



ACT TOGETHER

Ashram Community Trust

Issue 83 - 50th Anniversary

Spring 2017



1986 Ashram Weekend at Cliff College

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

www.ashram.org.uk

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ASHRAM COMMUNITY WEEKEND – THE WHOLENESS OF CREATION

God's Creation and its Infinite Wonders

The First Talk Given by Euan McPhee on Friday 7 October 2016

Until recently, the environment did not feature as an area of concern for the church. As a young Christian, I used to wish that Jesus had said something about such matters! In the last few decades, however, environmental concern has entered the mainstream of church thought. That said, it is one thing to get something onto the church's agenda, but another to have Christian congregations wholeheartedly embracing such concern and altering their lifestyles as a consequence.

The apparent lack of concern for creation was compounded by the fact that many Christians were much more focussed on the human condition - not realising that human well-being was in fact intricately tied up with environmental well-being. Now, of course, most people understand that, as do many organisations such as Christian Aid. Everyone is aware of the interdependence of people and the environment - for food, water, and all the other resources which sustain life.

Where does one look for scriptural support for environmental concern? Many Christians, both the environmentally-aware and the doubters, have based their positions on the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. The eco-Christians point to the first chapter where it says no fewer than six times that what had been created was good, and after all was made, it was pronounced very good. So if God considers the creation to be so good, the argument goes, then what right have we to exploit and damage it?

The doubters turn to the same first chapter and point to the verse where God says to humankind: "*Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.*" (Genesis 1:28). Certainly, humankind has more than fully responded to the first edict; human population growth is still regarded by many as the elephant in the room of the whole sustainability debate.

And then there is that much maligned concept of dominion. However, the key word is dominion, not domination; dominion infers delegated authority from God to humans, where we are charged to act as regents, answerable to God for how we act. Domination is how we have tended to act, with all of the consequences to the environment, and therefore people, of which we are only too well aware. Hence the debate which has reigned around the concept of stewardship; for too many years, this has been thought of in Christian circles as how we as followers of Jesus should account for our money. Keeping the physical structures of the church going has been too much of a focus for individual Christian action within the church family. How and where that financial wealth originates and its connections with all manner of exploitation and oppression across the globe scarcely enters the conversation.

Further on in Genesis, we have the story of Noah. Whilst many concentrate on the implications of this parabolic story for human behaviour and its consequences, it is easy to miss the key notion of a God who is concerned for all life on earth. Thus we have a picture of God making a new agreement, or covenant, not only with humans, but with all creation: "*When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and **every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.***" (Genesis 9:16).

In Leviticus we see how God instructs Moses and the Israelites to manage the land sustainably, through the Sabbatical Year and the Year of Jubilee. Not only would this enable the land to recover its fertility, but a whole range of social and economic reforms took place during the Jubilee Year which would have ensured that wealth did not accumulate in the hands of the few. This concept is one that must surely resonate with anyone who is appalled by the actions of bankers and financiers continuing to award themselves obscene amounts of financial rewards despite

having been responsible for precipitating the financial crash which has impacted hugely on the poorer people of the world. The idea of debt cancellation was taken up vigorously by campaigning groups, under the banner of the Jubilee Campaign, leading up to and after the millennium – but with limited success.

It is small wonder that most scholars believe that Jubilee was only enacted once – it was too much even for the Israelites to maintain!

Also included in the 613 laws which make up the Torah are numerous laws which instruct the Israelites as to how they should treat animals, as well as people. Whilst many of these laws could be regarded as sensible environmental health precautions, implicit within them is the notion that God cares for other life forms, not just humans.

Looking at the Psalms, that treasure trove of worship resources to Jew and Christian alike, we can find numerous references to the wonders of God's creation. Psalm 8 is perhaps the best-known outpouring of wonder at the whole created order. An even more fulsome rendering is found in Psalm 104. Starting at the universal scale, the psalmist then focuses on the earth and its physical makeup, then talks about water and its life-giving properties, before giving an account of the plants and their role in feeding animals and humans (in that order). This is followed by a cavalcade of plant and animal life, and how their existence is marked out by the seasons. After this great paean to the rich diversity of life, almost as an afterthought, the psalmist says: "*People go out to their work and to their labour until the evening.*" (Psalm 104:23). This really puts humans in their place – not as the pinnacle of creation, but as a member of the ecological community. However, it is easy for anyone who reads this and other psalms to simply view them as rather extravagant poetic pieces, not comprising any instructions for living.

Looking at the prophetic writings, however, there is little room for shrugging off the message of reaping the social and environmental consequences of our actions. Isaiah warns the Israelites: "*It is you who have devoured the*

vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord God of hosts." (Isaiah 3:14-15). And "*Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left alone in the midst of the land!*" (Isaiah 5:8). Whilst these may have been specific prophecies for a particular time and people, nevertheless the implications for our own generation are clear.

Paul in his letter to the Roman church picks up on the all-encompassing concern of God for all life on earth, not just humans: "*For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.*" (Romans 8:19-23).

So, to return to my original problem that Jesus does not seem to say anything about the environment, it could be claimed that he did not need to. Both Jesus and his Jewish audience would have been well versed in the Torah and its edicts on creation care. Also, the lifestyle of the average Palestinian in Jesus's day would have been far more limited in environmental impact than our modern industrial, technological world today.

Perhaps more convincing than all of this, however, is what Jesus says in the sixth chapter of Matthew's Gospel: "*Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?*" (Matthew 6:25). Adopt this attitude, and that of the other recommendations in what we call the Sermon on the Mount, and our lifestyles will automatically conform to one which is infused with creation care!

Euan McPhee October 2016

The Community Weekend on THE WHOLENESS OF CREATION

After a wonderful bring and share meal complicated by problems with lighting the oven, Euan led a session on his own environmental journey, and on the Biblical basis for creation care.

There was also lots of unloading and setting up of Jenny's marvellous cornucopia of fairly-traded goods, where people browsed between sessions.

In the morning, after the usual format of silent reflection, breakfast, and meal preparation, Nona invited pairs of people to discuss their main environmental concerns, and to write on post-it notes what (if anything) they were doing in the area. Some of the ideas follow:

ASHRAM EFFORTS

- Ashram altering the membership commitment from "all humanity" to "all creation"!
- "Cooking Together!" Cookbook used for weekends
- The Gathering bring and share meal reveals issues of food, diet, lifestyle
- Burngreave Ashram free meal uses supermarket surplus food through faretrade
- Created New Roots shop and organic, veggie window displays on world issues.

WORKING WITH OTHERS

- Recycling people to help them re-engage with society
- Conserving Wildlife
- Actively involved in a conservation group – managing a woodland (2)
- Part of an eco-friendly project growing organic vegetables, rearing free-range chickens, recycling waste with pigs, making mulch, resting land, etc.
- Planting trees (planted 3000 hardwood trees),
- Started interfaith tree planting in Sheffield and forest gardening
- Set up a group to challenge the way we live
- Set up with others a community energy company
- Encouraging greenways and footpaths
- Campaigning against road and airport expansion
- Share transport
- Promote walking, cycling awareness
- Lobbying MPs via organisations eg Friends of the Earth, Oxfam

WORKING ON OUR OWN OR IN OUR HOMES

- *Minimalising* clothes
- Create awareness via preaching (2)
- Recycling as much as possible
- Walking when practical (3)
- Only using car when necessary
- Using bicycle
- Using public transport where feasible (2)
- Own electric car charged with green electricity
- Growing flowers for bees
- Avoid flushing toilet at night
- Boil just enough water for tea
- Do washing on very sunny days
- Query planning applications for tree felling
- working with ABUNDANCE...organic, veggie, vegan
- Write to MP re- fracking, fossil fuels
- Recycling household and garden waste
- Recycling cans and boxes
- Collect tea leaves from local community cafe for compost bin
- Taking to and buying from
- Obtaining Furnishings from charity shop
- Clothing – charity shops or fairly traded (2)
- Supporting WWF
- Switching plugs off where practical
- Proposed to the village and district that they should plant urban trees
- Using library instead of buying books
- Not refurbishing house
- Solar panels for electricity (3) and water heating
- planted soft fruit bushes and fruit trees plus growing vegetables
- Eat responsibly sourced fish
- Reduced meat consumption
- eating only once a day –including others' leftovers
- cooking for minimum time, avoiding ovens
- avoid heating of building by living in the tropics, esp. during winter
- LED light bulbs
- installing insulation in Victorian house
- Composting
- Choosing a "good" energy supplier (2)

We had with us copies of Green Christian's "Nine ways to live gently on the earth". Between those members present all nine ways were well covered! The leaflet says "Think: enough is best, rather than more is better." So well done, all!

