ideal in a spirit of friendship. It provides a level playing field for all and the opportunity to promote excellence, heroism, tolerance and understanding.

Seeing the Olympics unfold on my home turf was an enlightening and enjoyable experience. It brought out the best in British life (humour, culture, history, organization, hospitality, creativity), which not only appealed to my sense of patriotism but gave me hope for the future. I liked the idea of legacy, in particular doing something for future generations, such as developing sports, sports persons and sporting infrastructure. Whether or not this justifies the huge amount of money and resources invested in staging the games will remain a contentious issue. I liked

seeing the noble aspirations the games are meant to achieve become a reality and the friendship, good will and breaking down of barriers that were generated. I liked the emphasis, more than in previous games, on the disabled (in the paralympic games that followed), and felt for the first time they had a platform worthy of their efforts. Most of all, I liked the parallels I saw with the Bible exhortation to fight the good fight and run the straight race, but in the Bible's case not for any earthly accolade but for a crown that will never fade – and of course – passing the torch!

## **What next?**

During the course of writing, I have tried to incorporate all sorts of flashes of inspiration that regularly come to me (often when working out at my local gym) and things I felt I needed to share, on a variety of topics, and wanting to be precise also. But now I need to tie up the loose ends and conclude. I have come to a point where there is little more I feel I need to add, yet the story continues and there will always be more to reflect upon. Besides subscribing to the old adage that “the Lord works in mysterious ways”, I believe we live in a runaway world and no-one knows quite what major thing is just round the corner. For all I know, this may be the end for me and, such are the vagaries of life, this can be true for any of us. Now aged sixty-two, with declining health (physical and mental), I am only too aware of my own limitations when it comes to changing the world. It might be said that activity is often associated with the young, but invariably the enthusiasm of youth should be balanced by the experience of old age and the ideal scenario is when the two nicely combine to achieve the common good. One thing I can do is pass the torch to the next generation. This book contains an important part of what I want to pass on.

I realise my thoughts are often intertwined with my own story (but that is often how it is). For you the reader, some of the ideas and some of the anecdotes shared in this book may be of interest or helpful but some won't, and some of what is written you may not entirely agree with. That is ok as getting people to agree with me wasn't my purpose in writing, but empowering them to be active in their communities in beneficial ways was. For if, having read this, you do become more active in your community(s), serving others; I will consider that the torch has been passed. As I write, there are still many opportunities for me as a community activist that I could take up (the need is to be wise in choosing which ones) but many I won't (as time and circumstances have caught up) and there are lots of people I know I could help but only a few will I be able to do so directly, so that is what I will do and hope and pray others will come to fill the gaps. For every one reading this, their chance to shine will be different, but arguably every bit as important. Serving God, then my family, must take precedence over my community activism, but active I must be.

As I close, I hope you can see that what I wrote is not just about me telling my story as a community activist, although that is an important part as is getting off my chest things I feel strongly about. I wrote to encourage people to be active in their communities and make a positive difference, mindful that circumstances, interests, skills etc. may be entirely different to my own. I have given many examples of what is possible, some of which may not apply to you, but some of which might. I have no doubt there are many things I have missed but most of the principles are there. On the way, I have tried to point out some of the issues (including pitfalls and things to look out for, albeit not an exhaustive list) that any community activist, might wish to and should take into account in order to be effective in our communities and maintain our own sanity and not burn out at the same time.

What you choose to do will depend, in part at least, on the situation you happen to find yourself in, which is unique to you, and no-one can tell you what you must do. However, if you are to do something worthwhile that benefits the community, it will mean you need to be resolved to be appropriately active in a given area(s) and as most of us know, when it comes to making resolutions, it is one thing to resolve to do something and another to actually do it. In my book, it is those who do rather than say, insofar it benefits others, regardless of their beliefs, who are the real heroes. Also, different people, irrespective of their beliefs, will be motivated by different things. Without wanting to exclude those who do not share my Christian beliefs but who may otherwise agree, I wish to defer to the writings of a great eighteenth century American preacher, Jonathan Edwards, who from a young age resolved to do many things, including much that I would see as part of the remit of a community activist. He preceded his resolutions, all of which had the glory of God as his principle motive, with the following words, and it is these that I would wish to commend to you in closing: *“being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God’s help, I do humbly entreat Him by His grace to enable me to keep these resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to His will, for Christ’s sake”*.

