



# ACT TOGETHER

**Ashram Community Trust      Issue 99 Spring 2025**

Ashram Community Trust is a Registered Charity – Charitable Co. No: 1099164 [www.ashram.org.uk](http://www.ashram.org.uk)



October Weekend 2024 at Foxhill

## Contents

Page 1. Thoughts on why there is more focus on some conflicts than others.....Sandra Dutson  
Page 3. Aleyamma John - a tribute .....David Turner

### My Faith Journey

Page 5. ....	Nona Wright
Page 6. ....	Euan McPhee
Page 7. ....	Penny Rea
Page 8. ....	Lorraine Jones
Page 10. ....	Linda Marshall
Page 12. ....	Jenny Medhurst
Page 13. Our Food's Environmental and Climate impact.....	Cerys Brangwyn
Page 15. Fairtrade News.....	Zaytoun, Lorraine Jones
Page 16. Palestine.....	Zaytoun, Combatants for Peace
Page 17. Letter from France.....	Donald and Jacquie Henderson
Page 19. Goodbye to N.E. Ashram @ Greystone.....	Jenny Medhurst
Page 20. 77 Rock Street Community House.....	Nirmal Fernando
Page 24. Muti Faith Chapel & Library.....	Nirmal Fernando
Page 28. My Holiday in Italy.....	Paul Sutherland-Waite
Page 28. Community Information	



## THOUGHTS ON WHY THERE IS MORE FOCUS ON SOME CONFLICTS RATHER THAN OTHERS.

The following appears in a collection of readings, poems, prayers gathered by Amos Trust.

'They set my aunt's house on fire  
I cried the way women on the TV do  
Folding at the middle  
Like a five pound note  
I called the boy who used to love me  
Tried to 'okay' my voice  
I said hello  
He said, Warsan what's wrong, what's happened?

I've been praying  
And these are what my prayers look like  
Dear God  
I come from two countries  
One is thirsty  
The other is on fire  
They both need water

Later that night  
I held an atlas in my lap  
Ran my fingers across the whole world  
And whispered  
Where does it hurt?  
It answered  
**Everywhere**  
**Everywhere**  
**Everywhere**

*(Warsan Shire)*

It is clear there are many more major armed conflicts than commonly receive publicity. Numbers vary depending on who is counting but still are high. This raises the question why do we focus on some rather than others. The agonising realities are much the same for all conflict situations and the impacts are increasingly experienced by civilians especially children. I am aware recently I have been more focussed on the Gaza/Israel conflict than many others.

Understanding conflicts requires a lot of effort. How do we find the truth of the history, often long, and possible causes of the present situation and find ways to listen to the stories of those currently involved. This takes time and research and is often far from easy. There is propaganda and misinformation to be navigated as well as often understandably different perspectives.

My awareness of the impacts on real lives in some conflict situations has come because of relationships with those who have sought asylum notably from Yemen, Sudan, DRC and Burundi. I have gleaned some sense of the history but most significant to me is the continuing distress because of anxieties about relatives still in the countries of origin. This distress may not be highlighted in our media.

Why are governments/press more concerned about some conflicts rather than others?.

There may be historical/ geopolitical factors of a fairly direct kind. Economics often clearly features. Public interest seems greater where there is a sense of identification with those most affected. There may be a clear racist element to this.

Whatever the reason, we know we cannot understand let alone respond to every conflict situation, even where we hear and feel very acutely the world is hurting everywhere. Maybe though we should ask more questions about how our attention is being focussed by media and/or governments on particular situations. Maybe we can encourage each other to learn more of other less documented or forgotten conflicts. It also seems to me the more we do try to understand the more we appreciate some common elements to them all. The increase in weaponry often of an increasingly heavy so potentially damaging kind and the sheer length of the conflict surely point to some clear truths. Armed conflict does not resolve anything. The Arms trade is the main beneficiary. In fact increasing death, injury and structural and environmental damage makes everything much worse and perpetuates a really vicious escalation of the conflict. Maybe in the realisation that everywhere is hurting lie the seeds of heartfelt longing and searching for peace.

*Sandra Dutson*



*Brass earrings made from empty gun cartridges,  
Cambodia*

## Aleyamma John

Friends. Sadly on Tuesday 12th November 2024 I got an early morning phone call from Kerala to say that my great friend Aleyamma John had passed away. Some of you will have heard about or even met Aleyamma, the wife of Reverend Konathu Joseph John, Ashram's "Missionary in Reverse" back in the 1970s.

You will remember that Rev KJ John went on the most extraordinary journey. From labouring in rice fields to the leadership of his 'Backward Class Christian' community in the Anglican Central Kerala Diocese of the Church of South India. The Backward Class community, descended from outcaste converts of Christian missionaries in the Victoria era, formed the majority of members of the Central Kerala Diocese. Yet somehow the modern institution of the Diocese, well resourced by the missionaries' real estate legacy, was dominated by a higher caste minority. Elsewhere I have written about John's championship of his community, fighting for their representation in the Diocese and their economic development in the wider society. This is for Aleyamma.

Aleyamma was from the same Cheramar (Pulaya) dalit caste as her husband. She shared the same strong identification with her community, the same sense of responsibility and commitment to activism. They had been neighbours and enjoyed a proper love marriage. They were a team, John maybe speaking up front, sermons & talks, Aleyamma chatting, relating, networking in amongst the crowd. In her early years life was very hard. There was little money and lots of relatives who looked to them for help. John was often busy with church work and they had small children to bring up - two boys, Denison and Gibson (Roy), and Dolly their daughter. Their financial situation improved as John got ordained and then appointed to the directorship of a huge Diocesan development programme. But personal money worries persisted. Aleyamma would have loved to have had enough to buy a small plot of land and build a house. But it never happened, she lived in rented accommodation until the final couple of years when she moved in with Dolly and family in their CSI parsonage.

The political struggle for the Central Kerala Diocese and the enormous burden of running a complicated, challenging development project cost both John and Aleyamma a lot. He died early, in 1996, problems with stress, heart & diabetes. She was furious. After his death Aleyamma wanted to maintain the idealism & purpose that they had demonstrated together.

Unfortunately times were changing, activists got old, their organisations withered and the principles they represented becoming even harder to put into practice. Kerala was changing. Enormous inequality certainly persisted but the focus of the younger generation shifted toward seeking a life in the big city or migration abroad. Getting traction as a community organiser was a tougher. I think she felt frustrated at times. Nevertheless she was always out visiting churches, having ideas and talking to groups of women. She did find opportunities to take action on progressive change. The magnificent demonstration of millions of women joining hands against domestic violence, forming a continuous chain the length of Kerala, is an example. Kerala is hundreds of miles long. Aleyamma made sure that women in her immediate locality were standing on the road together to make links in that chain. Also we remember her responding to real need by seeking practical financial help for the many impacted by the dreadful floods of 2018.

As she got older, into her eighties, episodes of ill health inevitably cropped up. Issues with blood pressure, red cell counts, unfortunate falls and so on. She remained cheerful. Aleyamma was a very cheerful person. She and I often joked about death. Crossing from this side of the river ('ikkarra' in Malayalam) to the other side ('akkarra'), the beautiful shore as we referred to it. "Maybe I would go there soon. Hah! No problem. I am ready!". Spending time with Aleyamma in person or on the phone was an exercise in continuous, energetic banter. Aleyamma, and John in fact, could be induced to paroxysms of laughter. Dolly told me that she was like that until her very last illness, physically active, busy in the kitchen, full of fun. In the end her vulnerabilities crowded around, she was in and out of hospital, needing oxygen, suffering. I had a brief video call with her. Solemnity had descended, she didn't say goodbye to me, but her face did.

My friendship with Aleyamma was a wonderful gift. I don't know how it happened. I washed up in Kerala as rather daft 22 year old, we were friends immediately and remained so. She was my Malayalam teacher. The first lesson was "I love you" and "You love me". In the days before internet video calls etc it might have been three years between conversations but the reconnection was immediate, like I had just popped out of the room and come back in. She was a steadfast friend. It's an irrevocable loss.

One benefit of the modern age was that Aleyamma's funeral was broadcast live on YouTube. Early on a Friday morning we sat in our house in Yorkshire and watched the proceedings at Kollad CSI Church in Kerala 5000 miles away. It went on for hours. Aleyamma lying in the open casket. Dozens of church people came to pay tribute, dozens of clergy and the CSI Bishop himself.