Later that morning Euan offering an "information session" before a chance for all to share what we have been doing since the last meeting.

After lunch, we had some free time (except for the Trustees!) – some went for a vigorous walk in the neighbourhood, while others caught up on sleep. Then, following a nice cup of tea, Nona led a creative session on the theme of "Hope for the future" Evening meal, a happy product of much chopping earlier in the day.

Community AGM (reported on separately) and then games for those who wished to play, by a roaring fire.

Sunday

Silent reflection (not as well attended as breakfast) Our last session involved a series of readings from *Earthsong** by Erna & Michael Colebrook and *A Heart for Creation* by Chris Polhill, with a reflection



from Euan in the centre on the value of Information, Inspiration and Integration with regard to the creation. Ian Parker led a moving worship service before our final meal together. Thanks to Janice and helpers for all the fine food! During the clearing up, we witnessed the loaves and fishes miracle again as we found we had ten loaves of sliced white bread remaining after all had eaten their fill! Then time to say goodbye to friends old and new...thanks to all for another memorable weekend.

Nona and Euan.

*this wonderful anthology is not in print but second hand copies are available online.

SELECTED READINGS FROM "A HEART FOR CREATION"

Worship resources and reflections on the environment

Chris Polhill. 2010. Wild Goose Publications.

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APORIA

How shall we live in the years that are coming
How shall we love and live in the loving
When so many fears on tenuous threads
Hang over our lives and over our heads?

How shall we sing the songs of our living
How shall we hear the music of being
When in the bright sky even the lark
Fears the gathering storm and approaching dark?

How shall we know the bluebirds are winging
How shall we know the good earth is breathing
When oceans are warm and winds blow too strong
When we know that our living has badly gone wrong?

So how will we live in the years that are coming
How can we love and live in the loving
When so many fears on tenuous threads
Still hang over our lives and over our heads?

Bryan Owen

OH THE LIFE OF THE WORLD

Oh the life of the world is a joy and a treasure,
unfolding in beauty the green-growing tree,
the changing of seasons in mountain and valley
the stars and the bright restless sea.

Oh the life of the world is a fountain of goodness
overflowing in labour and passion and pain,
in the sound of the city and the silence of wisdom,
in the birth of a child once again.

Oh the life of the world is the source of our healing.
It rises in laughter and wells up in song;
it springs from the care of the poor and the broken
and refreshes where justice is strong.

Kathy Galloway

QUESTIONS

To fly or not to fly? – that is the question:
whether it is better for the planet to risk
damp greyness of a British summer,
or to take the plane travelling to distant shores;
so in bright warmth relax – meet Thai, meet African,
no more? To support a poorer culture
with the need to take a break,
and by my holiday learn more of them.

'Tis surely better than a walled hotel
of Western pleasure on the Gambia's shore?

But what of carbon? Ah! There's the rub.
An element when burned
rises through the sky to make a thicker blanket,
a stratum in the atmosphere
to warm the seas and change the weather,
throwing all in flux.
What then for all – let alone the hapless poor?
Useless the ancient knowledge of seedtime and
harvest,
seasons of rain and sun, all is change, all uncertain.

We here do sleep, perchance to dream
Of times when we knew naught of such a harm,
building still e'en larger places for the plane,
when it doth burn its fuel higher in the skies
than any other form of travel that we know.
How now can we ignore it – commerce and travellers
both?
Yet how shrink back within our little shores?

Time marches onwards never back.
Let conscience give us courage to move forwards,
our native resolution strengthen us to find gentle
ways
for our world's enterprises of great moment.
Meanwhile, dear friends, till these are found

we could consider this adventure
that we will travel on the ground.

Chris Polhill (with apologies to Shakespeare)

WHAT DO YOU HOPE FOR THE WORLD?

*What do you hope for the world?
What are your dreams?*

Peace and justice,
food and shelter,
lands and oceans
that are healthy and clean?

*What do you hope for your country?
What are your dreams?*

Freedom from oppression,
just and generous government,
available work and adequate housing,
allotments and gardens and city parks?

*What do you hope for your friends and family?
What are your dreams?*

Health and prosperity,
love between each other,
safe spaces to grow up in,
safe places to grow old?

*What do you hope for yourself?
What are your dreams?
(a moment to think)*

It's good to dream.
God is always dreaming.
And dreams,
with God's help,
can become reality.

Ruth Burgess

Visit to Hull

Kingston-upon-Hull, this year's UK City of Culture, is my home town, so a small family gathering was organised for a weekend in February, to see how things were going on the culture front. To be honest, it was as much a nostalgia trip as a cultural experience, but what prompted me to write this little piece was something else again – Hull as a city of philanthropy. Even so, let's start with some culture. On the Saturday

morning we all arranged to meet in the coffee bar of the Ferens Art Gallery, where the current special exhibition was a selection of paintings by local artists for their annual competition. I was slightly taken aback when I turned a corner in the display and was confronted with a huge painting of a classmate of mine from secondary school (the actress Maureen Lipman), lying on a sofa, looking comfortable and relaxed, and hardly changed in

appearance from fifty years ago (*nostalgia number one*). In 1983 the Ferens had an exhibition of over 100 photographs of the city entitled “Still occupied – a view of Hull”, photographs by one Peter Marshall. The rest of the Marshall family was able to view the exhibition courtesy of Ian Mackrill (a now deceased Ashram member), who drove us across from Cliff College in Derbyshire during the free time on the Saturday afternoon of an Ashram Weekend (*nostalgia number two*).

The Ferens Art Gallery is 90 years old this year, and it is 100 years since the site upon which it stands was first purchased. But why the Ferens? If you don't know already, there is a special exhibition this year that gives the answer, an exhibition about Thomas Ferens (1847-1930), who paid for the site, paid for the building, paid for a good number of paintings, especially ones by local artists of the time, and gave money that established a fund for future purchases which is still being used today (*philanthropy number 1*).

Ferens was the son of a miller and left school at 13, but at age 19 he got a job as clerk to Mr James Reckitt, of Dettol fame, and gradually worked his way up from there to become, eventually, the chairman of the company of Reckitt & Sons. In the process he became extremely rich. He also paid (*philanthropy number two*) for the foundation of Hull University (whose motto “Lampada Ferens” is a rather satisfying pun for speakers of Latin).

Thomas Ferens was a committed Methodist. He became the Liberal MP for East Hull in 1906, but insisted on returning home every weekend so that he could still teach the boys in his Sunday School class. Judging by the information in the exhibition gallery, he took seriously John Wesley's injunction to earn all we can, save all we can and give all we can, giving away in his later years 94% of his annual income (*philanthropy number 3*).

Returning now to February 2017.....

After visiting the art gallery I expressed an interest in undertaking an adventurous expedition to East Hull, to look at the Garden Village, which I had heard of but never visited. I was brought up in West Hull, on the other side of the river (Hull, not Humber) and rarely ventured beyond the city centre. This is normal for Hull; apart

from anything else, it would have meant taking two buses. But in honour of the year of culture we had provided ourselves with the Pevsner architectural guide to the city, and the Garden Village was one of the areas featured at some length.

It was developed by Thomas Ferens' employer, James, later Sir James, Reckitt, who is reported to have reflected on the fact, in conversation with Ferens, that he and his family had a comfortable house with a pleasant garden to live in, yet most of his workers lived in nothing better than slums; he would therefore set about providing them with decent houses and gardens, and at the same rent as they were already paying (*philanthropy number 4*). Reckitt was a Quaker, and was no doubt following in the footsteps of Cadbury at Bournville and Rowntree at New Earswick near York.

The estate remains largely as it was when it was developed between 1907 and 1913, though most of the houses are now privately owned, and the shops in the cloister-like shopping centre have been turned into flats as there are plenty of shops on the main road nearby. There are also three groups of almshouses, funded by various members of the Reckitt family (*philanthropy number 5*).

And now the downside.....

The company Reckitt & Sons was founded in 1840 and continued as a ‘family firm’ right through till 1999. About ten years ago we had a new volunteer at the CAB in Staines who, I discovered by chance, had come over from India to Hull when her husband, a chemist, took a job at Reckitts, and had been very happy there. But when Reckitts was merged with the Dutch firm Benckiser he was moved to their new headquarters in Slough, and I was saddened to hear that he was not enjoying the change in atmosphere and ways of working from ‘family firm’ to multinational – and there is worse to come! Just as I was about to type this article I noticed a headline in the paper: “Reckitt slashes boss's pay after South Korean safety scandal”. Apparently in 2015 their chief executive was paid £23m but last year it was to be a mere £14.6m. The article did not disclose what percentage of either sum was donated to charity.

