



# ACT TOGETHER

Ashram Community Trust

Issue 75

Spring 2013

Ashram Community Trust is a Registered Charity – Charitable Co. No: 1099164



## Contents

Page 2. Theology in Projects .....	John Vincent
Page 3. Gospel Excuses.....	Grace Vincent
Page 4. Working with Asylum Seekers.....	Maggie Jones
Page 5. Open Books & Open Mind.....	Lorraine Jones
Page 6. Bob Billsborrow news.....	Pat Billsborrow
Page 6. Intentional Community.....	Nirmal Fernando
Obituaries-	
Page 7. Ken Seagers .....	Linda Marshall
Page 7. Ian Makrill.....	Linda Marshall
Page 8. Letter to George Carey.....	Maggie Jones
Page 9. Move Your Money Campaign.....	Jenny Medhurst
Page 9. Middlesbrough Traidcraft shop news.....	Jenny Medhurst
Page 10. Fairtrade - is the job done?.....	Jenny Medhurst
Page 11. The environment and the wider world.....	Eurig Scandrett
Page 14. Thoughts on the Bible.....	Richard Pater
Page 16. Retreat information.....	Nirmal Fernando
Page 16. Website Information.....	Kath Clements
Page 16. Community notices.....	John Vincent

# THEOLOGY IN HOUSES AND PROJECTS

By John Vincent

In his important article “Ashram Theology” in the Spring 2012 *Act Together*, David Jones names three defining characteristics of Ashram Theology:

- Discipleship-  
“By following this way, Jesus’ story comes alive in us”
- Community-  
“Translating the way of Jesus into a lived experience is done in community”
- Kingdom-  
“The appearance of the Kingdom of justice and peace begins now”

Projects arise, says David, both directly “branded” Ashram projects, and those done by all members in their own localities. Such projects are “Thick Places” – seen as “Where people meet frequently, where meetings have different purposes”. David urges “working to create thick places as working witness to the reality of the Kingdom of God”.

This makes Ashram “a brewing ferment of experimental living” says Andrew Weeks. Part of this has been in our Community Houses and Projects, and hopefully continues so.

Ashram Community Houses were seen as “Creating a Roof for the Jesus action”, a phrase first used in the 1970’s-90’s, when we had 6 Inner City Community Houses. Houses were created not to solve social problems or to do community or social work (which we had neither resources nor staff to do), but as Intentional locations where the Christian practice and methodology of the whole Ashram Community would be facilitated “in miniature” and in concentrated form in one particular property and Project, and perhaps as “acted parables” of what society might do.

This became particularly clear in 1996, when we were discussing “Houses and Projects” at the May Community Weekend, reflecting on our five Inner City Houses of 1969 – 91, and the Income Sharing Project of 1984 – 89, the Sparkbrook House and Service Project of 1980 – 96, the Glasgow Flat of 1991-94, and the Sheffield Glossop Road Shop of 1987 to date. (The Stockton Parkfield House of 2001 – 07 should now be added to complete the history).

We concluded that there were four elements that were “starting points” for Houses or Projects, “any one of these” as immediate “call”:

1. *The Gospel Provoking Projects*. Here the emphasis is on (a) an action related Jesus/Kingdom theology, (b) the ACT membership commitment of “Offering the Kingdom” and a “lifestyle of sharing” and, (c) the theology of the community.
2. *Possession of Resources*. Here the emphasis is on (a) provisions and place, (b) expertise and experience.
3. *Discerning Needs we can respond to*. Here the emphasis is on (a) analysis of local communities, (b) analysis of our capabilities.
4. *Individual or Community Calls*. Here the emphasis is on (a) testing and supporting others’ Calls, (b) expectation that people bring their calls. (p.83)

Our present day Houses and Projects illustrate all these theological and vocational elements. Indeed the foundational purposes of each of them emphasise various aspects and combinations of them:

1. 347 Glossop Road (1987): The project aims to provide a Christian Community Centre in an inner city area of Sheffield’s west end / centre city: a ‘shop window’ for the activities of Ashram Community and Ashram Community Enterprise accommodation for a Christian Community House; a meeting place for organisations involved in social, religious and political actions; and a practical workshop, publicity outlet, and a ‘launching pad’ for community initiatives. (p.78)
2. 75/77 Rock Street (1995/97): “SICEM bought the Furnival Public House on Verdon Street and Ashram decided to revive the idea of establishing a community house nearby,” for volunteers at the Furnival and at Glossop Road. (p.85). The purpose was to carry out the Community House modal as above.
3. 80-86 Spital Hill (2000): “Our search for premises where the vision of an Inner City “Emporium”/ Christian Centre/ Community House/ New Roots Shop/ Workshop might become a reality” (p.91). A visioning process in 2001 listed the purposes as:

- to provide a Christian base in a needy area
  - to be a presence and embodiment of the Ashram ethos of community
  - to be a sign of the Incarnation, and a place where Kingdom of God things might happen; and
  - to provide appropriate responses to the issues of the context.
4. 79 Rock Street (2011): "To enlarge the size and scope of the residential community already established there" (Annual Report)
  5. 6 Andover Street (2012) "To house members and others who wish to come specifically to work in the Burngreave Ashram Project," as we were using it as a Homeless and Asylum Seeker Residential Community (Annual Report)

*ACT Together* records ongoing history – myself on A Day in Spring 2010, Nirmal Fernando on the 80-86 Multi-Faith Project in October 2010. Other *ACT Together* articles contain Residents Experience – 80-86 Asylum Seeker Community in Spring 2011, Nirmal Fernando on 77 in Autumn 2011, Alice Kearse on 347 in Spring 2012. Developments are reported in the Annual Report from Trustees for Ashram as a whole, and from House Committees for each House or House and Project. Frequently, we point out how our work fulfils various specific aspects of the General Objectives for Charities in Britain, and also the Specific Powers adopted for Ashram Community Trust. Every few years major re-visioning reviews are held, as with 347 in 2009 and 80-86 in 2010.