The most tender moments came at the very end. The funeral concluded with words of thanks from Dolly's husband Jonny. Then most of the congregation

dispersed. Aleyamma's closest friends and family came up to the coffin to tuck her in and kiss her goodbye. She was carried out to the church yard and lain down by the grave for the interment. John & Roy are a few rows down. Final prayers from the Bishop, more people dispersed. Finally it was just family to put the lid on the coffin. Denison, grandsons Jishin and Sanju were amongst those on the ropes to lower her down, Dolly, granddaughters Keziah and Aksah, Roy's widow Shamini too, all there for her.



*Aleyamma and Dolly 2019*



*David and Aleyamma 2019*



*Visiting the North East branch and Greystone 2001*

## MY FAITH JOURNEY - Nona Wright



*Photo: me re-enacting leading worship at Ochre River 35 years after being a student minister there*

Someone once described people who helped us to faith as “angels” I think I have had many angels in my life in that case.

My mother, daughter of an Anglican vicar, was thoroughly committed to the church – or churches, as we attended C of E, United and Lutheran services with her. She later became a Rosicrucian – but after we left home. My father came from a family of agnostics, who all loved to argue about religion – but he too attended church regularly and did the accounts, etc. So for me, from the start, faith was important but not something fixed or unquestioning.

There was also Margaret Hamilton, grandmother of a classmate, who taught an adult “Sunday school” class. She taught us to memorise the books of the Bible, and also some Psalms and Bible passages.

In college I came under the influence of Chaplain Ben Smillie, who preached provocative sermons followed by a “talkback” in which we discussed what had been said - over lunch. Ben had been a POW and said the worst part of solitary was eating alone!

After college I became a “student minister” under the wonderful Rev Ed (later Edi) Loucks, who I realised later was bipolar like myself. Ed was in trouble with some people because he had said, from the pulpit, that it was not necessary to believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus. He was also in trouble for eating with the Roman Catholic priests. His message: God is love. We are still friends and occasionally have wonderful theological conversations by long distance phone.

At the age of 21, I was finally confirmed in the United Church of Canada – and have stayed friends with David Gilchrist also. (Both Edi and David are now in their nineties but still going strong.

However, like my father I was an explorer : read about Edgar Cayce and even joined a group, spent a week at a Steiner school, went to several Gandhi Foundation summer schools, read Conversations with God, but always came back to the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth as my foundation.

A few more angels from my life: my amazing aunty Ruth Brown, Patty Shinasi, Revd Ed Checkland, Right Revd Horace Dammers, Steven Dawes, John and Grace Vincent, Revd Danny Reed “if you see God working, be there”, and Barbara Butler of Christians Aware. All of these folk just shone/shine with the love of Jesus. I feel so privileged to have had them in my life.



En route to COP26 I meet in Gandhi in front of Manchester Cathedral , Sunday Sep 12, 2021

### Euan's Faith Journey

I was born in Edinburgh, spent the first year of my life in Harold Wilson's constituency of Huyton, near Liverpool and then moved to Boreham Wood in Hertfordshire where I spent the next fifteen years. My mother grew up in a Brethren household; however, when criticised for playing hockey on a Saturday, she decided to join the Presbyterian Church who "seemed to have much more fun". It was at the local Presbyterian church that she met my father, a visiting local preacher who was working at the University of Liverpool. After the war, my father was offered a head of department job at the University of London, which brought us to Boreham Wood.

My early Christian influences came from having to attend Sunday School at the local Baptist church and attending monthly parade services when I joined the scouts. Sunday evenings I would often attend the Brethren meeting with my father. My eldest brother Duncan and I were both baptised into the Baptist church, but Alasdair decided that church was not for him (although he did once say that he was considering joining the Catholic church – but I think that was simply to shock our parents!).

As a young child, I used to bury any dead birds I found in the back garden, with a little funeral service and marking the spot with a decorated ceramic tile or wooden cross. I think this was the beginning of my conviction that nature was important and worthy of respect.

I was 13 when I was baptised, but looking back I think I simply went along with the flow and did not have really deep convictions – those grew later. Spending a year in the Negev Desert in Israel as part of my undergraduate training was a significant experience; living and working in the Holy Land felt really special. However, it also exposed me to other faiths and points of view – sharing a room with a Romanian Jew and three Palestinians was interesting! And attending Hebrew Bible studies helped improve my knowledge of the Old Testament. This was 1969/70 and all the Israelis I spoke to were confident that peace would come and all the

occupied territory would be handed back. How wrong we all were!

One of my childhood heroes was David Livingstone, which perhaps influenced my hopes of becoming a doctor; however, my A-level grades determined otherwise and I eventually became an ecologist. I headed to Canada to study for a PhD in small mammal ecology. Living and working in the far north, and undertaking several wilderness canoe trips greatly enhanced my appreciation of untamed nature. Attending First Baptist Church, Edmonton, Alberta, I was greatly influenced by the teaching of Rev Ed Checkland, who always managed to link the Gospel to current events and was a powerhouse of an intellect. It was also where I met Nona, who was game (insane?) enough to join me on the canoe trips.

Returning to the UK, I was still quite apolitical – after all, Christians don't do politics, do they? However, the pivotal moment for me was in 1979 when Margaret Thatcher was elected and, on the steps of 10 Downing Street, quoted the words of St Francis of Assisi "Where there is discord, may we bring harmony..." Hearing these words from a politician persuaded me that I could no longer remain on the fence – I had to get involved politically!

So I joined the Green Party. And I also joined Green Christian (which was called Christian Ecology Link then), which had grown from a group of Christians who were also Green Party members. My political ambitions reached their peak when I stood as Green Party candidate in the 1989 European elections and polled 37,500 votes (17%) in London SE. I have stood several times since but never got elected.

More recently, I have actively campaigned on environmental issues, including cycling to COP21 in Paris, COP23 in Bonn and COP26 in Glasgow. All the while I have felt this to be a logical expression of my faith, in protesting humanity's assault on creation. Whilst celebrating the fact that the Church has woken up to the climate and nature crises, nevertheless there still seems a bit of a disconnect between stated policy/theology and how most Christians live their lives.

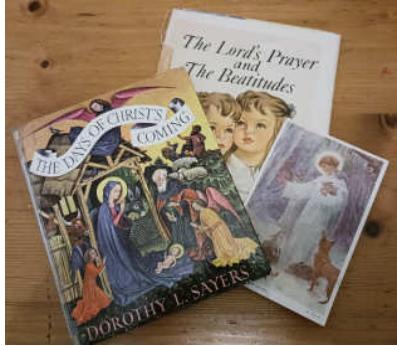
The ever-worsening situation in Israel-Palestine convinced me to sign up for the Big Ride for Palestine five years ago, and it has been a real joy and privilege to join hundreds of other ordinary people in campaigning for Palestinian people and raising money for children's projects in Gaza.

In 2016 I became a Methodist local preacher. One motivation for this was a sense that someone needed to introduce a bit more ecotheology into our faith – and if no-one else was going to do it, then perhaps I'd better

get on with it myself! Suddenly John 3:16 developed a whole new meaning: “For God so loved **the world...**” Not Jewish people only, not humanity only, but the world – and that includes the whole created order!

In summary, I hope that as a follower of Jesus I might continue to court the radical edge of faith; after all, there is no better example than Jesus himself for that!

*Euan McPhee, April 2025*



## First Steps in Faith

As the youngest child of a mother who was herself one of six my Christening was an event of great significance for our

large extended family. From then on, my Christian education was a serious matter with nightly prayers and Bible stories.

When my closest sister gave me a large print copy of the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes, illustrated with angelic children gazing heavenwards, my eldest brother followed up with the more classically illustrated The Days of Christ's Coming by Dorothy L Sayers. Soon I also found a large comic strip version of the Old Testament which I read and reread. My mother taught me how to recite her favourite Psalm 121 “I will lift up mine eyes to the hills”. All this reinforced the message of the great paternal God in heaven and gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

My Sunday School memories are mainly of handmade Christmas cards with too much glue and sticky paintings. At Primary School I and I loved to sing the children's hymns and still have the book with “Daises are our silver, Buttercups our gold”, and “Now the day has ended, Night is Drawing nigh..” at the end of the day as we stood beside the chairs on our desks. Good intentions and helpfulness were reinforced in rhyme and song at Brownies and my adolescent aspirations for our Church Youth Club led me into youth work training and a lifetime's commitment to empowering young people.