Linda Marshall



The former shopping centre in the Garden Village

How we ate beetroot soup and learned to love Putin

We first went to Russia in 1992 driving our van to Moscow across a vast expanse of forest. By good fortune and a series of coincidences we came to know a diverse group of people, followers of an Orthodox priest of ecumenical persuasion, Father Aleksandr Myen' who had been brutally killed, perhaps by nationalists. He had inspired them to set up a number of charitable works for the dispossessed. Because we lived and worked with people with special needs we were invited to return to Russia to collaborate with one such project for children with learning difficulties, Miloserdiye in Chernogolovka near Moscow.

We found there a group of devoted followers led by a formidably determined person, Inga Mistova. They were working with minimal resources. Among their charges Alyosha, Alyona, Kiryuska, Masha, Tanmya, Pyotr and more were severely autistic and profoundly handicapped and one dangerously violent. It was amazing how they coped.

Russia was chaotic. The state had sort of vanished. President Yeltsin was an inebriate, the mafia ruled. They were indistinguishable from some of the old soviet elite who were appropriating public assets, laundering their money in London and Cyprus. Frequently the rouble fell through the floor and basic foodstuffs would disappear from the shops to reappear later at double the price. So we learned to do without sugar and to eat beetroot soup, cabbage and potatoes, kasha and smetana. Happily there was always vodka.

Members of the group of helpers came to Stourbridge to visit the services for special needs. But it seemed like inviting them to another planet. Ashram sent some money (a Day's Pay). Some people may remember Sveta Shevchenko coming to an Ashram weekend. In Russia it was impossible to plan. One did what was needed day to day. But we had lots of fun and people were always telling jokes.

Back in England the new Russian millionaires were settling in, buying property in Chelsea. In Moscow former soviet administrators were busy stealing what had supposedly belonged to the people. The prime Minister, Gaidar, and the Finance Minister Chubais were on a crash course of privatisation. Chubais mysteriously suddenly became the owner of the electricity grid. Western capitalism was complicit in this theft. In Chernogolovka the local collective farm milk was replaced by imported Nestle milk cartons.

There was a fragmentation of the state. Corrupt regional governors were allied to local politicians, who were exempt from prosecution. In Chechnya there was an Islamic state and there were other separatist movements and a prospect of civil war as there had been in Yugoslavia.

The West was now advancing the frontiers of NATO and the EU right up to the Russian border. There had been an

undertaking not to do so when Mikhael Gorbachev had agreed to withdraw the Red Army from eastern Europe. Russian friends who had expected a new era of peace and detente now found their country being pushed into a corner, systematically pillaged and humiliated. It seemed to us a betrayal.

Then Yeltsin resigned and Putin was appointed President and later elected. There was a massive sigh of relief. The mafia and oligarchy were cut down to size and Gasprom and other stolen state enterprises were renationalised. New regional governors were directly appointed. In Chernogolovka our group is now able to extend its activities, buy a mini bus, plan a future.

Where a government is weak or corrupt, society is vulnerable to exploitation by the rich and powerful. The people suffer. We saw it happen before our own eyes in Moscow, but the same thing is happening more dramatically in the D.R. Congo with the scramble for rare metals. Elsewhere in Africa and Latin America we know that forests are being devastated, land is being grabbed and sold off by governments. The peasantry are being evicted and abandoned. This injustice leads to unrest, civil conflict and war. What are we to do?

Russia was till suffering injustice in the Baltic states where Russian people suffered discrimination, NATO seemed ready to slip into Georgia, the Ukraine removed the language rights of its Russian speaking people. Salman Rushdie said of Israel and Palestine, there are two narratives. It is so for Russia. When you have spent time in the place, know a few people well, speak the language a bit, you begin to see things from a different point of view. For example the return of the Crimea to Russia might seem quite fair and just, the correction of an historic wrong instead of an aggressive annexation as it is depicted in the west.

Engels reputedly said to Marx that history repeats itself and Marx replied "Yes, first as a tragedy, then as a farce". It always seems that Russian reform is followed by repression.

On Sunday 26th March in Vladivostok, Moscow and St Petersburg there was the suppression of large demonstrations against the corruption of the new elite and there were many arrests. I read a Russian newspaper, "Argumenti i Fakti" It once noted that it is ironic that President Putin so vigorously defends the rights of Russians abroad while at the same time reducing the rights of those who live in Russia itself. It's sad.

As a footnote we had a letter from a friends in Chernogolovka saying that now that Brexit threatens the stability of the United Kingdom she hopes the result will not be as ghastly as it was in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. A kind thought.

Donald Henderson

MORE NEWS FROM MULL

It's hard to believe that we have just completed three years on Mull and a few things have changed since the last update in ACT Together, 2 years ago. The biggest change has been that we have both come out of retirement and are now working part-time

In February last year, I spotted an appeal on the local Facebook page for some temporary, part-time assistance in the office of the local arts organisation, Comar, which runs the island's theatre, music venue and visual arts centre. A big upheaval in the organisation a few months previously had resulted in a lot of staff leaving or being off sick and the finance department badly needed help. To cut a long story short, I was taken on initially on a short-term contract but last October I was given a permanent contract as Finance Officer (though still part-time).



Mull theatre- the office where I work is on the first floor

Twelve months after I started with the organisation Brian joined the department as finance assistant. So, after a gap of three years we are back working together again, as we had done for 13 years previously. Working 16.5 hours a week each still allows us plenty of time to do other things, whilst providing a small income which has come in very handy, as you will find out later.

Brian has become involved in the theatrical world in another way too. One of our friends is involved in amateur dramatic productions and last year was putting on a one-person play at which he asked Brian to assist with sound and

lighting. It was a first for Brian but he rose to the challenge and thoroughly enjoyed it. Last month our friend co-wrote and acted in a play for two actors for the island's annual drama festival and Brian was in charge of the sound again. The play won, which was very pleasing for all concerned.

When planning to move here, we opted for a fairly new house with the thought that we would not need to do much work on it or to spend too much on maintenance. However, it didn't quite work out that way. We have since learned, to our cost (literally) that the previous owners who had the house built, running short of funds, stopped the builder before he'd completed the job and finished it themselves - badly as it turned out. The result is that we are having to have all the windows and patio doors at the front of the house replaced and to have the whole front of the house re-clad. Due to large amounts of water coming in, there is some rot in the floor in the downstairs living room, which means replacing the floor and we've also had a leak under the bath for 6 years, so have had to rip out the bathroom and replace the floor and walls. Some of this we have been able to claim on insurance the bulk of it will have to be funded from savings, which was intended to finance us until we reach pension age. The jobs have therefore proved very opportune.

We are both still involved with the U3A; I am now treasurer and Brian looks after the website. In addition we are jointly responsible for co-ordinating the flourishing walking group and enjoy joining with others to explore different parts of the island. We've also joined the geology group on occasions and learned about the structure of the landscape we are walking across.

It's lambing time at the moment, so we have some new neighbours in the field next door. We get visited by deer regularly and the other morning there were 5 on the lawn. We have attended various concerts and plays promoted by the arts organisation we work for, some of which have been quite thought-provoking. Recently the Mull Youth Theatre staged a play

ASHRAM COMMUNITY – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE
50th Anniversary Address to Ashram Community,
6th May 2017
by Rev. Dr. John Vincent, Leader

PRE-HISTORY

My inclination has always been to invent or discover a leading line or an urgent task, to broadcast it, and then to get people together to support and project it. At school I formed an SCM and IVF 'Christian Union'; in 2 years military service I formed a 'Waringfield Fellowship'; in 1960 the Renewal Group, in 1969 the Urban Theology Unit, in 1970 the Alliance of Radical Methodists. It's all in our 'Confessions' book, ***Inner City Testament (2017)*** in our Ashram Press series on Community.

I suppose I needed companions for the kind of thing I had encountered in Donald Soper's Order of Christian Witness, where I led yearly or twice yearly campaigns from 1950 to 1960, or in George MacLeod's Iona Community, where I had done yearly lecturing from 1958 to 1965.

My community, I knew, had to be different from both. Like OCW, Methodist in ethos, but not just weeks of campaign. Like Iona, founded on disciplines of commitment, but grounded not in a romantic island but in the urban-industrial north of England.

PAST

The name 'Ashram' was always a not very intelligent smoke-screen. Originally, we used it to describe the day long gatherings of like-minded people who wanted to stake out some kind of post-Church or even Alternative Church style and mutuality. It was a decade later that we discovered Bede Griffiths' Indian Christian Ashram, and Ghandi's Community – but both were far away from our interests or abilities.