## **A final indulgence**

One thing I have found in life is that all sorts of stuff around one’s personal life, however fascinating and significant for the one involved, may not interest others when we talk about it. The moral is don’t but the reader’s indulgence is requested as this is what I’m going to do now, having already done a lot of this. My concern has always been to explore the more significant nooks and crannies of this entire community activist business and my aim is not to omit something that may be significantly important. As with much of what I have written, it has been born out

of personal experience and this is a final attempt to include things I feel I may have omitted and I do so by way of a series of questions and answers that I am imagining someone asking me, who will have read what has preceded this.

### **Give further examples of community activism that might be undertaken**

While I have already given many examples of how we can be active in our communities, maybe none of these will particularly resonate with some readers. I therefore list more things that could be done; some will surely apply to each one of us. Not only will it do others good and build community, it will also do you good.

1. Get to know your neighbours. You will find those who are elderly, lonely and who have various needs. Help them by way of simple acts of kindness.
2. Consider your own neighbourhood. It is likely that things can be done to improve it and often there are local groups that convene for this very purpose. Join one and if there isn't one to join, start one yourself.
3. Our society is littered with casualties of social injustice, often as a result of the imperfect system that operates. It is amazing how much difference one with tenacity can do to advocate on behalf of victims of social injustice.
4. If you have an artistic talent e.g. music, dance and drama, join a group where these can be utilized. It will uplift the spirits of and inspire others.
5. Consider using skills gained in your working life to freely benefit the community *e.g.*: professionals like doctors, teachers, accountants and lawyers, and tradesmen like plumbers, builders, electricians and carpenters.
6. There are numerous outlets for people to work with organisations serving children and young people, in a wide variety of ways. Even if not dealing with the young people themselves, you can support those who are.
7. Go along to your local volunteer bureau (mine is Southend Association of Voluntary Services (SAVS)) and find out what volunteer opportunities there are in your local area – you may be amazed at the variety and scope on offer.
8. Pick up and dispose of litter you find in the streets, especially bottles.
9. Join and get involved in a club that happens to cater for your interests.
10. Write to (or even visit) a prisoner or someone in hospital.
11. Help at your local homeless night shelter or food bank or just respond to needs as they arise, *e.g.* helping alleviate distress due to the recent floods.
12. When you are out and about in your community, take time to say some kind words of encouragement to someone who might appreciate it (most will).

### **Say more about the importance of the arts, sports and recreational activity**

It would be disingenuous of me to say that we should get involved in the arts, sports and recreational activity just to serve the community. While many who have been involved in such activities, over a long period, find continued involvement is one way to give back to the community e.g. mentoring others, organising activities, most take up their object of interest for selfish rather than altruistic reasons. Because our humanity is more than being a mere product of a mechanistic universe, these things, sometimes intangibly, touch upon us all, relating to our soul and spirit and all that makes us human. I would encourage those with talent, interest or opportunity to get involved, as it can become, providing the work-life balance is maintained, something that personally enriches and, moreover, enriches others. I don't purport to have talent or particular interest in the arts, other than perhaps in the some genres of literature, on top of a general desire to read prolifically all sorts of matter on a wide range of issues, which has opened by eyes to see things I would never have otherwise seen. I believe I am a more rounded person because of it and it helps me understand and relate to others. As for the other arts, I know how much these can stir the soul and lift the spirits. I love much art without being artistic and much music without being musical, without which we would all be the poorer.

These days, other than working out in the gym and walking, my sporting interest is little more than that of an enthusiastic spectator. When a lot younger, I participated in many sports, although my attainments were modest. As a boy, I played endless games of football and cricket in the local park and I later played in teams, *e.g.* hockey, football and cricket; individually, *e.g.* running, swimming, golf and skiing; and socially: *e.g.* tennis, squash and badminton. I have given back, like discussing sports matters from a position of understanding and as a fan, refereeing football matches, playing tennis with my son and teaching others to kayak and sail. My main recreation these days is playing chess. I find it enjoyable and intriguing, and it keeps me alert mentally. I have been able to mentor youngsters, play with my homeless friends and socialise. I like how chess mirrors life *e.g.* needing to protect the king, coordinate pieces, sacrifice if needed and prepare to play the end game.