In Autumn 2012, discussions in House Communities resulted in houses' current projects as including:

- 347 Student World, New Roots
- 77/79 Inner City Retreats
- 80-86 Studies and Research into Community Homeless and Asylum Seeker Community, Multi- Faith Chapel and Library, Local Groups and Activities

In recent years, we have also developed non-property based Projects, reported in the Annual Report since 2008, notably Burngreave Co-ordinator (2001-10), Ashram Press (2001 to date), Multi-Faith Project (2010 to date) and Study and Research (2011 to date). Each fits into specific charitable aims, as well as Ashram concerns. Reflecting on it all, the Theology and the Practice, you would have to say that the Jesus model has its downside. "Christian Acton in the World" as we say in our logo, leaves you very vulnerable. As I comment in *Lifestyle of Sharing*, "We welcome every new voice, and often find that we have given bread and board to people who in fact are inveterate "movers on". We are open to all, and pay the price for being easily taken in." (p.126).

But maybe that is part of Discipleship/ Community/ Kingdom also. So I go on: "We belong to the world's misfits. And we find in the strange Jesus of Nazareth a fellow traveller and a friend. We seek to be beside him, not mainly for religious reasons, but for practical, secular ones. His movement, what he got going, seems to us to be worth not only hearing and hearing all over again, but also experimenting with in ever new ways."

Nothing like the full story, but some significant bits of it, are the pieces of Theology embedded and constantly active in our Houses and Projects.

References are to Annual Reports. Page references are to John Vincent, *A Lifestyle of Sharing*. Ashram Press 2009

## GOSPEL EXCUSES

by Grace Vincent

Are there Gospel stories that drive the things we do in Burngreave Ashram?

This was the question we asked ourselves as we prepared our presentation at the SICEM United Service on February 10<sup>th</sup> 2013.

Chris Bullock took the story of Jesus in Mark 2.15-25, which tells of Jesus sharing meals with publicans and sinners, followed by Jesus describing



his life with his disciples as feasting together. This fellowship of eating in his own home and the homes of others was a sign of the Community of the Kingdom of heaven on earth. So today, we in the Gathering, meet together fortnightly in each others' homes, from 7pm – 9.30pm. We share a meal, pray as a community, and discuss a topic chosen and presented by our members in turn.

Ruth Bird read the story of the woman who was not of the Jewish faith, who sought healing for her daughter, Mark 7.24-30. She was a Syro-Phoenician woman. Today in the Multi-faith Chapel and Library we meet to hear about other faiths and share food and drink together. Listening to others helps us all to find new sharpness in our own faiths and focuses us all on our similarities and our radical differences.

Tony Allwright's reading was from Romans 15.4 "The things written before were for our learning" to give us "comfort of the scriptures".

As part of the University of the Third Age, a group of around 10 meet to study, "Jesus and Christianity" .in two hour sessions on Saturday afternoons. Members have shared books from John Vincent's library and commented on them – probably covering 50 books so far. Now in the third year, the group is now studying John Vincent's doctoral study *Disciple and Lord* and are sharing their findings.

Grace Vincent's Gospel story was the feeding of the 5,000 as revised in John 6.1-13, which tells of the boy with the two loaves and five fish. The miracle in the story was not Jesus doing a magic multiplication of food, but the miracle of people all sharing what they had, which meant no-one was hungry. The Burngreave Banquet held on a Wednesday at 6pm is our gift to people as we can feed whoever drops in without expecting them to pay, we share all we have with everyone who turns up. It has become a sharing of mutual support also when we all sit down and to eat and talk together.

So, how can we share the Jesus style activity today, with whatever Gospel story that calls us, with whatever group or occasion that it suits?

John Vincent concluded that this method of matching Gospel happenings with Christian community happenings in New Testament Studies is identified as "Outworkings" or "Practice Interpretation". Ashram members will find Practice Interpretation explained in our little booklet *Discipleship*, pages 6 and 7.

## Working with Destitute Asylum Seekers in Nottingham

For the last 5 or 6 years, I've been a volunteer with the Refugee Forum in Nottingham, focusing on advice work with Refugees and Asylum Seekers. Three years ago I was asked to join the Management Committee (MC), (not necessarily a great compliment, as people aren't exactly queuing up to be trustees!) Although I enjoyed the meetings, I didn't feel as if I was a great asset, my knowledge of finance and governance not being extensive, and I was looking for another way to get more involved and to be more hands on.



A friend, Julia, who was also on the MC had an additional role as MC link with the Anti-destitution work and especially with the so called Food Group which meets on a Saturday. This group has always been a bit distinct from the Forum's general activity and focuses on people who have been refused asylum, some many times, and who have no financial support, apart from that of friends if they're lucky. Julia asked me if I would take over this role from her and I said I would, having very little idea of what it might involve.

My first impression on going along to the Saturday Food Group was one of benign chaos. Forty or fifty people, hard to tell who were volunteers and who were service users (but they could be both!), came and went, enjoyed a hot lunch together, socialised, listened to music, went on the computers and went away with bulging bags of groceries. I thought it was wonderful and basked in the general glow of being involved in a very worthwhile activity.

After a few weeks, it began to dawn on me that beneath the general atmosphere of well being and good being done, there were problems. There was some petty thieving, volunteer roles were not clearly defined, there was inconsistency in the amounts of food taken away. Also, it wasn't clear that everyone who came along was actually eligible – i.e. destitute. A general easy come, easy go culture prevailed, but this meant unfairness for some, and an imbalance of power among certain individuals. Around the time of my disillusionment, some funding was obtained to pay a part time worker, I was part of the appointment process, so felt a certain responsibility to support the new worker as much as possible. Gemma, the appointee, turned out to be a very bright young woman who is passionate about supporting Refugees and Asylum seekers. Together we were able to begin to address the problems which were having a negative impact on the sessions.