Rather, what we created came naturally – meetings and an organisation for people who wanted to think and act like ourselves, plus a few projects that were 'acted parables' of these things, especially with and alongside the poor - the Day's Pay Yearly Discipline, started

with us by Merfyn Temple in 1968, and the Inner City Community Houses, with the first in 1969, in King Street, Rochdale, and the second in 1971 in Andover Street, Sheffield.

We had a radical theology, using books by John Robinson, Bruce Kendrick, Geoff Ainger, as well as my own ***Christ and Methodism (1965)*** and ***Here I Stand (1967)***. Tony Wesson was Deputy Leader for the first eight years, and was a great strength and advocate, followed by Liz Turner as the first Convenor in 1975.

In today's display of photographs and documents, produced in 1977, the Community is displayed under the following headings:

Commitment

Membership form, Community Leaflet

Weekends

Mankinholes, Cliff, Wood Hall, also holidays

Worship

An Agape, Community Worship

Day's Pay

A dairy farm for Kerala, Mission in Reverse

Houses

Rochdale, Sheffield, Middlesbrough, Birmingham and London

Call / Congregation

Eucharist Congregation, Membership Commitment, Branches.

In the 1970s we would have fifty to seventy to our Community Weekends, originally in Southport residential boarding houses, but then more regularly at Cliff College, Calver, at Wood Hall, Tadcaster, and then other places – a school in Malton, a monastery near New Mills, a Catholic Retreat Centre in Oxford.

PRESENT

Ashram provided a place where three elements from the 1960s could be developed. First, an emphasis upon Jesus – a secular Jesus, a contemporary, involved in the real

world and operating through real people. Jean Reid saw this as continuing Albert Schweitzer's famous 'He comes to us as One Unknown' - Jean had a beautiful copper-plate of it which she later gave to me. We called this 'Christocentric Radicalism', and we still spend time asking what that means. My **Radical Jesus** is still a good summary of this, especially nowadays in a multi-faith context. Our bi-annual weekends continue to work at these fundamental theological questions and attitudes.

The second continuing emphasis is an effort to take the idea of intentional community seriously, in a non-sectarian, part time and unheirarchical way. The six 'lines' in **A Lifestyle of Sharing** continue today, with each one mutating at times. The Membership Commitments continue to be worked at in Weekends. Currently, Working Groups are working on the idea of Intentional Community, studying Jesus' work on the Kingdom, and working at Lifestyle and Diet.

The third emphasis is on experiential practice. From the outset, we felt a Jesus-style call to the inner city. The denominations were retiring to the suburbs. Could the cheaper, non-professional, street-level style of the community house be valuable there as a Christian base? We continue with the model now in Sheffield, where we have enough members to run it. There are at present six two-study/bedroom houses or flats, with resident members usually involved in the two shop-based projects, New Roots (from 1987) and Burngreave Ashram (from 2000).

We are now, it must be said, labouring and juggling and striving to find new people for all of this. But I would have to say that it has always been like that. So you are entitled to be asking 'Why do it all?'

That will continue to be a question for the future.

FUTURE

Can we go on?

Yes, I say, so long as we continue to draw into our membership and our work, people like ourselves, with our concerns. Every few years, we have always asked questions like 'Who are we?', 'Why are we here?', 'What is worth doing?', and 'What can we do?'. We need to continue with that.

Will we change?

No, it won't change until there is a fundamental conviction among the membership that we need to change, either because we are not strong enough to continue, or because we see that what we are into – and what the world needs – are found to be totally different. Happily, Ian Parker's Revised Constitution Rules of 2011 puts total power in the hands of the members. They alone can determine such things.

Part of the argument might be – can we do things we have done without being a distinct Community?

It's a good question. But you would then have to demonstrate three things. First, that the concern for a human, radical, secular, political, street-wise Jesus had passed. Second, that intentional community was simply a forlorn human failure, and not worth all the time it takes. Third, that the burdens and anxieties of running inner city community houses and projects was simply a mistaken vocation.

If we ever get to raising these questions, maybe my thoughts here will be part of the discussion! But for the present, it has to be 'For all that is past – Thanks! For all that is present – Keep on! For all that is to come – Trust!'

Captions for the photographs on the next page, Champness Hall 1967, clockwise from the top right

The modernised Hall;

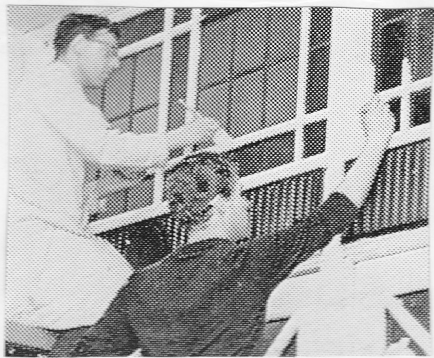
Grace, John and Christopher with Deaconess Kathleen Fountain;

Randal Cropper, John, Cyril Harman, Elsie Bott, Deaconess Vera Allcott;

Stanley and Kathleen Hope; Stuart Jordan; The Vincents;

Jean Reid (left) with friends. Marjorie James was Deaconess 1967-71

Champhness Hall - 1967



CHAMPNESS HALL COMMUNITY

COMMUNITY CUSTOMS

1. The Champness Hall Community is designed to provide members of the Rochdale Mission Team Ministry and others engaged in Christian work with a place for residence, retreat and mutual support.

Members have their residence in separate rooms, have some common life and accept common responsibilities for the community. They seek where possible to support each other in their various ministries in the town.

2. The Community gathers each evening in the Common Room at 11 p.m. and shares coffee. Prayers are said together by those who wish at 12 o'clock and members then retire and preserve silence till breakfast.

Saturday and Sunday lunches and tea are shared in the Community Common Room for those not invited out.

3. Individual members are free to invite friends into the Community, but it is the custom for individual members not to invite more than three personal guests into their rooms or the Common Room. During evenings, the Common Room is for the private use of members to have meals or to sit. Guests intending to stay overnight must be entered into the Guest Book the day before. Members are responsible for the preparation of the Guest Room. An overnight charge to cover laundry etc. of 5/-d. is made.

4. Living in a Community makes for both freedom and restriction. Individuals must wash their meal dishes immediately after use. They should put away all personal things in their rooms and put their food in their own cupboard in the Common Room. The bathroom, toilet and Common Room are cleaned every Monday morning and no personal items should be left in these places (except Common Room cupboards). Members are responsible for cleaning their own rooms and for washing up and putting away their own pots after every meal. Sheets should be placed outside the Warden's flat every Monday morning.

5. Security is of the utmost importance, The outside door to the Palace and the top corridor door are kept permanently locked. Members of the Community are the only people with keys. Access to the Community through the Main Hall is not possible.

CHRIS. BLACKWELL
DAVE GAMBLE
MARJORIE JAMES
JOHN VINCENT

12th January 1969.

John Vincent's 'Beam-enders' launch Ashram movement

DETERMINATION to provide some means whereby Methodists 'on their beam ends' could be helped to remain in the Church and Christian faith was the keynote of a conference held recently in Champness Hall, Rochdale, under the general theme "Living and Surviving in Methodism Today."

The conference, called as a result of a letter by the Rev. Dr. John J. Vincent in the *Methodist Recorder*, brought thirty-six people from many parts of the country for a week-end of frank discussion.

There were no set speeches and no visiting speakers, but the themes for each open session revealed a wide variety of need, frustration, and disappointment. Faced with a situation in which there seemed to be isolated Methodists all over the country who derived little or nothing from the local life of their churches, the conference set its mind to the discovery of means whereby the individual at least could be held and encouraged to grow.

Thus, the early sessions on "Where I am now," and "Whence do I receive?" led to a study of "A Contemporary Style of Life" and of some disciplines which exist today outside Methodism. Finally, four groups worked on various aspects of the question, "What can we do for each other?" and the skeleton of a pattern emerged. The members present finally pledged themselves to:

Minimal Devotional Discipline

Initially, this was decided to be the reading of three selected books, with discussion on them at local or regional meetings. Later, agreed reading of books of the Bible is suggested (not a daily lectionary).

Formation of Small Groups in Localities. These would come together between individuals in circuits or groups of churches, with a fourfold aim of common discipline to study, devotion, work in the community, and enjoyment.

Periodic Regional "Ashram" Weekends (residential). These would be open to all who felt the need of them, but some would be obligatory on those committed to the movement. Similar weekend or quarterly day gatherings would also provide meeting-points and action sources for members.

Rule of Life. This would require much experiment and mutual frankness, but it was felt that one of the problems of many people in the Church was that the only standards of behaviour put forward were irrelevant, and consequently there was no discipline. Specific points of "involvement" would be part of any rule.