Spirituality and a love of learning were nurtured at my C of E Secondary School, where 400 girls sang hymns in harmony and beautiful artwork hung in the modern school chapel. I did not do so well with the academic subjects but I left with an understanding of the injustice of apartheid, racial discrimination and the Chinese Five Year Plan. In the front page of my school Bible, in my fancy teenage handwriting, I have inscribed John 15 v 17 “This I command you, to love one another” as well

as the Beatitudes - Luke 6 v20 -26 and a fine set of instruction for living from Colossians 3 v 12 -17.

I did not realise until I had left home and moved to another city that it was actually the people in my church community that mattered and who made me feel safe and valued. Older people who were always there, who had watched me grow up, many of whom had encouraged me and some who I saw as role models. And my friends who had grown up with the same beliefs.

It took many years to find another church where I felt I belonged – not until ten years later when a Methodist Church offered free use of premises to set up a playgroup and I felt comfortable sitting in the church service while my own children drew, painted and listened to stories in the Sunday School run by the village infant teacher.

Marriage to a confirmed Atheist had caused me to peel back the layers of belief to find out where and why the rituals and recitations I had grown up with had evolved. My fascination with history led me back through the enforced introduction of the Book of Common Prayer, the translation of the Bible into English and the bloody history of the Reformation to the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325 an assembly that claimed to represent all Christendom and aimed to settle the controversial question of the Divine Nature of Jesus and his relationship to God. It was a revelation to me that the Nicene Creed, which I could recite by heart, was not composed until 300 years after the Resurrection and then as a largely political resolution to a diversity of beliefs, influenced by Roman acceptance that humans could become gods.

This unravelling of my early assumptions led to an exploration of World Religions and the influences that have shaped our religious institutions. Gradually I filtered all I had accepted and was left with the lasting conviction that God is a force for Good; that Jesus of Nazareth was a man inspired to teach a better way of living based on Love; that Community is about sharing and supporting each other and that my purpose is to try and help make the lives of others a bit better, especially the life chances of children.

*Penny Rea*



## My Faith Journey

I was brought up as a Christian, at least by my mum – my dad did not attend church (except for weddings etc. – and when I was baptised in my teens). My sisters and I went to church, Sunday School, Christian Endeavour and Girls Brigade and were taught to say prayers at bedtime and grace before **and after** meals. “Church” for us was a non-conformist Mission, which was under the umbrella of the Shaftesbury Society, founded by the social reformer Anthony Ashley Cooper, 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury.

At the age of 12, I “went forward” at a Billy Graham meeting and “gave my life to Jesus” much to the delight of my mother, Pastor, Sunday school teacher and many others in the Mission. I started to attend adult worship services and to receive communion. It was about a year after that that I became a Mission Member (the equivalent of confirmation) I was an enthusiastic Evangelical, keen for everyone to come to know Jesus – at 14 I decided I would become a missionary, an idea I held to for 3-4 years, going as far as having an interview at the local Missionary Training College. A group of us would go to Chiswick High Street and persuade children and young people aged from 10 to 14 to come to an evening Coffee Bar at the Mission, which they welcomed as it was a dry, warm space serving coffee and cakes – in return for which they tolerated us telling them about Jesus. We also went to different churches in the area leading services and singing songs of the “Shine Jesus Shine” type.

I had been christened as a baby but when I was 16 I wanted to be baptised by full immersion, the pastor of our Mission, who had conducted the first ceremony, was very happy to perform the second which was seen as a totally different event, being my personal decision on “profession of faith” rather than promises made on my behalf by my parents. I wouldn’t make the same choice now, but it remains in my memory as a special and significant moment in my life.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> form at school, a friend and I broadened the remit of the SCM (Student Christian Movement) and renamed it G.A.P. (God and People) seeking to encourage conversations about faith. We held a series of meetings with speakers on on Buddhism, Judaism, Sikhism and Islam, and I started to consider the idea that other religions might also be a way to God, but remained still very much a conventional Christian.

When I was 19 I met Brian, who did not attend church and did not profess to be religious in any way. Nevertheless we were drawn to each other at once and found we shared a lot of views in common about how to treat people and both held a conviction that war and fighting were wrong. Brian was keen to try to share this important part of my life and he was willing to attend church with me as long as it wasn’t the one I had grown up in (which he hadn’t found welcoming). We went to a Baptist church (again very Fundamentalist Evangelical), where we made friends, became members and then Deacons and later got married there. After 3 years Brian said he was no longer happy there and said he’d like to try somewhere else. That took us to Christchurch in Uxbridge, a liberal-thinking joint Methodist/United Reformed Church, where we settled in well at first. After a year or two Brian went less and less and eventually said he didn’t want to go any more, although he was more than happy for me to continue. I accepted this and didn’t pressure him to go.

It was at that church that I was introduced to some very different ideas and realised that not all Christians believe all of the bible or even accept ideas such as the Virgin Birth and the bodily Resurrection of Jesus. It was there I was introduced to Fairtrade and was one of those enduring the dreaded Campaign Coffee and started running a stall at another church.



We moved to York in 1986 and, after trying a few churches of different denominations, I wound up at the one that I could walk to – a Methodist Church, where I ran a Fairtrade stall and held various Fairtrade events.

By then I had joined a group called The Alliance of Radical Methodists (one of the members being a certain **John Vincent**) and THAT'S when I really started to change. I realised that I no longer believed a lot of what I'd previously done, but voicing any such thoughts to any of the people at church was met with concern and disapproval. Also, no-one seemed to care about Fairtrade or all the social justice issues that I was starting to speak out about. I began to feel that I was just completely different to everyone else there and that I really didn't belong. In 1992 I made the decision to leave, I didn't just stop going but wrote to the minister and told her, returning my Membership Ticket. She didn't acknowledge my letter in any way – not even a phone call – until the day when I went for what I said would be the final Fairtrade stall and my final attendance at the church, when she said "so this is your last visit to us. Do you want to talk about it?". My response was simply "It's too late for that". I found it much harder to leave it behind than I'd expected and felt let down by the church. I'm sure it was a contributing factor to the major depression that I experienced a few months later.

I did not attend church for several years, apart from visits to a Unitarian church at Christmas-time as I wanted to sing a few carols, but continued to be involved in ARM, holding various posts and also forming and running the Northern ARM branch. A group of us attended Methodist Conference every year, producing a daily news-sheet, reporting on the debates from a radical viewpoint. I organised the accommodation and photocopying facilities for the group. When we decided to close down ARM in 2004, John Vincent (who piggy-backed onto the final letter that was sent to members telling them the organisation had ceased to be) invited me to attend an Ashram weekend. By the end of the weekend I had volunteered to be Weekends Secretary!

In 2008, I revisited the church I'd left in 16 years earlier, after reading an article in the village newsletter by the new minister. I was impressed and inspired by her, so I started going more often. We had a lot of views and ideas in common and she would have fitted in well with Ashram. This time I took the approach that I didn't need to believe what most of the others did and that God accepted me "doubts and all" and I continued to attend although not every week. By then, they had embraced Fairtrade, so I got involved with the stall sometimes. I attended a lot less when that minister left and was replaced with a man who was **very** evangelical – I was the only one who was not sorry when he left after just a year.

When we moved to Mull in 2014, I tried both of the churches in Tobermory, the C o S and The Evangelical Church (I even went to a Quaker meeting but didn't get on with the silent worship thing). The Evangelical one was pretty much as I'd expected and I did not want to frequent it. I was pleasantly surprised by the CoS. The minister was a lovely man, liked and respected by those within and without the church, with a liberal approach and very supportive of Fairtrade. On alternate weeks services were led by another minister who did not have a parish, having moved to Mull to "do church differently", she was into environmental issues and Fairtrade etc.

So I settled in quickly & started producing a newsletter, running a Fairtrade stall etc. When the minister Johnny died suddenly 5 years ago, Liz then acted as the locum for a few months before becoming the full time minister for 4 years. So I continue to attend regularly and still produce a monthly newsletter and get involved in other things, including selling and promoting Fairtrade. The newsletter gives me an opportunity to share info about Fairtrade and other social justice issues.

I'm not sure if I believe in God these days but I've realised that it isn't important, what is important to me is following the teachings and example of Jesus. I raise matters of concern about social justice and of course keep flying the flag for Fairtrade – and the church and the newsletter gives me an opportunity to do so.



Just to finish, I said that at one time I thought that I was called to be a missionary – it was only many years later that I realised that perhaps my role was as a missionary **to the church**, so that people could hear the message that they might not otherwise be exposed to.