For a start, we began to admit people one by one via Reception after checking their referral forms. If someone comes who is not strictly eligible, we look into their circumstances and usually arrange for them to be assessed in the following week, allowing them at least to come in and have something to eat. We got a handle on the supplies, the groceries, fruit and veg, working out how much could be spent per person – all the money used comes from donations, and also we devised a better security system for the store room, limiting who had access to it. Volunteers are vetted and monitored and individuals whose contributions as volunteers were less than positive, were gently eased from their positions of power.

At first, people complained that the friendly atmosphere had been lost and that we were too strict. However, as time has gone on, the sessions are much more ordered, run smoothly and are hopefully fairer to all. The friendliness is still there – I'm so impressed with how the people who come for food support each other and manage to stay so positive.

Although this activity now takes up most of my Saturdays, it feels (most of the time) like a blessing. I'm humbled by the strength of spirit and resilience of the people who are served,

and often fascinated by the glimpses of the richness and diversity of their former lives. As Jemal from Libya said to me 'this time – now - it's just a little window. I have been somebody before. I had a house, money, family. I will be somebody again soon.'

Maggie Jones

---

## OPEN BOOKS OPEN MIND

I love books.

I love reading books, I love buying books, I love owning books.

I **hate** getting rid of books.

So, when there wasn't room for any more on the shelves in our house they got packed them away in large plastic boxes in the loft. Now that isn't what books are for. I couldn't read them or even just enjoy seeing them around, but as giving them away (don't anyone even dare to suggest *throwing* away!) would be such a painful experience, I decided on a way to share them and allow other people to benefit from them but without actually losing them for good.

I set up a library at the local Methodist Church. A small library had been there some time ago and a number of books were stored away in cardboard boxes, along with audio cassettes and DVDs. I created a catalogue, grouping the books into categories and adding a sentence to indicate what the book is about.

Then I started adding books of my own. A very few I was willing to donate for good, but most of them I intend to retain ownership of so that I can have them back sometime.

A number of others contributed books and are continuing to do so. Most of these have been donated permanently, but some people have chosen to place books on loan to the library, whilst still retaining ownership. The catalogue listing, which gets updated whenever there are new arrivals, indicates if this is the case and to whom the items belong.

Quite a few of the books donated are Evangelical in style and content and not ones I would particularly wish to promote but I decided it is not my place to censor other people's reading. I do, however, try to

ensure that there is an equal amount of liberal, radical material available.

There were far too many books to be accommodated in the small mobile bookcase that housed the previous library, so I have been allocated a large walk-in cupboard to store the majority of the items.

The mobile stand goes on display on Sunday mornings so that people can browse the shelves or look through the catalogue during coffee-time. I try to change the display regularly and always keep the top shelf for displaying new additions or books on a theme appropriate to (Advent, One World Week etc) or to fit in with a sermon topic.

Some eighteen months on, the library now contains over 500 books as well as over 40 audio cassettes and a few DVDs. Covering 20 categories ranging from bible study guides and worship resources to biographies, fiction and humour.

There hasn't been quite as much usage of the facility as I'd like to see, but a good cross-section of books have been borrowed, some more than once. I am pleased to see that even some of the more radical material has been borrowed.

I have recently become even braver and now have an "Other Faiths" section which includes books by Buddhist Thicht Nhat Hahn and the Dalai Lama - and even a copy of the Bhagavad-Gita. Although no-one has borrowed any of these yet, I live in hope - at the very least it might provoke some interesting discussions.

I now produce a regular newsletter giving details of some of the books available and drawing attention to the latest arrivals.

A competition to find a more interesting title than "The Church Library Newsletter" resulted in a number of suggestions. I eventually chose one that appealed to me and "The Treasure Chest" now makes an appearance about every two months. A few people have been approached to write reviews of the books that they have borrowed, although only one person has so far submitted his thoughts for publication. And all this because I can't bear to give things away!

Lorraine Jones

---

## Bob Billsborrow update



As those who attended the February meeting will know, Bob had a stroke in October last year from which he is recovering quite well, but his mobility is very restricted and there has been some hearing and memory loss. He is looking forward to us hosting the Summer meeting here at our home 38 Darwin Street Northwich CW8 1BS (for those with satnav) on Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> July. We hope that as many of you as can make it and that the sun shines so that we can extend into the garden if necessary.

Pat Billsborrow

---

## INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

SEEDS OF LIBERATION ON OUR  
DOORSTEPS

*A weekend to explore a contemporary  
commitment to  
Kingdom of God lifestyle community*

**Fri 7 – Sun 9 June 2013  
Burngreave Ashram  
86 Spital Hill Sheffield S4 7LG**



**Details & Bookings**  
**John – 0114 243 6688**  
**Nirmal – 07932 017 929**  
**Email: [cursu@hotmail.com](mailto:cursu@hotmail.com)**  
**Ashram Community**  
**178 Abbeyfield Road**  
**Sheffield S4 7AY**

# OBITUARIES

At the beginning of March the London Agape Group suffered two losses within a day of one another. On 1st March Ken Seagers died, aged 74, when in hospital for a pre-planned operation. Two days later Ian Mackrill died peacefully at his home in Hull aged 95.

## Ken Seagers

Ken joined our group in 2001, around the time of the "Radical Christ for the New Millennium" initiative. His very first entry in our scrapbook, for 24 March 2001, says in the context of a discussion on atonement: "Refreshingly open discussion compared to what I experience at both my churches, cake good too!" and a couple of months later: "I feel very at home at these meetings and willing to share concerns I might be wary of sharing elsewhere. The difference from my housegroup is stunning."