There was considerable discussion as to what to call the work. Many of the old words—fellowship, group, movement, retreat, brotherhood (there were four women present)—seemed either hackneyed or inappropriate. The question of a title was left over, and "Ashram" in fact is only a way of describing the weekend or quarterly retreat-confrontations. However, it may be that these occasions will become the most distinctive aspects of the work, particularly catering for people in isolated situations who otherwise might not receive any regular and, to them, relevant "means of grace."

Future Meeting

Hendrik Kramer says that "The ashram usually combines the Indian idea of retreat for the cultivation of spiritual life and religious study with the European idea of a settlement for service to the environment in various ways." (The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World, p.375). This, it was felt, was so near to what those present desired to provide for, that the name Ashram was chosen and might well stick.

A working committee of fourteen, from nine circuits in the North-West, was set up, which will meet on June 29. The first day Ashram preparatory meeting is on Saturday, October 14, from 10 am to 8 pm at the Champness Hall, Rochdale (accommodation overnight where necessary). Anyone who is interested in future developments, or who would like to be linked up with the group, is asked to write to Dr. John Vincent, Champness Hall, Rochdale. The question of developing similar groups in other parts of the country will be considered later, and regional meetings will be held as and when interest arises.

Methodists-- to whom it may concern

TODAY. May 1967

Dear Friends Known and Unknown,

Over the past few weeks, I have found myself meeting with two independent groups of laymen in our church. They do not belong to any theological wing. They do not belong to any of our recognised "pressure groups." They range in age from twenty-two to fifty. They are not all from a common background. Some went to university, some have been in business all their lives. So far, they are all men, although this has not been intentional. They are, with one or two exceptions, not ministers. They are, in the main, not "prominent" in our church, but are the kind of men who are deeply committed in practical ways to its service.

Every one of them confesses to being "on his beam ends" in Methodism. They have no intention of leaving Methodism, largely because they are personally committed in some form of service within it. But they all confess to receiving nothing or very little from the worship of their local congregations. They all feel themselves more or less cut off from their ministers and from their senior lay colleagues. They find neither meaning nor inspiration in the traditional Methodist "means of grace," and find our hymns, our fellowship meetings, our "standards," our discipline and many of our people so completely unconscious of the real issues now confronting them in their discipleship that they feel compelled to cry from the heart, "Are there not many more like us, and must we not now band

together, at least from time to time, to secure each other in our obedience to Christ and in our service to His Church?"

Some of them already met here in a Conference on "A Twentieth Century Christian Style of Life," on January 30th. Others meet simply from time to time, perhaps in each other's homes, perhaps around events of common interest. A third of them are local preachers, and try to maintain a lone prophetic ministry in their own localities.

They have finally decided to hold an open residential week-end, in the Community at Champness Hall, from Friday night, June 2nd, till Sunday afternoon, June 4th. There will be no big "speakers." Everyone will be invited to say what is in his own mind. Out of the weekend, perhaps some kind of pattern of mutual discipline and dependence may emerge. They are calling it "Living and Surviving in Methodism Today." It is not for bellyachers or sluggards or people running after some new thing. It is for those who find themselves in the same situation as I have indicated, and who, powerless on their own to remedy the situation, feel the need to take counsel, fellowship and action alongside others who are also where they are.

Anyone interested is invited to write to me for a registration form for the weekend.

Yours very sincerely,
JOHN J. VINCENT.

STOP PRESS--

AN EXTRA "ASHRAM"

At the first Methodist Ashram held on Saturday, 14th October, the 34 people from many parts of the North-West soon found that they needed to meet again before the proposed next date (February 3rd, 1968), in order to carry on the work and action which emerged as the necessary next steps.

Accordingly, the next Ashram will be on Saturday, 25th November. The programme will run, as before, from coffee at 9.45 a.m. through to Family Communion at 7.0 p.m., including the two main meals together, and including also prayer periods led by members based on Michel Quoist's "Prayers of Life." The Groups, however, will carry on the special themes which came out of the 14th October Ashram:

- 1—The life and purpose of local "Ashram" groups in specific localities, as "pressure groups," disciplined but unstructured.
- 2—Acted Parables in the world. Christian witness and relevant worldly action, in race, affluence, war, etc.
- 3—A Rule of Life for Total Involvement (devotion, reading, action, finance). What is practical Christian obedience?
- 4—Renewal of Worship from Action in the world. How the world may feed a new worship. The mechanics of this.
- 5—A residential Christian community. Its possibility, purpose and life. One roof or several roofs?

It was decided to continue with Michel Quoist's "Prayers of Life," but to add the World Council of Churches book, "The Church for Others." Anyone interested is asked to write to Dr. John Vincent, Champness Hall, Rochdale, for a registration form. The all-inclusive day fee is £1. Today, November, 1967

Champness Hall - 1967

COMMUNITY

Residential accommodation (bed-sitters, bathroom, kitchen, dining-room, library for study) is available for men or women for long or short periods, who wish to come and take a job locally, work alongside us in our work, or pursue a course of study. Details from the Superintendent, or from the Secretary of the Management Committee, Mr. Harry Taylor. Conferences, residential or semi-residential, are also arranged, as announced. The Community is also available for parties from other churches for week-end conferences, etc.

TODAY is published on the last Sunday in each month, for the month following and is distributed by church members and friends for 2s. 0d. yearly, or posted anywhere for 5s. 0d. yearly. Address for subscriptions, letters and articles: Today, Methodist Mission, Champness Hall, Rochdale. Editorial Committee: Rev. John Vincent, B.D., S.T.M., D.Theol. (Editor), Keith Gregory, B.Sc. (Asst. Editor), Stanley Hope (News Editor), Manager: Mr. Arthur Heap, Mrs. Kathleen Hope, Distribution Secretary: Mrs. Molly Heap, Manager.

ASHRAM has a full programme for its next full day meeting—the third—on Saturday, February 3rd from 10.0 a.m. to 7.30 p.m.

Groups will concentrate their work on each of the following:

- 1—Local "Ashram" Groups. Purpose, discipline, function. Leader: Dr. Alan Tulley (Southport).
- 2—Acted Parables in the world—race, affluence, war, etc. Leader: Mr. Stanley Hope (Rochdale).
- 3—Rule of Life—devotion, reading, action, finance. Leader: Miss Gladys Brierley (Edgworth).
- 4—Renewed Worship through Action in the world. Leader: Mr. Graham Watkins (Leeds).
- 5—Residential Christian Community— one roof, several roofs? Leader: Mr. John Gamlin (Rugby).
- 6—Ash Wednesday Day's Wages for World Hunger. Leader: Rev. Merfyn Temple (Zambia).

ASH WEDNESDAY WAGES FOR "ATTACK"

Arising out of the final decisions of February 3rd, a statement will be published giving details of how you may send your Ash Wednesday Wages for "Attack," the Ashram project to send trained technical teams to help agriculture in Africa.

Please write to Dr Vincent if you would like a copy, or simply send the amount to "Attack," c/o Dr Vincent, Champness Hall Rochdale.

"TODAY"
FEBRUARY 1968

ACT

Without intending it, Ashram has followed up its "Attack" scheme for a Day's Pay for World Poverty with another snappy title and slogan—ACT!

On Wednesday, August 6th, Ashram became a proper Charity (Registration number pending confirmation is P.2917.R) and called itself Ashram Community Trust. The next day they discovered that it gave them a slogan, too.

The Ashram Community Trust now has a proper Constitution and donations can be covenanted and property owned, and rates avoided (we hope!) Current officers are: Leader, Dr. John Vincent; Deputy Leader, Rev. Anthony Wesson; Secretary, Mrs. Gwen Brereton; Treasurer, Dr. John Reade; Minutes Secretary, Mr. David Gamble. The four Trustees for 17 King Street South are the Leader, secretary, treasurer and Miss Jean Reid.

If the Charity Commissioners give permission to the Presbyterian Trustees to sell in time, we now hope to have 93 Grove Street and 17 King Street South ready together in November or December. Keep in touch for details.

Residential Ashram, Friday, January 16th — Sunday, January 18th.

Day Ashrams, Saturdays, March 7th and June 13th.

'ASHRAM HOUSE' 17 KING ST. SOUTH

Tweedale Street Community House looks like being at 17 King Street South—a large six-bedroom, two-bathroom house, divided into two in 1932, basically a Presbyterian manse. Negotiations are still going on between the Ashram Committee of Forty Treasurers (Gwen Brereton, John Read, Jean Reid, John Vincent) and the Presbyterian manse trustees.

So far, Gladys Brierley, Elaine Peace, Chris Blackwell and Peter Crompton are committed. We have room for seven study-bedrooms, so there are three places for which we shall be glad to have inquiries. Members work through the day, and share community life and social responsibilities in the area in evenings and weekends. Please write for details.