### **What are your political views and perspectives?**

Some readers might guess my politics are veering toward Conservative, albeit with a particular interest in social justice. If that were the case, any inclination to vote for them has been scuttled due to them recently bringing in same sex marriage, a harsh immigration bill, about to be enacted, and a welfare reform program that has caused avoidable misery to many, to identify but three issues. I will just as likely not vote for any of the other main parties on ideological grounds and due to a lack of confidence in their ability to govern competently. When I was in my teens and

twenties, I had strong political views - starting off far left, then far right and ending up in the middle. These days I vote when I judge, all things considered, a particular party would benefit the country more than the alternatives, although it has been my habit for many years now to vote for the person who I believe will do most good, and this is especially so locally or when local issues are an important consideration. For these reasons, I voted for Teddy Taylor, my previous MP. I have assisted local candidates campaigning, while warning them my support is likely the kiss of death. Like it or not, politics are relevant, if for no other reason than that as a community activist some of the barriers that are faced are due to systemic failures that cannot be directly overcome without a political impetus to do so. In a democracy politics is the prescribed way to effect change if we wish to not merely skirt around the issues. I believe there is scope for community activists getting involved in politics and my hope is there will be more rightly motivated, good people doing so, although I would first offer the following salutary words of advice and caution:

1. To be seen as a conviction politician was once considered to be a matter of honour rather than cynicism, but nevertheless is needed now more than ever.
2. Avoid sound bites and nastiness; research the facts and stick to the issues.
3. The electorate are fickle and there will be many who want to manipulate you or do you down – so stick to what is right and honourable and keep sane.
4. Likely, you will overall do more good helping individual constituents than anything else, for the reality is there is little you can do to change the system.
5. Remember, you are elected to serve the people; not for any other reason.
6. Getting things done and advancing one's career may involve partaking in unlikely alliances but politics can corrupt so guard your integrity at all costs.

### **Of the big issues in the community, say more about health?**

My main health interest has been mental health, discussed elsewhere. Now in my old age, I am more conscious of physical health issues than I ever was and that having good health is something we need to be especially thankful for. I realise the need for a good diet, lifestyle and exercise and the consequences of poor health. Provision of good health facilities is important (and is why I support overseas missionary activity that brings this to those who often miss out – the poor). Right now, I am involved in campaigning for better primary health care in my own ward, that has a much lower life expectancy than nearby more affluent wards, conscious that the decision making process has often been flawed and unjust in the past. While health has traditionally been seen in terms of absence from disease, I see it more in holistic terms and it is these other aspects e.g. social, spiritual, healthy lifestyles that I would want to promote. Many of the projects I am and have been

involved with have a health promotion element. There is a link between poor health and homelessness for example. My wife is a nurse working in the area of lung cancer. Part of my volunteer activity is to help out with the support group she runs.

### **And the environment?**

The stereotypical community activist is one who campaigns on one or another environmental matter. But that isn't me. Given my community focus has been on the poor, environmental matters have, except during the period I was managing the Growing Together project, often been relegated to that of a side issue, although I was mindful when managing diversity events to include environmental groups. But it is still something we mustn't neglect, and too often that has happened in the past. The environment we live in is important and affects the quality of life of everyone, and not least the generations that are to follow after us. Issues like global warming, deforestation, recycling, waste disposal, alternative energy sources, reducing carbon emissions, flood risk, preserving green space, etc. all need addressing, based on factual evidence and right balance, and protecting individual freedom as far as it is possible. One reason for my continual involvement with my local residents association is that protecting and improving the environment in which we live is a necessary thing and this only happens when residents collectively make it happen.

### **And finally, what about young people?**

While these days I do not work that much directly with young people, other than occasional interactions (most of which I find worthwhile), including engaging with the children of friends and relatives, that has not always been the case. In my younger years, I was much involved in youth work, particularly within the church: Sunday school, Bible class, children's club, Boys Brigade. Looking back, I can see these were all useful activities. One of the things I often hear is that young people don't have enough to occupy them and this is why they go astray. We can debate at length whether this is true and the roles of teachers and parents, but there is much that ordinary members of the community can do to help, in working among and being examples to the youth. Many youth activities suffer due to a lack of older helpers. By getting involved, they will be investing in the future. As for the future, I am pessimistic because too many young people do not hold the values that are worth holding, because society has lost its way and has failed to instil these into the young. Sadly, the older generation who have inherited a Christian based legacy, have failed to build on it and pass it on – selfishness, profligacy and greed have replaced sacrifice, duty and generosity, and we are all the poorer for it. I am also optimistic, seeing the enthusiasm, energy, innovation and desire to do good among the young, and because of my belief that right and truth will prevail in the long run. This paper is written with that hope and a desire to inspire our youth to greatness.