*Lorraine Jones*



## My Faith Journey

Earlier this year the Tuesday evening Zoom group shared with one another their religious/faith background, what had inspired them and led them to where they are now. I forget what the official title of those few weeks was, but I remember spending a long time and going into a lot of unnecessary detail about my last seventy or so years. Since sharing my account with the group I have often thought back to it and came to a conclusion that I hadn't really been aware of to the same extent previously.

But I can't resist starting again with the same first few sentences which prove how old I am now and how much the world has changed since 1950 or so. My father was Anglican, my mother Methodist and they married in 1938. I think they may have continued attending their respective churches for a year or so, but then the Second World War interfered with everything and my father ended up, as a conscientious objector, being sent to India for the duration, eventually returning to this country some time in 1945, and I was born in 1946. I imagine it was about three years later that they felt it was time to send me to Sunday School, but it wasn't so easy in those days and I was put on the *waiting list* for the Sunday School at the newly built Methodist Church a mile or so from where we lived in Hull. I must have been a precocious little so-and-so because apparently I started to beg them to let me go to the Sunday School that a slightly older girl nextdoor-but-one to us attended. It was much closer, but Presbyterian! In due course they did let me go there and we ended up quite an ecumenical family for a while – but more of that later.

Going back to my reflections on what or who had guided me in my faith journey, I had come to the conclusion that a huge proportion of my influence came from my father in all sorts of ways. He lost his own father when he was only about four or five years old and grew up in a very deprived household, so he had to leave school at 14 to contribute to the family income. His first job was in some sort of accountancy firm so when he was put into the army as a conchy it's not surprising that he was put in the Royal Army Pay Corps to work out the pay of the soldiers that were fighting. He was based in Meerut, a little way north of Delhi, and he found there was a Christian group of some kind in the regiment which he joined and in due course managed to learn Urdu, so the answer to the question "What did you do in the war Daddy?" was "I taught a huge Sunday School class of little Indian boys". Better than that, the group he had joined had friends who were missionaries in various parts of India, so when they had a week's leave they could travel around the country, staying free of charge with one of these families – and now we're coming back to ecumenism – or not? The group he had joined turned out to be Plymouth Brethren, but mainly not very strict ones, and one in particular remained his friend, at a distance (Eastbourne), for the rest of his life. However he had an interesting experience on one of these visits. The couple called everyone in their household, and their visitors, Brother Alan, Brother Bob etc, so when he went up to bed the first night he felt he should just mention that his background was Anglican, and the next morning they addressed him as Mr Hoult.

Back in Hull, in the late nineteen forties or early fifties, we lived about a mile away from Hull University and my father investigated these religious differences by doing some sort of evening class course on Biblical Studies. I think they must have been free or very cheap for him to have afforded it, but I still have his Bible in which he underlined verses in red, sometimes with notes in the margins; but what about the Presbyterian Sunday School? Well my parents (had) joined St Ninian's Church and my father became a Sunday School teacher and in due course the Superintendent, overseeing I should think well over a hundred children every Sunday afternoon.

My earliest memories of my father are of passing their bedroom when I was going to the bathroom

before breakfast, and seeing him through the open door either standing in the corner putting in his glaucoma eye-drops or kneeling beside the bed for his morning prayers. But the mention of eye-drops leads me to the next stage in his influence on me when, in 1960, at age 50, he lost his sight completely and his everyday life had to change radically. He had to change his job and his income was reduced, so my mother had to get a part-time job and I had to start having school dinners rather than cycling home every day for my mother's home-cooked meals. I'm afraid I complained bitterly about that and didn't realize at the time how much effort they put jointly into keeping life for me and my brother as far as possible how it had been before, particularly as I was preparing for my O-levels at the time. As for the Sunday School Superintendency! - our mother read out the weekly instructions from the planning book onto a tape-recorder every Thursday evening so that he could continue in that role, and she would type things he might need to submit in the other roles he had taken on over the years: Elder, Session Clerk, Church Secretary..... So as for what influenced me in my faith background, I came just yesterday by chance upon a copy of the address given at my father's funeral by the Church Minister at the time which will probably answer that question. Here's how it begins:

"Bob was an unassuming, modest and gracious man who would not want a fulsome tribute, and who would want any 'credit' for his life to go to God in thanksgiving for what He makes possible in these earthly vessels which are our bodies. So let's begin by saying that in Bob we saw God's all-sufficient grace at work as he was enabled to live by faith, triumphantly overcoming the blindness which struck him some 32 years ago."

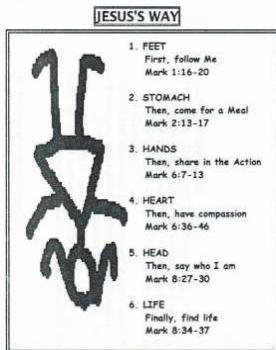
I'm afraid I haven't inherited all these qualities myself as yet, particularly with respect to prayer, because during the weeks my father spent in hospital while they tried, twice, to repair the detached retina that was causing his loss of sight, I prayed fervently, morning and night, that the operation would be successful, so that's still a work in progress for me.

*Linda Marshall*



If you click on Christian Aid's fundraising page (<https://fundraise.christianaid.org.uk>)  
guess who's eating the cake?

## My Faith Journey



I grew up attending a Methodist Church in the new town of Newton Aycliffe. My father was christened Wesley Samuel which, as he said, told you nothing about him, but about his parents. He'd given up the Church, but I went to Sunday School and later Church with my mother, became a Sunday school teacher and a Church member, though I worried

whether my spiritual commitment was adequate, and what I should feel at Holy Communion. I became a Brownie and Girl Guide and promised to my duty to God and the (then) Queen. I loved learning to be helpful and resourceful, but am not sure now about parading the flag into Church.

I joined MethSoc at Sheffield Uni. in 1967 but the radicalism of the time seemed to completely pass me by. Inspired by an older girl at Church, and never expecting to be accepted, I applied for VSO and went to Nigeria (my first trip abroad and first flight, and I arrived just as the Biafran war ended) to teach science for two years - a life changing experience. In a so-called 'developing' country I learned to appreciate a very different culture and see the effects of colonialism and lack of development. (My school had been founded by Archdeacon Dallimore and mobile health services were provided by medical nuns.)

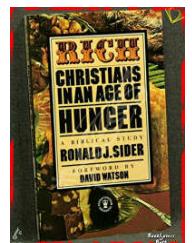
I returned to England determined to put people before possessions, but chatting with strangers at bus stops in January was far from easy. I lived in the Methodist International House in Newcastle when I was finishing my PGCE and made wonderful friends from Tonga and Sri Lanka, but my first job was in Harrogate (to be near the Dales) where the church's only connection to a non-white world was still through missionary work....

A Scottish friend in Nigeria had met Peter Crompton there and suggested I might be interested in the Ashram House in Rochdale, so I went to stay for a weekend and then went to a couple of Community Weekends, before going off on VSO again. This time it was to Malaysia- an amazing multi-cultural experience with Indian, Chinese and Malay friends and students, and an understanding of what their faith. Back in England I decided that I had to find out what the Ashram Community was about by moving to where there was a project, and got interviews for jobs in Middlesbrough and Rochdale - and the Middlesbrough job came up first!

In the Ashram House I had the joy of sharing the Newton's family life and life in a multi-cultural neighbourhood. Mike was involved in Wastechasers, an early recycling scheme, and the Lifestyle Movement and Ashram's income sharing and Walking Distance community ideas chimed,

as I learned to cook, as much of the world does, with less meat. I gave up teaching and got involved in Fairtrade through Traidcraft, started by a small group of Christians in Newcastle. The scale of world poverty was daunting but they said "It's better to light a few candles than complain about the darkness" - and through their vision and faith a global movement for change started. Konathu John, Ashram's Missionary in reverse, visited and I went to stay with him in Kerala and learned about the conscientisation work being done there, and brought back placemats and stories to share in my Fairtrade work.

Frank came to the house to buy WDM tea and helped plan a successful public meeting on the Brandt report about North-South interdependence. I read Sheila Cassidy's "Audacity to Believe" and was in awe of her bravery, but was most taken by "Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger". Until then the church and the Bible had seemed to only care about personal sin, not about social and economic injustice - it was a revelation, and I was able to use it when invited to give Church talks on Fairtrade - "it's about justice NOT charity".