At the end of August, Gladys Brierley, will move into the smaller unit (93 Grove Street), temporarily. The others will move into 17 King Street itself in October, and the two houses will then be linked internally, No. 17 front door serving both.

There is a meeting to discuss and decide on further details on Wednes-

day, August 6th, at 8.0 p.m. Anyone interested is welcome to attend. In particular, we would appreciate

- Offers of furnishings, pots and pans, furniture, etc., etc.
- Offers of money to pay for specific items of these.
- Offers of practical assistance for August Saturday working parties. Come 10.0 a.m. or 2.0 p.m. any week.

The financial situation is that we have at present received £658 10s 0d., with some other amounts expected later, but we still need more £25 founding donations if we are to reach the £1,000 we need.

ASHRAM

At the last Ashram on May 17th it was decided to have a proper membership, £1 annually, and mailing list, 10/-, both of which include Today. Forms are available for those interested.

The next Ashram is on Saturday, Sept. 27th, 10.0 a.m. to 6.0 p.m. Cost of day is now only 10/-, with excellent pie served in lounge. Forms are available; or just let us know you're coming.

Rev. Anthony Wesson will take the chair as Deputy Leader.

AUGUST 1969

OCTOBER 1969

King Street South, Rochdale House



Rochdale-Sheffield meeting outside 239 Abbeyfield Rd, Sheffield ,January 1971

Mike Newton, Liz Turner, John Reade, Tony Wesson, Barry Swift,
Pat Newton, Robin & Elaine Parker, Gwen Green, Ian Laughton, Howard Knight, Emily Innes, Chris
Blackwell, John Vincent with 2 Reade and two Vincent children at the front

MORE NEWS FROM MULL



An eagle captured on camera on one of our recent walks

called "Chatroom" which dealt with issues of social isolation, bullying and suicide and the powerful film "12 Years a Slave" was shown last week to coincide with an exhibition inspired by Robert Burns' poem "The Slaves Lament".

I continue to run regular Fairtrade stalls at the Church of Scotland in Tobermory and sometimes in other villages and also occasionally at the weekly coffee morning at the Evangelical Church. Orders last Christmas and at Easter also did quite well - both doubling the sales for these periods the previous year.

I am still producing the church's newsletter, now on a monthly basis, which gives me an opportunity to promote Fairtrade and to raise other issues. I can flag up campaigns etc that the congregation might otherwise be unaware of and also to suggest a different viewpoint that they might not otherwise hear. I recently wrote

a piece encouraging people to "give up giving to charity" and instead to support ways of assisting those in poorer countries to become self-sufficient through trade by switching to buying Fairtrade goods regularly and supporting schemes such as *Lend With Care*. Not a charity hand-out but an interest-free loan to a small business in a developing country which will be paid back from the profits of the business. (If you're not familiar with the scheme and you'd like more info, visit the website at: <https://www.lendwithcare.org>)

Our minister describes me as the church's "Social Conscience" and seems to welcome the fact that I stir things up from time to time, even if I sometimes step on some toes! He says he wants to give me as much of a free reign as he can, but occasionally he suggests that we need to go more slowly and gently with some issues and I try to accept his guidance although I like to push the boundaries sometimes.

Although I have found one or two individuals to connect with, I still miss the kind of conversations, workshops and worship I find in Ashram so I am very much looking forward to sharing in the 50th birthday celebrations in May.



Our Murder Mystery Night cast outside the theatre

Lorraine Jones

Hello from Paul Spilsbury

As a new Associate Member of the London Group, I've been asked to write a little about myself. Well, I was born in August 1939, in Bristol, and survived the Second World War, in which my father served in the Royal Navy, in the Mediterranean and commanding a tank landing craft at the Normandy landings. My family moved to Tickenham, in north Somerset, after the war, and I went to the local Church school, and then to Bristol Grammar School.

Though my family were Church of England, I had no great personal religious belief until my mid-teens, when I was attracted by the intellectual rigour of the Catholic Church, becoming officially a Catholic at the age of seventeen, and in due course joining the Franciscan Order, and being ordained priest in 1965.

Sent to Nottingham to read Mathematics and Philosophy at the University, I became aware of a wider religious world, and made many friends in the Anglican chaplaincy, which was of a definite Anglo-Catholic type. At the end of three years, already accepted for an M.Phil. course, I left the Franciscans and rejoined the Church of England. At the end of two years I went to Lincoln Theological College for some "recycling", before becoming Curate of Cricklade in Wiltshire.

Meanwhile, I had met my future wife, Marilyn, who had come to Nottingham to do a Cert.Ed, after reading English at Leeds. We were married in 1972, shortly after I had taken up my post in Cricklade. In due course we became parents of five children.

By this time I had moved to a parish in Swindon, and then (before the youngest two arrived) back to Bristol.

After fourteen years in a Council Estate parish, I left parish ministry and fulfilled a long-standing ambition of studying for a Doctorate. My chosen field was the writings and Biblical studies of St Anthony of Padua, a contemporary of St Francis and the first theologian of the Franciscan Order. While doing this, I was also priest secretary to the Bishop of Ebbsfleet, Michael Houghton, and, after his untimely death at the end of 1999, to his successor Andrew Burnham.



Now officially retired (ha, ha!), I help in the parish of All Hallows, Easton, an inner-city area of Bristol where half the

congregation is of Jamaican heritage, and where the local places of worship include mosques, a synagogue and Sikh gurdwaras. Our priest-in-charge is from Zambia, a churchwarden is from Ghana, and there are other nationalities in the congregation. It is stimulating and great fun.

How did I come to join the London Ashram group? My lovely wife died two years ago, and our dear friend Liz Urben, whom we have known since University days, invited me to stay. My visit coincided with one of the monthly group meetings at her flat, and when I discovered that the following meeting coincided with another visit to London, to some other friends, I managed to attend that meeting too. Although it is quite a journey, I have managed to attend most months, and thoroughly enjoy the opportunity to explore Christian discipleship together.

Paul Spilsbury

JESUS

COMMUNITY

Religious houses (convents, monasteries, friaries) constantly talk of 'community'. This was a key feature of the early days of Ashram with the establishment of Ashram houses. (Though equally important was 'community' in the sense of gathering together for a day or a weekend, and later 'walking distance' communities.)

I guess I was a key player in the establishment of Ashram houses, pioneered in Rochdale. In due course Sheffield, Middlesbrough, London and Birmingham followed.

I came to live in the Champness Hall and become part of the Rochdale Methodist Mission ministry team in 1968 after 12 months living with homeless people as a member of the Simon Community. During that time I had written a plan for a Christian community house, and this was incorporated into early planning of the Rochdale Ashram House.

It was the beginning of 1970 when Elaine Peace (subsequently Parker), Gladys Brierley, and myself moved into the Rochdale house on King Street South. Peter Crompton should have been with us but decided to go to Africa to work as a structural engineer for two years and returned to King Street South afterwards. He was resident in the house longer than anyone else and a major influence.

My preoccupation has always been Jesus; and Jesus was the heart of the Rochdale house. Not all who lived there embraced Christianity – but I think they did embrace Jesus, in one way or another. For me Gospel values are key. Not Christian values, but Jesus values. The rest of the New Testament and the whole of the Old Testament have to be tested against the Gospels in my view, and I love it that amongst others Anglicans generally now stand when a Gospel is read in public worship, and may even process a Book of the Gospels to a central point in the

church with candles accompanying while the whole congregation turns towards the reader. (Though there are those who say that John Vincent has shown us we need nothing more than the first chapter of Saint Mark's Gospel!)

I have been a Franciscan for about ten years now and this grew out of and is similar in many ways to the Ashram thing. For example, for friars the key thing is getting out into the community, not primarily working with people within their religious houses as in monasteries and convents. My personal Rule of Life has many parallels with the Ashram annual Commitment I used to work on. The Gospels and the Eucharist are very important.

So I conclude. JESUS: born a Jew; God-with-us to Christians; a prophet revered by Muslims; admired by many of other and no religious persuasion. *"Gaze upon Him, contemplate Him, as you desire to imitate Him."* (St. Clare)

Chris Blackwell



TONY HODGSON. PERSONAL DISCIPLESHIP COMMITMENT 2015-2016.

Tony Hodgson, an associate for many years, sadly died last year. As Chair of the Lifestyle Movement he had shared some of our Ashram weekends. His widow Judith is happy for his last 'discipleship' commitment form to be shared here as it said so much about him.

1. Following the way as revealed in Jesus.

Disciplines in prayer, bible study, reading, spirituality, worship, reflection, writing.