Ken attended both Methodist and Anglican churches in his home town of Dartford, he was also a tertiary of the Franciscan Third Order, and had his own website called *Seeking God* on which he shared things he discovered in the course of his seeking.

Feeling 'at home' with us, he soon suggested some small changes to our regular liturgy, which he quite rightly perceived had not been amended since we had slightly modified the style of our meetings. He also added a formal 'grace' before the food: "We thank God for our food and for our fellowship together." Ken always felt that Ashram was deficient in the practice of prayer, so he was surprised, and very pleased, when he first received a copy of Ashram Community Prayers. Later on, one of his comments in our scrapbook reads: "Much more spiritual and theological than usual and perhaps we actually got close to God."

He sometimes found our inability to reach a common understanding in discussions frustrating. He also longed for us to be better organised: "Good meeting amazingly well organised, with clear written outcome. All meetings should be like this." (October 2011)

But all this is only half of the story. In losing Ken we feel we have really lost two people, as he almost always brought with him, in spirit, someone we came to think of as 'his Paul'. Ken had met Paul in prison and felt called upon to take him under his wing. Paul's life in the

outside world lurched from one crisis to another, and at times Ken's phone hardly stopped ringing with desperate pleas for help. But in living out his faith, Ken continued to respond, despite constant anguish and sacrifice on his part. We wonder what will happen to Paul now.

Ken's last entry in the scrapbook, for February of this year was this: "All Christians of any persuasion need in the end to confront the Cross. Jesus did not 'come back to life', he rose to a new Immortal Life." And the Ashram Commitment was read out during Ken's funeral.

---

## Ian Mackrill

I first met Ian at an Ashram-in-the-South Weekend in Oxford in 1977. The subject may have been *Alternative Church*, but my main recollection is of Ian's engagement with our nine-month-old son, and this was a theme that continued throughout the twenty years during which Ian was part of the London Agape Group.

He took great pleasure in being with Samuel and Joseph Marshall as they grew up, and for them he was very much part of their lives. Joseph made a point of taking his small daughter on a trip to the *Deep* in Hull so that he could call in to introduce her to Ian about a



*Ian with Sam Marshall 1980*

year ago. Samuel's comment on hearing of Ian's death was, "He really was quite a remarkable person." Ian always enjoyed the treasure hunts devised by the children at the Ashram Weekends at Cliff College. The oldest of his 14 godchildren, who gave the eulogy at

his funeral, spoke of how supportive he was to all fourteen of them as children and continuing into adulthood.

Ian was born in Hull, just before the end of the first world war. He was educated at Winchester College, where he obviously learned a huge amount of poetry by heart, as he often had a quote to add to our discussions. He studied classics at Cambridge and then became a barrister in London. He took a flat in Gloucester Road, Kensington and was involved for some years in the West London Chaplaincy. He often had a student from Imperial College lodging in his spare room.

He also did youth work with young people from the less affluent end of the borough, recalling occasions when he piled several lads into his car to take them off for a weekend camp somewhere in the country, having checked with them orally that their parents knew where they were going! He was an active member of the Labour Party – something of a lost cause in Kensington – and the local WDM group met at his flat for some time. In 1997 Ian moved back to Hull, in due course occupying the house in which he was born.

Ian's contribution to Ashram and its members was considerable, but always in the background. I have only just learned, for example, that he advised Andrew Blackburn and his friends on the legal niceties of setting up their community house in Hither Green in the 1970s, one of the venues where the London group used to meet. He was invaluable to our group when it was London's turn to plan a Weekend, and he was always concerned that everyone's contribution to groups should be properly valued.

Ian was a good cook – he even baked bread on a canal-boat holiday that some of us shared one year – and he often wrote something complimentary about the meals provided at our meetings. "Really nice day – delicious meal (we are a 'meals' group, Radical Jesus 5)" on 31 August 1986.

His hospitality was relaxed and thoughtful. Several members and friends of the Community lodged with him over the years. Simeon Mitchell has good memories of the summer he spent at Gloucester Road while doing research at the British Library for his history degree. Valerie Boyd's son stayed at the house in Hull while studying at the university there, as did Helen Davies soon afterwards, and for me it became a second home for the seven years when I was visiting

my mother in a residential home just west of Hull. It was an oasis of peace – no television, no computer, no pressure...

Four of us from Ashram attended Ian's funeral, along with a large congregation representing all stages and aspects of his life. The character of the person described in the eulogy was immediately recognisable, but the account of his activities during the second world war came as a complete revelation. Not only did he serve in something called GHQ Liaison (or Phantom) Regiment, a secret unit whose role was to transmit vital information to high command, but he received an American Bronze Star Medal for his "very material part in the successful co-operation of the two allied forces" - not something ever mentioned in rounds of telling an interesting fact about ourselves at the start of Ashram Weekends.

Ian's last entry in the London group's scrapbook, on 30th November 1997, prior to his return to Hull, quoted TS Eliott's "In my end is my beginning," and the poem from which this comes was read at his funeral. There were also two quotes on the back of the service sheet, one a paragraph by Richard Holloway, the other from Canon Collins: "This life of faith is a pilgrimage, a going onward in trust, a searching towards an end that is hoped for but unknown."

*Linda Marshall*

---

### **Response to George Carey's Easter attack on the Government for making Christians feel persecuted.**

Could I make the point that when you are speaking, apparently on behalf of the Christian community, especially via such a hate-disseminating organ as the Daily Mail, that you are not representing me and the Christians with whom I have fellowship? In fact, there is a danger of making Christians more of a laughing stock than we are already to many.