But a crisis arrived when I became the only resident in Ashram House. Amazingly Ashram members invited me to join them in Sheffield, or offered to share their income with me so that I could continue my Fairtrade and campaigning work in Teesside. That for me was a wonderful example of real Community commitment, and supported me as my friendship with Frank developed and we married. He'd lost his faith in WW2 but was very supportive of Ashram projects, and together we campaigned on justice, peace and environmental issues, and later helped set up the Parkfield Ashram House in Stockton. This became a much needed home for people whose asylum claim had been rejected, and who had lost all Govt support but were not deported. Being able to offer a place of safety was important in the light of the Govt's "hostile environment" policy, and the generous hospitality and welcome I'd received working overseas. And we were able to share their stories anonymously and counter the widely held misperceptions of asylum seekers by local church goers.

So Ashram brought me - feet first - to Teesside and then Frank and Greystone - to follow Jesus' teaching. I couldn't drag Frank to church services which didn't offer me the challenge and inspiration I needed, so the Community gatherings here and at Weekends have been for us our church. We've shared food and worked with friends on projects trying to create a better world. I still struggle with the spiritual, and worry that I'm a Martha not a Mary, but I am in the right place and glad to be able to offer a practical way of "doing justice." *Jenny Medhurst*

## Our food's environmental and climate impact

### Dairy Issues

Arla, which owns a large part of the milk products sold in these islands is allowed direct access to this government (Westminster, London) and convinces the Prime Minister of its necessity, in its present form. In order to supply vast quantities of cows milk to individual consumers in densely crowded towns and cities where by necessity most people live, it is making intensive farming a reality with vast quantities of slurry sewage, some of which trickles into rivers. That is only part of the problem. Global warming is accelerated by large dairy cows in big numbers emitting a lot of methane, a powerful greenhouse gas, into the atmosphere.

I watched on Rumble a video about a family living in a remote part of Alaska. They had a few chickens in a shed under an infrared lamp to keep them warm in winter, being fed grain or soy pellets and a fenced yard for the warmer weather where they forage for insects and grubs. They supply plenty of eggs. They also have a few sheep including a ram and two ewes, which have a shed and a covered area where straw bales are in the feeding rack, to stop it becoming mushy in the wet weather or in the snow. The rest of the bales are stored in a large covered shed. The two ewes are going to be milked. The quantity of milk shall be no more than one large mug full from the two of them. Even for people with the ownership of plenty of land, milk quantities from 2 sheep or a goat are going to be very small. Goats and sheep emit less methane and can be kept in smaller areas and colder tougher conditions.

This shows that the vast quantities of cow's milk consumed is completely unsustainable. I think for town and city life, people need to try to move onto plant liquids like Oatly, Alpro OAT and other milk alternatives, simply to protect the rivers and climate. Soya lecithin from European sources only and dried yeast flakes can make up for eggs, which outside rural areas, are intensively farmed using vast imported shiploads of grains and soya, and causing river pollution problems quite often. Oats grow well in Northern Europe and do not need to be transported over great distances.

### Bovaer- the methane suppressing animal feed additive.

Arla is continuing its trial of Bovaer, <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/ara-to-continue-with-bovaer-trial-despite-boycott-calls/698650.article> though English newspapers have many readers who are going to boycott the wide variety of food products by this big unethical company and outlets that sell their products.

Oatly is widely available, I am using organic Oatly at present but Plenish is a completely vegan company, so I shall try and buy their plant liquids when I find it. I have bought Plenish plant liquids in the past. Oatly won a court case against them for using the term "post milk generation" brought by dairy farmers. So they are still allowed to use it.

Like Ozempic drugs for obesity, when a healthier whole plant diet would be much safer to achieve weight loss, so Bovaer tries to reduce methane emissions from cattle, when people would benefit from safer plant liquids. That would be much better to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Scottish schools can request plant milks on ethical grounds for students. The local Co-op doesn't sell organic Oatly.

<https://www.ethicalconsumer.org/food-drink/shopping-guide/vegan-non-dairy-milk>

Cerys

Hi Cerys,

*Dairy farmer friends who live in the North Yorkshire Moors supply Arla - which is big, but is a farmer owned co-operative. I buy milk in glass bottles from a local organic dairy.*

*Riverford Organic Farmer's response to the Bovaer trial is that Bovaer isn't permitted under organic standards. It says "There's definitely an environmental argument for reducing methane emissions. As our growing demand for dairy drives moves towards further intensification, it's a significant concern for the industry, but we recognise the complexity of the situation. While Arla are trialling a technical fix for a way of farming that is focused on efficiency and cost in order to stay competitive, there are other ways in which dairy farmers are seeking to reduce*

13

emissions.

*Agroecological farming systems where cows can browse from trees, or make greater use of herbal leys, switching grain-based feed for natural forage, and naturally reducing the amount of methane they produce, are something that some are experimenting with. The integration of rotational livestock grazing with pasture is a cornerstone of many regenerative approaches.*

*But the reality is that these systems do not prioritise yield in the same way that intensive systems do, meaning milk produced in this way is more expensive. We'd love to see a move towards systems that prioritise working in more nature-friendly ways, but we also understand that for the consumer, this would have cost implications. ....We welcome a proactive discussion of the environmental challenges within the dairy industry from one of its big players."*

Jenny

### **Feeding livestock with soya**

What percentage of soy is used for animal feed? People may not eat large quantities of soy directly but the animals people eat, or from which people consume eggs or milk, do add up often to a lot of soya animal feed in the farming process. Almost 80% of the world's soybean crop is fed to livestock, especially for beef, chicken, egg and dairy production (milk, cheeses, butter, yogurt, etc). In the United States, chickens eat the most soy, followed by pigs, cows, and fish, (fish farming). These animals eat over 70 per cent of all soybeans grown in the United States, with some pigs eating over ten pounds of soy per day. Turkeys and ducks thrive on soya bean meal. *World Wildlife Fund WWF---*

Few of us are aware of how much soy we eat- because we tend to consume it indirectly. So why does this matter? Three State provinces in Brazil grow large quantities of soya beans, much of it from cleared rainforest, adding to global warming and climate change. Water is used for both the soya crop and the animals who eat the soya beans,

adding to extra pressure on the world's water resources, including excessive extraction of water from rivers. Chinese pigs are fed on soya beans or soya bean meal from the Americas, and soya bean farmers are very concerned about tariffs since their income could drop dramatically.

I live in the Far North of Scotland, in the county of Sutherland, in Dornoch, and often see very big animal feed lorries going to a local farm and to Inverness. In local papers animal feeds are advertised for farmers including feed for sheep. All this relies on a lot of imports. So reducing eating meat and eggs and dairy products would take a lot of pressure off water resources and accelerants of global warming. It is not vegans who eat most of the world's soya bean crops but meat eaters and those who consume egg and dairy products.

My mother was in the Women's Land Army growing food in the Second World War. In those days any animal feed was from local crops. In the 1960's, a local farmer I knew supplemented the diet of his Red Poll cattle (dual purpose cattle for milk and meat) with silage from his farm. In world history the vast quantities of grains and soya bean crops shipped around the world for animal feed is quite a recent development. So I ask you to examine your conscience when shopping for non vegan foods, and consider the environmental and climate impacts of what you are doing. If you can definitely know a local farmer who uses only animal feed off his own land, then that is fine. Most of us cannot possibly know this, especially in supermarket shopping.

<https://www.ethicalconsumer.org/food-drink/climate-impact-meat-vegetarian-vegan-diets>

Jenny, This is a useful article. Yesterday I ate vegan Quorn and tofu. I ate vegan Quorn on Wednesday when I went out to Inverness. I have also told my friend Tim about vegan Quorn so he sometimes eats it when he is away from home.

I look forward to reading your contributions in ACT TOGETHER soon, and what other people have put in. I hope your move has gone well.

*Greetings from Cerys*

## Fair Trade News



### Heartfelt thanks from Palestine

Elayan Abu Arra is a Fairtrade almond farmer from Aqqaba village in Palestine. He has been a farmer for 30 years growing olives and almonds on his 12 hectares of land.

Growing almonds is crucial to Elayan's livelihood. Selling his almonds at Fairtrade prices meant he was able to educate his children and help them build their own homes. His farm is organic, free of chemicals, and relies on rainfall rather than irrigation systems, making his almonds a more sustainable choice.