'Early morning prayer using Celtic daily prayer. Spiritual readings from Prayer for Ministers and other servants. Quaker faith and practice. Evening prayers with my wife, mainly intercessions with Bible Study from Word for Today and following the calendar of saints. Daily journal, twice weekly worship in St Peters church. Monthly attend Quaker meeting. Started group for contemplative prayer. Read spiritual passages in books and magazine articles.'

2. Supporting each other in good and ill.

Who am I relating to and supporting among relatives, neighbours, enemies, friends, Ashram and other fellow disciples, fellow travellers? Who supports me?

'I am supported by my wife and family and support them including widowed brother-in-law. I also support other widows, neighbours in our retirement complex. Worldwide network of friends. I receive support from a College of ministers in Oudle, an ecumenical study group and local Society of Friends.'

3. Challenging evil with the power of love.

What am I working against? How will I oppose injustices in race, class, sex, economics. First/Third World? When? Where? How?

'Against selling of Housing Association properties, TTIP, agribusiness, large supermarkets closure of independent shops. I wrote to my MP about unlimited detention. I was founder member of the Peak District Rural Housing Association 25 years ago. Wrote 'Good Food Stories' about successful small retailers and suppliers who avoid the agribusiness/supermarket nexus in 2008'.

4. Offering the kingdom in political and economic witness.

What vision of the Kingdom do I have? How will I embody it in projects with the poor, outcasts, victims, enemies, and the oppressed? How will I communicate it with others?

Started Credit union, member of green Party and canvassed for Caroline Luca in April. This year, being 80, I walked 80 miles for freedom from torture and raised £15,000. My model of the Kingdom is the Beatitudes. I am giving a talk next month to the Quakers about helping refugees.

5. Working for the Community of all creation.

What am I committed to doing with regard to a) the majority world, b) the natural environment, c) my own body. What lifestyle changes am I called to?

'Started Oundle Transition Town in 2009. I use alternative methods of healing where possible. I follow the LOAF principles when shopping for food. I am a Christian Aid Collector. Substantial financial and moral support to INTERLOCK helping Indian slum dwellers to re-settle and rebuild their lives in rural areas of India. Downsized to small flat. Minimum use of car – walk, bus, train, where possible. Compiling book of green poetry,

6. Risking ourselves in a lifestyle of sharing.

What personal disciplines of income, sharing, simple living, do I adopt? With whom do I have things in common – time, skills

'Chairperson of the Lifestyle movement whose motto is 'Live more simply than others may simply live'. In 1973 refounded the Little Gidding community with sharing of possessions, home, car share 2003-2005.

MARJORIE BONEHILL (SISTER MARJORIE)

I WILL REMEMBER.....

Marj's struggle with domestic cooking because she was expert at cooking for hundreds at Pinderfields Hospital.

Her great satisfaction in the 1960s from conducting funerals well.

Her ability to stand up to John Vincent!

Her elocution lessons (!), 1968-70, with Mrs Dorothy Heap, Chairwoman of the Magistrates on the Juvenile Bench :

"Repeat - 'The-streets-were-full-of-a-moving-mass-of-men-and-women-and-children-in-the-gayest-and-freshest-of-holiday-clothes.'"

Her assisting Liz and Jay Jaye and I at Ruth's [my first wife's] Memorial Service at an Ashram Weekend in 1990.

Her thoughtful and informed reflections at the Manchester Ashram Group.

Writing our annual Ashram Personal Discipleship Commitments together at Dr. Kershaw's Hospice.

Her love for Andrew.

Her laugh.

And so much else.

CHRIS,
With Love,
April 2017

WHAT IF.../ but EVEN IF.....!

A poem by Jay Jaye, a member of our Manchester Ashram Group and a friend of Marjorie.

Though She slay me yet will I trust Her,
for I have seen too many lovely things
experienced too much beauty (Keats-style)
ever to shrivel into bitterness.

I have thrilled at too many Springs,
green and yellow,
as even now I thrill at the vibrancy of the colours
of half a dozen antirrhinums that weathered the
winter,
a self-sown poppy day-glow orange,
and a bare and prickled branch bent double
with the weight of fragrant tea roses
peach-pink and perfect,
ever to sour into despair.

I have thought about the Cross, the cosmic cross,
too often,
and exposed myself to Easter stories too
frequently
ever to degenerate into self-pity.

Nothing that She allows to happen in Her world
can terrify me.

Nothing that is human do I consider alien to me.
If any sister suffers
then why not me – why should I go free?

Should not the poor planet,
polluted and pained,
fighting for its life,
cry out,
send out distress signals,
pleas and warnings,
signs and portents,
not only in Chernobyl and Rongelap,
but here where monstrous predators
live in mind-blown privilege,
purveyors of a cancerous ethic,
ceaselessly devouring
good cells, good earth, good dreams, good folk,
and growing
growing hard and bright tumours of death?

How long can they hold cause and effect apart,
study symptoms but ignore dis-ease?
How many of us must die
before they hear the word of She-Lord?

Tribute to JEAN REID

By Rev. Dr John Vincent



Steve Wild, President of Conference, friend and Rochdalian with Jean and her preaching certificate

Jean Reid was one of our firmest allies and most constant friend and fellow-worker throughout the time that Grace and I worked in Rochdale from 1962 to 1969.

Jean was a qualified nursing sister, an MRSH, and worked in the Rochdale General Hospital. At the time, she lived in Kirkholt, near Oldham Road. From an early age, she and her sister, Annie – and Annie’s daughter, Pauline – were wholehearted supporters of the Rochdale Methodist Mission, of which I was a very young Superintendent. Jean was a Local Preacher, a House Group Leader, and a member of the Champness Hall Mission Team.

In 1967, Jean was with us when the Ashram Community started and she supported its early work with great enthusiasm, including our first community house in King Street South. Jean remained a Member of the Ashram Community to the end, and whenever we were in Rochdale,

Grace and I visited her at Half Acre House – and they were all ready to bring her to the 50th Anniversary in May 2017 – though that was not to be.

Jean had enormous energy, imagination, originality and profound gut-level insight. She believed passionately in Jesus Christ and in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth that he brought and left us to carry on.

On one occasion, she presented to us a beautiful plaque which contained some famous words of Albert Schweitzer, who was one of her heroes. The words echo Jean’s own understanding, vision and vocation, and they were truths embodied in her own life.

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old by the lakeside. He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: Follow thou me! and sets us to tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands, and to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience, who He is.

Albert Schweitzer

Book sharing in Sheffield

The Multifaith group that meets monthly at the Sheffield Ashram had another book sharing session and would like to share what we are reading with the wider community.

Walking the healing labyrinth by Helen Raphael Sands. An introduction to the history, creation and use of labyrinths for spirit and healing. Labyrinths have no dead ends, they provide a path to the centre. Read by Sara Clayton.

You will not have my hate by Antoine Leiris. You may remember the author's post "On Friday night you stole the life of an exceptional person, the love of my life, the mother of my son, but you will not have my hate," after the death of his wife in the Bataclan massacre in Paris. This book continues this determination. Read by Sandra Dutson.

Preparing for Christmas by Richard Rohr, an American contemporary contemplative. Presenting his thinking on contemplation and non-dualism.

This gives daily meditations for Advent. Read by Diana Gustafson.

Night of the confessor by Tomas Halik. The emphasis so far read is the argument that we seek a *little* faith to meet today's challenges. Read by Liz Hamblett.

Radical Christianity by John Vincent. A collection of essays on living Christianity. One of John's chapters reflects on the need for a dynamic practical life in service of Christ. Christianity as wholeness, perfection and reconciliation with a view to the salvation of everything. Introduced by John Vincent.

Texts and contexts of Ignatius Loyola's "Autobiography" by John McManamon. This book studies the links between the Saint's *Acts* and the gospel of Luke. It seeks to show the means by which St Ignatius of Loyola used an account of his own journey to encourage others to grow closer to God. Read by John Hamblett.

2016 - Our 31st Christmas Traidcraft Shop

We managed to get our 'Goldilocks' shop again last Christmas – opposite M&S on the main pedestrian shopping street in Middlesbrough, the right size, and price and all the problems sorted out the year before, I confidentially assumed! And apart from the rats who'd moved into the ladies loo and the ageing front shutter which was beginning to break into rusty pieces, that was so. What I hadn't bargained for was that nine of my regular volunteers (out of 30) would retire or be a way on exotic holidays! Pleas for help produced some well intentioned but not very well informed offers ("Four of us will come and help one afternoon" someone emailed – who'd never been in the shop before let alone knew how it worked! So we opened with a gaping hole on the rota for Tuesday and Thursday afternoons and a few Saturdays and gladly welcomed whoever arrived and trained them on the spot.