In my church (High Anglican) and among my Christian friends, there was despair this Easter morning at your latest utterances - what chance do we have to appear credible and to be taken seriously when our image is further defined by you as narrow, bigoted and unloving, obsessed with sex and apparently uncaring that a large percentage of the population is about to have their lives made miserable by the introduction of the Government's welfare reforms. Now that is a subject on which you could maybe have said something useful..

Please Lord Carey, if you can't say anything helpful, consider staying silent.

*Maggie Jones in an email to his office*

## Move Your Money!

I'm embarrassed to admit that it wasn't until the Move Your Money (MYM) campaign started last summer that I actually got round to doing something I'd intended doing for ages - move our current account. It was with one of the big five (though it was formerly a building society) and we are now with a more ethical bank - the Co-op.

MYM was launched before the scandals of the Libor rate, and HSBC's funding of drug gangs came to light- but what I learned about the big five banks made me very angry. They, with our money, are involved in food speculation and environmental crimes, fund arms companies and Arab rulers fighting democracy movements, while keeping their funds in tax havens and paying their top men millions. Our current account had to go.



July Oldham Community meeting - cutting up my debit card

Only the Co-op and the Islamic Bank of Britain among the ethical banks offer current accounts, but there is more choice when it comes to savings accounts. Moving was very easy - the Co-op transferred the direct debits and standing orders, and gave us a temporary free overdraft facility in case there was a problem while these were set up. (We didn't need it) And I now pay cheques in at my village post office and operate my account online. Embarrassingly my Fairtrade business account is still with an unethical bank - the Co-op doesn't have a physical presence on Teesside - but it's a start.

To find out what happens to *your* money go to [www.moveyourmoney.org.uk/what-about-my-bank](http://www.moveyourmoney.org.uk/what-about-my-bank) and click on 'read more'.

The banks have failed us spectacularly and there is a danger that despite new regulation the system isn't going to change much. If enough of us move our money we send a powerful message to the banks that we don't want business as usual, we want a better banking system serving a fairer society. Even if you can't move all your money you can make a public pledge to move some of it.

*At an individual level, you can't do everything to put an unfair economy right - but you can do something. Move your money is the new fair trade. It is THE campaign for our time." - Ed Mayo, Secretary General of Coops UK*

## The Middlesbrough Traidcraft Christmas shop 2012

I found out too late last year that the recession had at last made Middlesbrough landlords more realistic. So when I went shop-hunting all but two central properties had gone to other short lets. The Mars pension company eventually let me into a former Sony shop for just four weeks. It was in the newest



shopping centre, with no vehicular access. Everything had to be trolleyed in and out, but fortunately the weather when we set up and unpacked was kind! It was especially good to reach lots of new, delighted customers in a new venue, and the old ones found us thanks to a friendly policeman. What progress!! And we took £27,500! *Jenny Medhurst*

## Fairtrade is now mainstream -

### so is the job done?

Fairtrade sales last year rose to an amazing £1.6 billion, improving the lives of 7 million producers and their families. And as a group Fairtrade products are Sainsbury's second biggest seller - so can we relax, box ticked, job done?

But if we look behind those figures, we see that Tate and Lyle's conversion to Fairtrade sugar, and Cadbury's move into the Fairtrade market had a big effect - while sales of some products shrank.

Traidcraft and the other dedicated Fairtrade companies welcome the impact that big companies purchases can have on growing the market, but have concerns. The ethics of big business is very different, and Traidcraft, which helped to set up the Fairtrade Foundation and Cafe Direct, wants to stand up to those who are now trying to dilute Fairtrade standards.

Fairtrade is also about much more than fair prices, and last year Traidcraft was able to offer £1/2 million in interest free loans to help its producers with their cash flow - credit that they might not have been able to obtain elsewhere, or that could have cost them 15% interest.

And Traidcraft focusses on the poorest - helping them to organise in democratic societies so that they can obtain Fairtrade certification and get onto the Fairtrade ladder. It is now buying 80% of its products from smaller and needier groups, including some from conflict zones like Afghanistan - a risky but valuable commitment.

Supermarket competition and the recession meant that in 2011 it made a loss and bought 20% less from its producers than the year before. But through the Producer Support Fund it helped groups in other ways. A honey co-op in the mountains of Chile was assisted in diversifying into blueberry production - they have now been able to sell fresh blueberries to and access financial support from the Co-op.

Traidcraft also wants to expand the Fairtrade market to reach out to new producers - hence the

first rubber gloves from Sri Lanka, and charcoal from Namibia. Now that Cafe Direct and Divine have established markets, it is targeting some of the poorest cocoa and coffee producers in the world to source the ingredients for its new chocolate range and instant decaffeinated coffee.



The latter comes from Guatemala where half the people live on less than \$2/ day, and the farmers live arduous and dangerous lives high up a volcano. In the pipeline are stevia - a low calorie sweetener from Latin America, and palm oil for cleaning products. Controversial - but the biggest product grown by small holders for which there is not yet a Fairtrade Mark.)

Through the work of its development charity Traidcraft Exchange vegetable, fish and duck producers in Bangladesh who supply their local market have increased their incomes by over 60%. While the Exchange's work with the National Farmers' Union has helped to get our government to commit to appoint a Grocery Adjudicator to protect farmers everywhere from supermarket bullying.

Today 1.4 billion people still live on less than \$1.25 / day. Traidcraft is a small company which pioneered Fairtrade more than 30 years ago and wants to be in it for the long term - to ensure that the movement isn't hijacked and that the poorest are helped to access its benefits.

So is the job done? No - we've only just begun - and we urgently need your support! Buying products with the Fairtrade Mark makes a difference to the producer - but buying from Traidcraft and other 100% Fairtrade companies goes so much further - it's better than fair and **more than just!** Please share this message with your friends, family and colleagues too - so that the work of building self confident and flourishing communities can grow, helping to create a world freed from the scandal of poverty.