*"For me almonds give me a sense of security. When the trees carry a lot of fruit, I feel confident about the future. I thank all British people who love and buy our premium quality Fairtrade products - and I am grateful to all those who enable their export to the UK and Ireland"*

More than ever Palestinian Farmers need the support of fairer trade to thrive and rebuild!

In September, I co-led a service on the theme of Fairtrade as part of Fairtrade Fortnight, which also marked 30 years since the launch of the Fairtrade Mark. We had appropriate hymns, including two which were especially written for Fairtrade, showed video clips and shared stories from people about the difference Fairtrade has made for them, their families and their communities. The service went well but afterwards I was disappointed that no-one came to look at the information stall I had or to browse the books about Fairtrade. I was even more disappointed to see that the sugar sticks that someone, who I'd thought was quite keen on the principle, had just purchased for the church were not Fairtrade (despite

supposedly having a commitment to be a Fairtrade Church) AND the coffee they were using was Nescafe!

I was nearly in tears and said to Donna, who had done the service with me, that I wondered why I bothered as people just didn't seem willing to embrace it. She gave me a hug and tried to encourage me not to despair and praised all that I do to promote Fairtrade, but I still went home feeling I was wasting my time. However, the next day I was *really* cheered up when someone who had been at the service with her grand-daughter came round with a picture the little girl had drawn, completely of her own volition, to represent what Fairtrade is about. Isla is just 7 years old but was clearly paying attention during the service and wanted to illustrate what it meant.

I have interwoven Isla's explanations of the different parts of the picture with my own interpretations and comments. The picture, Isla explained, shows the world in the top right corner which is balanced by the Fairtrade symbol on the left.

Below you can see people of different races beneath the stars in the sky (the same sky - we are all part of one universe). There are some illustrations of food that these people grow, reminding us of our dependency on them.

The sea is significant for 2 reasons, we on Mull are surrounded by it (Isla said she put it in because Grandma's house overlooks the sea and she was right next to it) and it represents the physical barrier between us and those in the southern continents where Fairtrade operates, but don't forget we share the same stars - so we are still connected.

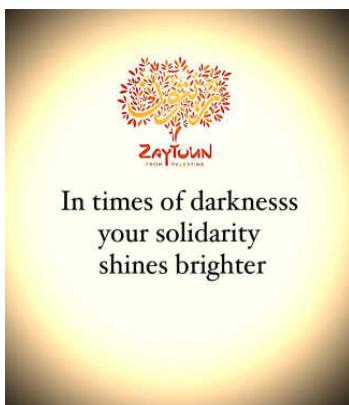
There you are - a sermon in a child's drawing. We can learn a lot from the younger members of our church family.

The drawing is reproduced here, with Isla's permission.

Lorraine



## Palestine



marketplace for good food and skincare; you've built a

We enter 2025, hearts heavy with sorrow for the continued injustice faced by Palestinians, especially those in Gaza who are enduring cold, hunger, and daily fear for their lives. The weight of this reality is immense, but so is the hope that your solidarity brings.

By standing with us, you've helped create more than just a

community that deeply values the people behind these products. Through your support, you are making a tangible difference for Palestinian producers, ensuring their resilience and traditions thrive despite the challenges.

Thank you for believing in our mission to connect the UK and Ireland with Palestinian farmers, producers, and their rich culture. Together, we resolutely hold onto optimism and the belief that even in the darkest times, solidarity shines brighter.

Here's to a new year that brings justice peace and freedom to Palestinians. #BuyPalestinian

Zaytoun



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvGxSbdGYHA>

### The invitation -

Held on the eve of the Israeli Memorial which often entrenches despair and excludes Palestinian grief, this Joint Memorial creates a space where grief becomes a bridge, where remembrance becomes resistance, where choosing humanity becomes a radical act of hope—and an invitation to freedom for all.

Because real freedom means freedom from fear. From military occupation. From sirens, airstrikes, checkpoints, tunnels. From the belief that anyone must die for others to live.

This vision is alive—in the defiance of those still under siege in Gaza, in the courage of families demanding a hostage deal, in every voice that says: "Enough".

And it's under attack. In this climate, the Joint Memorial takes even greater courage. Its organizers face political pressure, threats, and backlash—but they refuse to back down. Because this is more than a memorial. It is a powerful choice. A liberatory vision of a new reality for Palestinians and Israelis.

### Afterwards

Last night, tens of thousands of people gathered for the 20th Israeli-Palestinian Joint Memorial Ceremony. Together, we created a powerful shared space of grief, humanity, and hope.

Over 160 live broadcast screenings took place around the world in homes, community centers, places of worship, and even in the EU Parliament. In a moment where hatred continues to rise, our growing community chose another path - one of courage, empathy, and shared grief.

In Ra'anana, just 20 km north of Tel Aviv, a screening held in a local synagogue was met with protesters shouting abuse and physically attempting to block people from entering. The 200 strong mob forced their way inside the synagogue and assaulted participants, hurling rocks and firecrackers at them.

This is the reality we face - where fear breeds hatred, and hatred escalates into intimidation and violence. We chose to listen to the voices of grief, empathy, and resistance - rather than give in to militarism, blame, and nationalism. Thank you for choosing to confront the pain of 'the other,' and for bearing witness not only to the loss within Israel, but to the ongoing devastation in the West Bank and Gaza, where war rages and starvation looms.

In a time filled with heartbreak and uncertainty, the ceremony reminded us of the simple but radical truth: humanity and hope must come first.

We must stop the de-humanization of 'the other' and remember that a mother is a mother, a child is a child, and a person is someone's world. Last night was a lesson in profound empathy through these dark days of violence and trauma - let's all take time to reflect on what we heard, and consider how we act now.

*Estzer Koranyi and Rana Salman,  
Co-directors, Combatants for Peace*

75 Chemin des Génets  
Cabaniers  
24 360 Pierrefontaine-les-  
Mines  
8th March

Dear Jenny

I'm very sorry not to have replied earlier after the arrival of the Bethlehem peace baubles - they are sitting on the table just as you come in, on either side of the candle we light from time to time. Visitors notice them & ask about them & it can start a conversation about important things - like peace on Earth <sup>television</sup>

President Macron was on Tuesday to tell us that the 80 years period of peace in Europe is now over. A time for peace & a time for war as the Bible says? A friend has just told us that the banks are opening up a new deposit account for their customers to invest in re-armament. I don't think we will be buying into it! We are banking with the Crédit Agricole here - but they don't put a lot of money into agriculture, rather into more horrid things mostly very bad for the environment.

We seem to remember a picture of you <sup>in fact together</sup> cutting up your bank card & moving to an ethical bank and we thought 'bravo!' We don't know anyone so brave here & out of lethargy have never made the move. But though we're stuck with the wicked Crédit Agricole we do have an account with them rejoicing in the name 'développement durable' (or sustainable development). All our pensions go into the NatWest in England & we transfer to ~~here~~ <sup>to</sup> every 3 months. Every time it comes we quickly shift it to the deposit account to stop the C.A. investing in war & capitalism and then filter it back as needed. + however a friend looked up what the C.A. considers to be sustainable development & was horrified to find some (or a lot?) of the money goes into the more acceptable projects

of disreputable companies like Totalenergie which mostly is busy digging up the planet, building pipelines & pumping CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere but does invest a tiny, tiny amount in 'ecological' projects like covering fields with solar panels!

As always we are following the evolution of Ashram in the notices & minutes Sandra kindly sends us & think about the past - how we enjoyed the weekends at Cliff college, so long ago it seems now. Things move on relentlessly! We noticed the mention of Frank's wood & wonder what is going on there & how it is managed and also how big it is? & here the management of the very expensive forests is close to a disaster but there are good people buying forest land collectively & running it responsibly including 2 associations working cooperatively in our patch here.

Meanwhile as our energy levels decrease alarmingly & we potter about our land in somnolent forgetfulness, sometimes followed by quacking ducks things are sort of OK. Daffodils all over and the 8 ewes have produced so far 3 frisky black lambs. More to come very shortly no doubt.

As we have said previously if any members of Ashram were to stray into our neck of the woods & managed to find us hidden up a country lane behind hedges & trees we would be so happy to see them & maybe introduce them to some of our crazy friends. If they wanted they could even stay awhile in our rather archaic conditions, dry toilets & all.