I'd also forgotten about the heavy sliding glass front door which had to be left open, allowing the winds

from Siberia to blow onto the hapless person behind the till, because the shop heating didn't work. But it was marvellous to have the help of two older asylum seekers -Nena from Nigeria and Gladys from the

Cameroon whose smiles lit up the shop and who were glad to be able to do something useful out of their homes.

So the seven weeks passed in a blur of late-night orders, unpacking, selling and training- and thankfully without snow ! Our local refugee co-ordinator always offers his trailer for the last journey home with the furniture on December 23rd. He has

to collect it from Rosedale and he had the flu and the rain was absolutely tipping down as we packed the shelving and lashed all our cardboard for him to compost. What a hero!

And when I did the final sum we had taken £38,000- our best year since 2006! We were all glad to have been able to help to make a real difference to the lives of our producers – and we already have a list of new volunteers for next year's shop! *Jenny Medhurst*



Urban Discipleship Forum, Nottingham

On Saturday 28th January 2017 Keith Hebden of UTU put on an 'Urban Theology Forum' in partnership with Transforming Notts Together. Nottingham/East Midlands Ashram group formed a fair percentage of the 14 participants but it was a mixed group comprising people from quite a mixture of perspectives and church backgrounds.

The focus was on types of power. Power was described as 'the ability to act' and shown as being either *over people* or *with people*. We also learnt that while there is need for consensus and democracy there is also a need for leaders who can provide a focus and a vision. (that inspire people to follow).

We explored a depiction of power being like an upside down mountain. As such it is held up by certain assumptions or habits. If we dismantle these habits we might 'cast the mountain into the heart of the sea'. We also looked at a spectrum showing Jesus' engagement with unjust structures; the style of engagement is matched to the group Jesus is relating to. The spectrum moves from allies round to enemies. For example, with the disciples, Jesus communicates through dreams and visions; with the scribes and Pharisees through demonstration and public engagement and with the Roman powers by exposing and disarming them. Each of these powers of Jesus' time are then compared to our own, such as the crowds being our workplace and the scribes our local councils.

Alice McGregor

London Agape Group

The 'London' Branch of the Ashram Community usually meets in London, at the home of Liz Urben in Streatham, although only two of our members actually live in London; we come in from Leatherhead, Staines, Bristol...., usually for 2.30pm on a Saturday afternoon, bringing something with us to share for tea at the end of the meeting. Most of the group are Associates of the Community, just two of us are national Members, but we all participate in planning the sessions and take turns in introducing a subject for discussion. Two previously very regular members are now prevented by poor health from coming to join us, so at present we are likely to be five or six taking up some of the seats usually occupied by the two resident cats.

So far this year we have heard about Harvey Cox's latest book, *The Market as God*, and discussed issues raised by *The Ethics of Evangelism* by Elmer J. Thiessen, with help from notes of a sermon by Sue Keegan von Allmen, Superintendent of Hinde Street Methodist Church. At our next meeting we will be looking at Catholic social teaching, stemming from Pope Leo XIII's letter *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 on the rights of workers. Our discussions or other activities take place in the context of a simple agape liturgy, hence the name of the group.

We meet monthly, normally on the third Saturday, and our next gathering is planned for 20 May. After that it will be 17 June, when we will arrange the dates for the second half of the year. Sometimes we look at an issue or a book in more detail over several meetings, sometimes we respond to current events or the interest or concern of one of our members at a particular time, but at least the dates for July to December, if not the subjects, will be available on the Ashram Community website www.ashram.org.uk after the June meeting.

Meanwhile, with any queries you can contact Linda Marshall at 31 Budebury Road, Staines, TW18 2AZ, tel. 01784 456474, email: lindam@inbox.com

Sheffield Branch news

The Branch consists of 11 members, all involved in some ways.

The Gathering is a fellowship in each others' homes on the 2nd and 4th Mondays of the month. Our recent theme has been our members sharing Their Treasures, which was very rich and valued. The current theme is "Texts/Value" which is going well.

Every Thursday the residents in Rock Street invite us to share prayers. And on Wednesdays several members are heavily involved in running The Free Meal at 6, followed by a Eucharist together in the Multi faith Chapel.

Once a month, on Saturdays, we have an adult Bible School, led by John and members, followed by Cafe Church on Sundays, and sessions on Mondays in the Multi faith Chapel and Library.

We all find the meetings together important and involving. Everyone leads following the printed quarterly plan.

ASHRAM COMMUNITY LONG WEEKENDS

With Sheffield Ashrams

Alternate Months

Our long weekends (from Thursday to Monday afternoon) are designed to:

- Give an experience of 3-4 days of life together
- Enable people to come and stay in Ashram Community Houses
- Provide an opportunity to do practical work together
- Be a place and time for people outside the community to come and experience our life together

Thursdays

5 – 5.30 pm Prayers 77 Rock Street Ashram House S3 9JB

Fridays

7 – 8.30 pm Residents' Fellowship followed by evening meal
77 Rock Street Ashram House S3 9JB
(Fortnightly)

Saturdays

10am–12Noon Working Party Burngreave Ashram 86 Spital Hill S4 7LG
(Bi-Monthly)

12.15 – 1 pm Lunch Burngreave Ashram (Monthly)

1 – 3 pm Adult Bible School Burngreave Ashram (Monthly)

3.15– 6:30 pm Study & Research Group followed by evening meal
77 Rock Street Ashram House (Bi-Monthly)

Sundays

10.30 am Morning Service Pitsmoor Methodist Church S3 9DG
(Bi-Monthly)

12.30–2.12pm Café Church incl. Lunch Burngreave Ashram

2.30 – 5 pm Arts Group 6 Andover Street Ashram Community
House S3 9EG

Mondays

11am–2.15pm Multifaith bring and share lunch
Burngreave Ashram (Monthly)

Long Weekends – Bi-Monthly Dates 2017

3 - 6 Feb; 31 Mar - 3 Apr; 2 - 5 June; 4 - 7 Aug; 6 - 9 Oct; 1 - 4 Dec

Guests

B&B at Ashram Community Houses £10.00 per night.
Other meals as in the programme. If not specified it is self-catering or other

For Further Details Please Contact:

Rev Dr John Vincent t: 0114 243 6688

Nirmal Fernando m: 07932 017 929 / curlsu@hotmail.com



Members and Associates

We invite anyone interested to request details about becoming a Member or Associate from the membership secretary, Sandra Dutson: smdutson@btinternet.com
Members and Associates are listed in the 7-day cycle Community Prayers

Projects and Commitments

Ashram Press – Radical Christianity, Gospel Study, Discipleship, Community Study and Research- projects on Community and related issues
Homeless and Asylum Seekers - Residence and Community for people in need
Multi-faith - mutual activities and projects open to all faiths

DATES

2017

5-7 May Community Weekend, Middleton
6 May 50th Anniversary
8 July General meeting
10-12 July Summer School with UTU
August Community Holiday
29Sept-1Oct Community Weekend, Unstone

2018

16 Feb General Meeting, Sheffield
11-13 May Community Weekend, Middleton
5-7 October Community Weekend, Unstone

COMMUNITY

Community Office:
7 College Court, Sheffield S4 7FN
T: 0114 243 6688/244 7278
E: ashramcommunity@hotmail.com

Ashram Press: As above
See Website www.ashram.org.uk for publications

Ashram Community Trust is a Registered Charity
Registered Charity No: 1099164
Charitable Company No: 477991
Website www.ashram.org.uk
administrator: kathclements@ymail.com

Act Together editor: Jenny Medhurst
medhurst@phonecoop.coop Articles for the Autumn 2017 edition needed by September 1st
Contributions from members/associates who do not attend national Community events especially welcomed!

HOUSES AND PROJECTS

Burngreave Ashram Centre, Interfaith Chapel and

Library

Burngreave Ashram: 80-86 Spital Hill Sheffield S4 7LG – Tel: 0114 270 0972
New Roots Shop, Basement Speakeasy and Residents' flat
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
Tel: 0791 092 2462 (Tamara)
27 Hallcar Street, Sheffield S4 7JY (Gail and Abi)
29 Hallcar Street (Jackie)

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 –01784 456 474
Saturday Meetings – Monthly

North-West – Josie Smith – 01706 841 532
Meetings bi-monthly 11-2 at Luther King House Restaurant.

Sheffield – Grace Vincent – 0114 243 6688
Gatherings - second and fourth Mons, 5.30 – 7:30pm in member's homes or Community Houses. See 'Burngreave Ashram News', quarterly

North-East – Jenny Medhurst Tel: 01740 630475 – Meetings as arranged