*Jenny Medhurst*

# Sharpening our prophetic edge in the wider world and the environment

Let's start with the environment because it gives us an insight into other aspects of the wider world and it is in some sense foundational. We cannot live without some kind of constructive relationship with our environment.

A great deal of the church's thinking about the environment has been based on different understandings of *creation*. Creation theology has often been seen as a synonym for environmental theology - humanity having dominion over the earth, the Sabbath as the crown of creation etc.

I want to argue that this is a mistake -the appropriate place to start is prophecy. Walter Brueggemann has argued that two distinct trajectories can be identified in the bible. One encompasses creation, the book of the covenant, the wisdom tradition. This is the tradition of the kings, of the priests, the hierarchy. It was written and edited over a long period of time by those with influence, wanting to preserve their position. It emphasises stability, hierarchy, reflection, changelessness.

However the Israelites, the worshippers of Yahweh, were founded and held together not by hierarchy or stability but by liberation: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, *that's why* you shall have no other God but me". The liberation from slavery is the founding narrative, the exodus gave the Israelites their faith. As Dorothee Soelle says, they had to know they were liberated *before* they could know they were created.

So there is this other tradition, the prophetic tradition, with origins in the liberation from slavery and the exodus, and includes the prophets who develop a narrative of returning to the liberator God. This tradition emphasises radical change, it is unsettling, divisive, exposing oppression, rousing the poor, condemning the rich. Brueggemann argues that this is the tradition in which Jesus locates himself.

So we should look first at the environment through the theology of prophecy – and only then should we look at creation. Our approach to creation should be based not on the originator myths of Genesis, but of the prophetic utopia of 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah, of the new heaven and new earth. If we are thinking about the environment through prophetic eyes, we should ask: Who is suffering in the current state of the environment? Who are the oppressed? Who is the oppressor? Who are the environmentally poor?

The first thing to say about this is that we live in a *globalised* world. It is impossible to separate ourselves from the poor and oppressed because we are oppressors. The way the global economy is set up means that we cannot help but oppress others through our everyday activities. We may buy fair trade and environmentally friendly products, and make ethical decisions in every aspect of our lifestyle, but by being in the world as citizens of a European nation, we oppress. Andrew Dobson, who writes on environmental citizenship, calls this the "*relations of actual harm*": the social relationships in which we exist cause actual harm to someone somewhere in the world. We cannot extricate ourselves from this (or rather, if we did manage to find a way to separate ourselves from all societies and live, self-sufficiently in perfect isolation from everyone else, then notwithstanding the legacy of oppression we would take with us, we would also do nothing to challenge this oppression). This is the tragic dilemma of the parable of the talents – using the talents which have been allocated to us (the extortion rights in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine or capital and resources in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe) enables us to benefit from the exploitation of others, but burying the talents does no good either.

The second thing to say is that we live in a particular form of globalised world – a *neoliberal* one. Neoliberalism puts the interests of capital above all other interests. It is a breach from the policies of the welfare state, in which most countries accepted a compromise between the interests of economic growth and the welfare of

citizens. Neoliberalism tears this up. The state no longer has the responsibility for the welfare of its citizens. The responsibility of the state is to make things easy for capital accumulation or economic growth. All things must become commodities, to be bought and sold on a marketplace, so that businesses can make profits out of them – or if they don't, they go to the wall. There is a constant striving to turn more things into commodities like water and the atmospheric carbon cycle.

Neoliberalism was first experimented with in Latin America by US client dictators and juntas, then introduced to the UK by Margaret Thatcher, and more recently into India and China where it is currently leading to massive dispossession and, in India, civil war. The geographer David Harvey points out that neoliberalism maximises only particular kinds of economic growth, those which benefit the elite class, the owners of the big companies and their allies. So the point of neoliberalism, to Harvey, is a shift of class power away from working people – who had achieved some influence through the welfare state – to the transnational capitalist class.

So we live in a time of globalisation but it is the particular form of globalisation which is the problem, the neoliberal globalisation which puts the interests of the seriously wealthy, who need to find new ways to invest and make money, above the interests of everybody and everything else. It doesn't have to be like this. Globalisation could mean many things which are in the interests of the poor, the dispossessed, the exploited. That is why the vast movement of campaigners call themselves alternative globalisation, under the banner of 'another world is possible' (which sounds very like a 21<sup>st</sup> century secularised translation of 'the Kingdom of God is among you').

And thirdly the global economy as based on a *logic of dumping*. The economy, whether local or global, is essentially a mechanism for extracting materials, turning them into things or energy which we need or want or can use, distributing these and then disposing of the materials again. At each of the stages in this process, economic decisions are made. We are used to making our decisions as consumers - do we pay that extra premium for the organic vegetables, or fairly traded products? Do we take the environmentally preferred train to

London for £150 or the plane for £50? I guess we usually chose to pay extra for the ethical choice, if we can afford it. If we can't afford the organic potatoes sometimes we buy the chemically produced ones and what we are doing is shifting the difference in cost onto the soil whose life is shortened, the contaminated rivers, the workers exposed to the chemicals. We shift costs, not because we are bad but because we can't afford not to.

Everybody along this supply chain is making similar choices – and not usually on the basis of ethics, but on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis in a competitive environment, constantly looking for ways in which they can make savings in order to stay afloat. So they try to shift costs off their budget sheet so that the cost-benefit equation comes out better, which usually means dumping them onto the poorest, those with least leverage to resist, those who can't buy themselves out of being dumped on, those that are so desperate for a job that they will tolerate being dumped on, countries whose foreign investment is predicated on providing a space which is safe for dumping – such as the Special Economic Zones in India, where environmental and labour laws are relaxed in order to attract foreign firms.