Thinking of you in your new abode

Love Donald

lots of love and best

wishes

Jacquie & Lx

## Goodbye to N.E. Ashram @ Greystone



*Breakfast agape*



*"Annual" Breakfast agape 1995*



*Planning the Journey Course Feb 2001*



*Farewell to Ian July 1995*



*Sep 2005 Frances and Bill brought dinner after we both had surgery*

and lots of friends  
came to stay



## Ashram Community Houses 77 & 79 Rock Street Sheffield

What follows is a brief description of the Ashram Community Houses at 77 & 79 Rock Street in inner-city Pitsmoor, Sheffield, during the period I was at 77 – summer 2008 to autumn 2019.

When I came to 77, 79 next door was not a community house, but was purchased by the Ashram Community Trust some years later. Chris Bullock, whom I believe had resided at 77 from the time it was purchased by the Trust, and Dr Raslan Al-Zubai, who was then engaged in postgraduate studies at Sheffield University, were living there when I joined them. Some years later, Raslan left, having got married, but regularly came around on visits, and to sort out any problem that arose on our house computer. After his departure, 77 had some residents who really didn't remain long, and thereafter we were joined by Cerys Brangwyn who enriched the community with her knowledge of diet, nutrition and also the Orthodox Christian tradition.

Both 77 & 79 are semi-detached structures almost identical to each other, with a sitting room, dining room, and kitchen on the ground floor, a cellar below, two bedrooms and a bath-toilet on the upper floor, and a loft room above. However, they were very different in community praxis in that, 79 never really developed regular community praxis, while 77 had it 'all the time'. However, I must mention Sam Humphreys of 79 who was regularly involved in 77's community programmes.



*The front door and sitting room window of 77,  
and the sitting room window of 79 Rock Street Sheffield*

### **'Theology', Features, and Praxis**

The 'theology' that the founder leader of the Ashram Community Rev Dr John Vincent, entrenched within its ranks was one of discipleship to Jesus in community. The narratives on Jesus, clearly depicts that discipleship was based in disciples' homes which became community spaces. Further, discipleship praxis is strongly evident in the Five Commitments of the Members of the Ashram Community, which were prominently displayed at both houses.



## ASHRAM COMMUNITY

**We commit ourselves to:**  
**Follow the way as revealed by Jesus,**  
**Support each other in good and ill,**  
**Challenge evil with the power of love,**  
**Offer the Kingdom in political and economic witness,**  
**Work for the new community of all creation, and**  
**Risk ourselves in a lifestyle of sharing**

### *The Five Commitments of the Ashram Community*

I must mention two outstanding features that were practiced at 77, without them ever being decided upon as precepts or rules for praxis. Those were, welcoming one and all without judgement, and the love and tolerance we had for each other. Perhaps, they are best expressed in the writings below, three of many writings that adorned its walls. Such a display of writings, in a home is perhaps a unique feature in itself.

*Christ be in all guests  
Calling upon us,  
Christ in abundance  
Sharing his grace,  
Christ be the  
brightness  
Burning within us,  
Christ always present  
Here in this place.*

*Peter Hurley, Rock Street Ashram  
House, Housewarming, 1996*

**“Christians should judge no one, neither an open harlot, nor sinners, nor dissolute people, but should look upon all with the simplicity of soul and a pure eye. Purity of heart, indeed, consists in seeing sinful and weak men and having compassion for them and being merciful”.**

**“Time will come when everyone will go crazy and whoever is not acting similar to them will be called the crazy one. It is not important to do what pleases the people since nothing will please them. Everyone has his own mind. We should please the Holy Spirit within us. If you question the effect of the surrounding environment and what we read and hear on our consciences, I tell you, it is better to consult those who possess the wisdom and the virtues...”**

**-Macarius of Egypt (295-392 CE)**

### **How We Try to Feel and Express in this Community Home**

**Our life is love, peace**

**(despite occasional misunderstanding and disagreement),  
and tenderness**

**(despite being hard sometimes)**

**We do this by**

**bearing one with another, forgiving one another, and not accusing one another;**

**But 'praying' one for the other in loving kindness,  
and most importantly,**

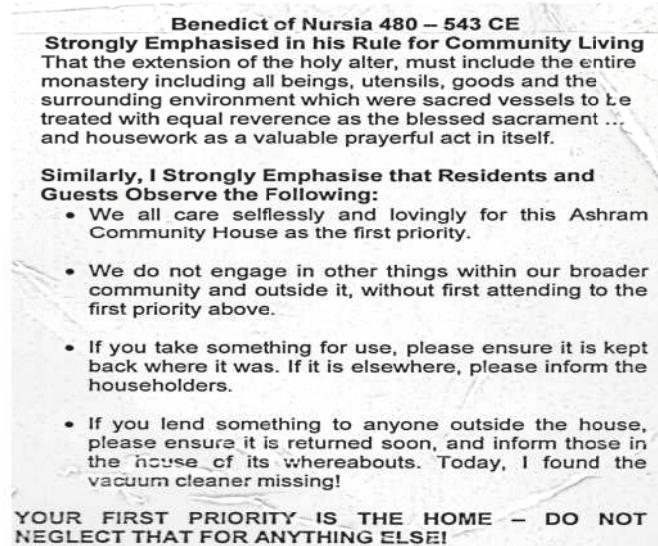
**helping one another, always with a tender hand**

*-Improvised from the words of Isaac Penington , 1667*

## Beyond Rules and Times

Unlike many other religious and community houses, there were no daily rules nor times at both houses that were binding on residents and guests. There was no common purse; each resident paid reasonable rent, and made purchases as was needed, ensuring that none was lacking. No type of food or drink was barred, but those residents and guests who wished to avoid one or another food or drink were not only at liberty to do so, but separately catered for. No wakeup times, mealtimes, prayer times, work times, study times, relaxing times, or bedtimes. Each did as suited, without any problem to the other; there was no need for a rule or for fixed times!

However, like in any social group, members have to be reminded of things at certain times. So, after eight years at 77, that below appeared on its walls.



## Food and Fellowship

Food was always cooked at 77 Rock Street, and occasionally at 79, and made available together with wine and juice to residents and guests alike, even for those who frequently arrived at the door uninvited and without notice, which was not exceptional. Sometimes guests used to bring a dish or dessert along. If it was a planned meal, the residents sat at the table along with the guests, but one person did not, and served at the table.



*A Community Meal at 77 Rock Street*

There was also informal fellowship both before and after a meal, and as we pleased, almost from on a day-to-day. We sometimes also walked up to the hillock behind the houses to relax and enjoy the scenic beauty.



*On the Hillock which overlooks both the Upper and Lower Don Valleys*

### **A New Mealtime Liturgy of the Eucharist**

Long before the doctrines of transubstantiation and consubstantiation were formulated and celebrated on altars in church buildings, Jesus sat around food and wine with some of his disciples on the day of the Jewish festival of Passover, a feast of remembrance, and with words and action left something new to say and do in remembrance of him. Accordingly, a new liturgy was written at 77, following the words narrated in the 'Gospels', and first celebrated over a Community meal, where each one takes the bread, and thereafter the wine and may eat and/or drink and pass them to the other saying: "And, so let us do as he did, remembering him"; or, just pass on the plate and cup.

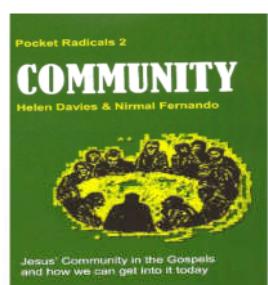
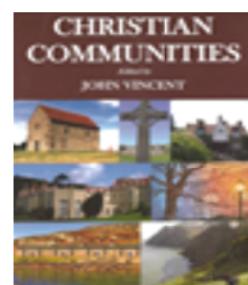
### **Programmes and Events**

Once a week, usually on a Thursday evening, the residents of both houses met at 77 for prayers, reading, and discussion on the reading, followed by dinner. Apart from that, several sessions of the Ashram Community were hosted at 77, such as long weekends, and guests from outside Sheffield stayed over for a night or more. It was a joy for residents to sometimes sleep on the floor, and give their beds and rooms to guests. Also, Bible Study, sessions of the Ashram Study & Research Group, and Ecology, and Health & Food Forum were hosted at 77 Rock Street.

Apart from that, workdays for gardening, and caring for the fruit and vegetable were organised, where guests also came along to help. An event was always held on Christmas Day, where 77 opened its doors to anyone and everyone of any or no faith, bearing in mind those alone over Christmas.

### **Drafting, Formatting, and Printing**

It was at 77 Rock Street that many documents of the Ashram Community were drafted, formatted and printed. The Burngreave Ashram News, and leaflets of programmes and events. Also, it was on the house computer that the Ashram Community Trust's Annual Reports, Brochures, and some Ashram Press books were produced for the printers.