So we are all bound together through relations of actual harm, we live in a neoliberal form of globalisation in which everything is commodifiable, and the logic of the economy is one of dumping onto the poorest. In this context, who are the poor? Who are those whose interests are the core of a prophetic vision to which our Community can respond in matters of belief and action within the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> C ?

One such group of people are the survivors of the Bhopal gas disaster. 25 years ago, on the night of 2nd-3rd December 1984, toxic methyl isocyanate gas leaked from the union carbide insecticide factory in the city of Bhopal. It leaked because of the logic of dumping. The factory was set up by the US company Union Carbide in India, in the poor sector of the city of Bhopal, to provide insecticides for the new high-yielding crops introduced in the Green Revolution. As sales plateaued, profits were squeezed and savings had to be made. Maintenance was reduced, staff levels were cut, training was diminished, worn parts were replaced

with cheaper alternatives, broken monitoring gauges were not replaced at all, refrigerator units were switched off, chemicals stockpiled, expensive safety equipment was removed. And so when water leaked into a tank of gas and started a chemical reaction, there was nothing to stop thousands of people being killed – an estimated 8,000 people in the following few days, some 25,000 to date.

I have had the privilege of working with the survivors who have been campaigning for justice for over 25 years, demanding commensurate compensation, economic rehabilitation and pensions, adequate healthcare, environmental remediation of the factory site and the contaminated water, corporate accountability from the company. But during this time, India got the neoliberal bug and started doing whatever it could to attract multinational capital to invest in its high-tech corridors, its mineral deposits and its special economic zones. Multinational capital from corporations like Dow Chemicals, which bought Union Carbide. The last thing which the Indian government wants to do is send out a message that such companies could be liable for expensive reparations if an accident happens during its ordinary cost-shifting, dumping activities. After all, one of India's unique selling points is that its population is cheap.

And the chances are, we have all benefited from the production of cheaper food as a result of Dow's pesticides, or nicer coloured paint on our walls, or car engines which work, or printer's ink or computers or mobile 'phones – all the accoutrements of modern life in which we are, without much choice, implicated in the relations of actual harm. And all around us, companies are still shifting costs as cheaply as possible – cutting corners, moving operations to India, increasing productivity, putting profit before humanity is an ordinary, everyday activity. As one of the Bhopal campaign slogans puts it "we all live in Bhopal".

When we start with creation, we have a tendency to ask: How can society sustain itself? Sustainable development is the mantra. We need to sustain things more or less as they are. How can we go on *like this*? How can we keep the lights on?

But when we start with prophecy, we ask a different question:

- How can society be transformed? How can things be different?
- How can we make another world possible, an alternative globalisation which isn't based on the logic of dumping?

As rich and reluctant oppressors, our lifestyles would not be sustained in such a transformed world.

When we start with creation we ask: What lifestyle choices should I make? How can I make decisions ethically? How best to use the power of choice which I'm blessed with?

But when we start with prophecy, we ask:

- Where are those who are dumped-on resisting?

Don't start with those of us that have the power of choice, look at those who have least choice but are still challenging the logic of dumping which they are experiencing most acutely.

- How do we join them in their struggle?

The creation-focussed starting point asks: How do we become better stewards of our possessions? Make sure what we have is environmentally friendly. What should we be doing with what we own the better to make positive impacts on the world?

But the prophetic starting point is:

- how do we lose our possessions?
- How can we engage with the world in ways that risk losing what we own?

Ending injustice means ending the privileges that we get from being rich in a corrupt, unjust world, privileges like being able to be stewards of our possessions.

Making ethical choices, being good stewards, sustainable development: it is almost inevitable that we will want to support these. But these will

never transform the world and the corrupt logic which dumps on the poor. And the more we focus on our ethical choices, the more we will want to hold on to the privileges which give us the power to make them.

I want to finish with the prophetic insight of 15 year old Amir, in Bhopal, whose parents were exposed to the gas and whose friends include those born with severe abnormalities:

*What has happened has happened and we can't change that, but we will keep on fighting. We want to stop another Bhopal happening elsewhere. Even when we get justice we will keep fighting so that no company feels it can do what Union Carbide did, and nobody else will have to experience what Bhopal has.*

*Abridged from an article by Eurig Scandrett for Coracle, the Iona Community newsletter [www.iona.org.uk](http://www.iona.org.uk)*

In November 2010 In Sep. 2012, two survivors of the Bhopal disaster toured the UK. Balkrishna Namdev, a trade unionist, organised the Gas Affected Pensioners' Front. Nineteen year old Safreen Khan was born to gas affected parents and has grown up drinking water contaminated by the factory site. She and her friends established Children Against Dow Carbide to keep the campaign going.

Namdev and Safreen met with environmental justice activists, trade unionists and elected representatives to talk about the campaign to blacklist Dow, especially with the company's sponsorship of Olympic events.

<http://sfobhopal.org/?p=95>. More Bhopal solidarity events will be staged in the run up to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the disaster in December 2014.



*Balkrishna, Safreen, Eurig and his partner Susan at the Dow Works at Grangemouth*

## Thoughts on the Bible

Having been preaching for nearly 50 years, and faced with a protracted period of medically driven down-time, I thought it was about time I read the bible. So I read it from cover to cover, including the Apocrypha, and was interested therefore to see David Wood's an article in the Methodist Local Preachers' Ichthus magazine about giving the bible it's due. I felt there were comments to make!

First, and most important, we must distinguish between the old and new testaments. As I read the OT, I struggled to keep interested, to keep awake even. It is essential to grasp that this is the (a?) history of the Jewish people written by the Jews for the Jews. Their relationship with – and indeed their understanding of - God changes markedly as the history progresses. At the beginning they, like everybody else, are polytheists who

merely think their God is best. The wonder of the book is the story of the gradual realization that there is only one God, and that the model they have discovered is best and most accurate.

But in and around the telling of that story are some very dubious tales of some very dubious people – and much of it, especially to someone coming to the tale with no background of faith, is of very little interest or value. At almost 1200 pages it is a pretty cumbersome way of telling the story of the, albeit hugely important, development of monotheism as a meaning of life. It would be better to tell all this in a good summary of 100 pages – plus the book of Job, which is the one part which really comes through as a modern discussion of why bad things happen to good people.

Much of the Apocrypha is also less than riveting, but I would seriously recommend the books of the Maccabees for dramatic history with very interesting inclusions of verbatim letters to and from Rome.

So what a relief then to come to the New Testament. In contrast this reads like real history of real people: an inspiring story of a man who gave his life to show that love was the right way to solve problems, and that love should be pursued whatever the odds and whatever the outcome. Then the remarkable, if sparse and patchy, description of how a few brave and dedicated men spread that story round the Mediterranean and set in motion the chain of events leading to the Christian church we have today.

But even with the NT I think we have to be very careful when introducing it to the uninitiated with phrases like ‘the word of God’ or, as David Wood put it, ‘God’s gift to all’? How do we react when Moslems tell us that the Koran was dictated word for word by the Archangel Gabriel to Mohammed?

Furthermore I think it would be wise for the first time reader to use, for instance, the William Barclay version of the epistles – putting them into (probable) chronological order, and explaining the circumstances in which Paul and others were writing.

Finally, although the Bible is clearly fundamental, it is vital that we recognise that there is a huge amount of important Christian literature – most of it far more recently written than these books which were all finished 1800 - 3000 years ago. Modern thinking is also important. God may be timeless and unchanging, but we – the human race – are not. The relationship between us changes because we change, and despite the fact that God doesn’t. We must never be so keen on reading the bible that we neglect modern thinking and scholarship.

Richard Pater, Local Preacher in the  
Kendal Circuit

PS I read the bible in the NEB version, since my understanding is that the NEB still represents academically the most objective and authoritative translation. As a wonderful bi-product that produced the ultimate pub quiz question – who gave whom 5 gold haemorrhoids, and why? (1 Sam 5 and following, esp. 1 Sam 6 v 11-12).

There is also a useful tip on the appropriate punishment for a wife who stops a fight by grabbing the genitals of one of the combatants (Deut 25 v 11-12). And the odd way in which Achsah caught the attention of Caleb when she wanted to ask him to give her pools of water (Judges 1 v 14). A bit like clearing your throat I suppose!

## Website News

Ashram Community now has an updated website which is available via BOTH of the existing domains

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

and

[www.christiancommunityashram.org.uk](http://www.christiancommunityashram.org.uk)

All the pre 2008 material is available by clicking the relevant parts of the new Website.

Please send news, ideas and suggestions for the website to Kath Clements at [kath@kclements.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:kath@kclements.fsnet.co.uk)

It is anticipated that the longer domain name will not be renewed on expiry so please always use the [www.ashram.org.uk](http://www.ashram.org.uk) in your communications

## INNER CITY RETREAT

Be a 'guest' welcomed as Jesus in a community home, sharing around the table as he did, contemplating on his Gospel and life, expressing insights with one another, en-fleshing his words in our beings, and walking the city streets as he did with a community of caring disciples!

**Thu 4 –Sun 7 July 2013**

**At walking distance**

**Ashram Community Homes in Sheffield**

**Details & Bookings**

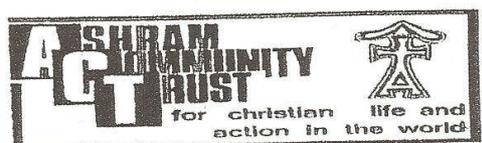
**John – 0114 243 6688**

**Nirmal – 07932 017 929**

**Email: [curlsu@hotmail.com](mailto:curlsu@hotmail.com)**

**Ashram Community**

**178 Abbeyfield Road, Sheffield S4 7AY**



## DATES

### 2013

7-9 June – Intentional Community W/E Sheffield

4-7 July – Inner City Retreat, Sheffield

13 July – General Meeting, Castle, Northwich

2 -8 Aug – Sheffield Ashram Week

23-30 Aug-Community Holiday Holy Rood House, Thirsk

4-6 Oct – Community Weekend, Castleton

1-7 Nov – Sheffield Ashram Week

### 2014

22 Feb – General Meeting, Sheffield

9-11 May Community Weekend, Castleton

## COMMUNITY

Community Office:

178 Abbeyfield Road, Sheffield S4 7AY

Tel: 0114 243 6688/244 7278

Ashram Press: As above

See Website for Publications

Ashram Community Trust is a Registered Charity

Registered Charity No: 1099164

Charitable Company No: 4779914

## HOUSES AND PROJECTS

Burngreave Ashram: 80-86 Spital Hill Sheffield S4 7LG – Tel: 0114 270 0972

Ashram Centre/New Roots Shop:

347 Glossop Rd Sheffield S10 2HP

Tel: 0114 272 1971

Community Houses: 77 and 79 Rock St

Sheffield S3 9JB – Tel: 0114 272 7144

6 Andover Street Sheffield S3 9EG

## BRANCHES

All Members and Associates are attached to one of five Regional Branches. Please contact Secretaries if you would like to know more about meeting or events. The Branch Secretaries are the local contact points for the Community.

## SECRETARIES

**Midlands** – Chris & Lorraine Smedley

Tel: 0115 9288430 – Monthly Meetings

**London** – Linda Marshall –01784456474

Saturday Meetings – Monthly

**North-West** – Josie Smith – 01706841532

Meetings as arranged

**Sheffield** – Grace Vincent – 01142436688

Gatherings fortnightly – Mon, 7 – 9:30pm

**North-East** – Jenny Medhurst

Tel: 01740630475 – Meetings as arranged