*Two Volumes Produced at 77 Rock Street*

# THE MULTIFAITH CHAPEL & LIBRARY

## Nirmal Fernando

What follows is a brief description of an Ashram Community project, the Multifaith Chapel & Library (MCL) at Burngreave Ashram on Spital Hill in inner-city Sheffield, from its inception in the summer of 2008 to the autumn of 2019, the period when I was co-convenor alongside Rev Dr John Vincent, the founder-leader of the Ashram Community.

### **Beginnings: Empty Basement Room to Multifaith Chapel & Library**

Perhaps, this project was interfaith from the roots. A radical theologian and scholar, the Methodist Rev Dr John Vincent, the late Ruth Bird an Anglo-Catholic and Augustinian Oblate, Coral Amina Craig a Sufi Muslim, the late Grace Vincent a questioner of faith, and myself, one influenced equally by the words and way of life of both the Buddha and Jesus, that made the start to make MCL project happen.

So, a basement room at Burngreave Ashram had to be thoroughly cleaned, decorated, book shelved, and carpeted. Grace supplied all the material as and when needed, often from recycled stuff rather than purchased.



*The Multifaith Chapel & Library in 2008*

Our chosen theme was 'caring and sharing – within and among faiths'; and so, MCL's motto became 'Caring & Sharing'. Amina did the art work depicting symbols representative of many faiths, and Ruth's generous donation of most of her private library enabled the once empty basement room to be called "The Multifaith Chapel & Library". And so, in September 2008 our inaugural session was held – the room was full. It had only taken a couple of months from envisioning to launching!

### **A New Space**

After some four years of considerable activity, in the summer of 2012 John decided to relocate the Multifaith Chapel & Library in another part of the basement – a much larger and more open space with sunlight. Certainly our shoulders had to be put to the wheel, but the new space was most welcome.



*Part of the Multifaith Chapel & Library's new space*

*The large mosaic on the theme of caring & sharing depicting faith symbols done voluntarily at little financial cost by Burngreave Ashram's Art Group which adorns its walls*

### **Programmes**

Our primary intention from the beginning was to promote proper understanding of faiths, particularly outside one's own. Hence the books in the library were 'canons' of major faiths, and many more about various faiths. Equally or perhaps more important were our intended sessions, carefully planned so that people of any or no faith, could attend and learn of the teachings, liturgies, prayer, meditation, spirituality, and ways of life of various faiths.

Right after its inauguration, the MCL commenced carefully planned frequent sessions of seminars with meaningful discussions, meditation and prayer, and reflections. Since 'sharing food' was one of many longstanding practices of the Ashram Community, these were held with lunch or dinner 25

cooked by volunteers at the Burngreave Ashram's kitchen, brought along and shared by attendees, or made available at another Ashram Community project, the New Roots Café on the ground floor of Burngreave Ashram. There was a theme for a series of sessions, with a topic for each session. Sometimes, a session focussed on one faith, and at other times up to three presenters' spoke of their faiths precepts and practices in relation to the single topic. Open to those of all faiths and none, the presenters were knowledgeable followers of a faith, or those having academic proficiency of a faith. These sessions continued throughout my days at the MCL.

Another regular practice which took place at the MCL, as I recall from around 2013, was the celebration of the Eucharist after the Wednesday "Burngreave Banquet", a free evening meal particularly for those needy who lived in the area. It is important to note, that the celebrants were always chosen from among the participants, following the Ashram Community practice; beyond the dichotomy of 'cleric' and 'laity'.

An important programme that the MCL planned and implemented was "Interfaith Tree Planting" at various sites across the Sheffield City region, and creating a forest garden at Parkwood Springs in Sheffield. This was done together with the Sheffield City Council, Islamic Society of Britain (ISB), Hindu Samaj, Pagan Pathways, Grow Sheffield, Sheffield Interfaith, British Humanist Association, Blue Loop, and Shirley House Interfaith Centre. Once again, freshly cooked food was provided in at a suitable premises close to the worksite, or food was brought by individuals and shared at the site.

Another essential practice was that 'members' of the MCL visited mosques, temples, churches, and attended religious gatherings, also participating at their programmes, creating meaningful links with various faiths by reaching out to them.

## Events

The MCL organised and hosted special events from time to time. I particularly recall those held during annual UK Interfaith Weeks. The pictures below depict some of these events.



The Multifaith Chapel & Library was central to the launching of Sheffield's celebrations of UK's first ever Interfaith Week in 2009 at Burngreave. Apart from other faith expressions on the day, an Interfaith Tree was planted and blessed by some 12 faiths. This event inspired interfaith tree planting throughout the city and other cities such as Leeds.



*The Lord Mayor of Sheffield Alan Law, Rev Dr Inderjit Bhogal [Yorkshire and Humberside Faiths Forum], Abdool Gooljar [ISB] and Nirmal Fernando [MCL] unveiling the plaque at the 'Interfaith Tree' on the first anniversary of its planting.*



*Rev Dr John Vincent opens the Open Forum on 'Understanding the other's Faith' at the Hindu Samaj – Guest Speaker Dr Elizabeth Harris with commentators from all major faiths in Sheffield*



*Dr Vithal Patel (Hindu Samaj) Chants a Hindu Prayer*



*Local folk musicians at an Interfaith Social at Burngreave Ashram*

The MCL held occasional events, such as interfaith day retreats, and workshops with invited presenters focussing on topics such as eco-spirituality, ecology, and sustainable local economy. A week-long exhibition of Buddhist art and artefacts, was organised by the MCL and held on the ground floor of Burngreave Ashram. On the opening day, a buffet of Sri Lankan dishes was cooked and served at the New Roots Café at the premises.

### **Voluntary Work and Funding**

The MCL's work was done by volunteers. Most did so without counting cost, not even reclaiming out of pocket expenses for purchases, etc. The overhead costs were met from voluntary donations and contributions at programmes and events, while any shortfall was funded by the interfaith fund of the Ashram Community Trust. Apart from that, a small grant was awarded to the MCL for one year by the Faiths In Action Fund in 2010.



## My holiday in Italy

This was the first holiday on my own. I chose to go to Italy as I wanted to see Rome.

I flew from Gatwick to Venice. We spent two days in Venice. The first morning we caught a bus to the railway station and met our guide. Then we walked around Venice all morning. In the afternoon I went into the Doge's Palace. Our next day we visited San Marino with a guided tour in the morning. We went up to the castle in the cable car.

Then we visited Bologna. We visited a medieval castle fortress about the size of Windsor Castle. The following day we visited a chocolate factory near Assisi then had a guided tour of Assisi in the afternoon. This included seeing the tomb of St Francis.

Then we headed south to Rome. The first day we walked and saw the old Roman sites including the Coliseum and the Amphitheatre.

We saw the Spanish Steps but, fortunately, we didn't have to climb them. The next day we went to the Vatican. We saw the Sistine Chapel, it was fantastic, and we went to the Vatican Museum.

This was a quick holiday and I would have liked to spend longer in Rome and Assisi but it was good for me to spend even this little time in each place.

*Paul Sutherland-Waite*



### DATES

#### 2025

17 – 19 October Community Weekend Hinsley Hall, Leeds

### COMMUNITY

Community Office: John Vincent  
7 College Court, Sheffield S4 7FN

### Enquiries

[ashram.community@hotmail.com](mailto:ashram.community@hotmail.com)

Ashram Community Trust is a Registered Charity  
Registered Charity No: 1099164  
Charitable Company No: 4779914

Website [www.ashram.org.uk](http://www.ashram.org.uk)

Act Together editor: Jenny Medhurst  
[medhurst@phonecoop.coop](mailto:medhurst@phonecoop.coop)

Articles for the Autumn 2025 edition needed by September 17th.

Contributions from members / associates who do not attend national Community events are especially welcome!

### MEETINGS/ZOOM GROUPS

Please contact the convenors if you would like to know more about meeting or events. They are the local contact points for the Community.

### Convenors

**London** – Linda Marshall –01784 456 474  
Saturday Meetings – Monthly on Zoom or in person

**North-West** – Sandra Dutson  
[smdutson@btinternet.com](mailto:smdutson@btinternet.com)  
Meetings bi-monthly on Zoom or in person

**Community** Zoom meetings fortnightly – Pippa Thompson – 07918 757068.