



# ACT TOGETHER

Ashram Community Trust

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# LEAVING MY NETS

“And at once they left their nets and followed Him” Mark 1:18

The Isle of Iona, summer last year. I am working as chef at Bishop’s House, the retreat run by the Scottish Episcopal Church. I have become an associate member of the Iona Community and am wondering where my tentative inclinations towards discipleship and Christian community will lead me next. Kerry the housekeeper is leafing through the British Retreats Handbook and lights upon an entry for the intriguingly named Ashram Community in inner city Sheffield. After a little further investigation, she decides to volunteer there for a month in the winter, not really knowing what to expect. I resolve to pay her a visit for a day or two while she is there. Meanwhile I continue to investigate and find in John Vincent’s writing and the witness of the Ashram Community a long and rich history of radical, intentional Christian community. This, it seems to me, has long been addressing the issues that I have been encountering in the more recent radical Christian writing that I have been reading here.

I duly arrived in Sheffield at the beginning of December. I had already decided not to return to Iona for a second season and had formed the intention of taking my next steps in discipleship in a less rarefied setting. I had expected this to be in my native West Midlands. Only the day before showing up in Burngreave I had been to visit Ash Barker at Newbiggin House in Winson Green Birmingham with a view to getting involved in his Urban Shalom project. He was an inspirational guy to meet and he spoke highly of the Urban Theology Union in Sheffield. More seeds being sown. But on meeting John and looking around Burngreave Ashram I soon had a keen sense that there was a role for me here. I took a deep breath, and within a week had decided to give it a go. On returning from a brief visit home to Wolverhampton the following week we agreed that I would join the community and move into the flat above the Ashram. I would be a kind of caretaker, a community member with a commitment to Christian discipleship living on the premises. A great stride into the unknown, having only a few very slight acquaintances living in the area and having only visited once before. The only thing that I was sure of was that I wanted to examine a sense of calling further. I did, and still don’t, know what form that

might take, but I felt that here was a place that I could study whilst, deed by small deed, deepening my commitment to walking in Jesus’ Way.

I started to drive John to his preaching engagements around the Sheffield Methodist Circuit on Sundays. It soon became clear that he wasn’t about to let me sit quietly there watching him lead services and week by week I have become more and more involved in worship leading. Today John, Sam Humphrey, Nirmal, Chris Bullock and myself were at Pitsmoor Methodist Church.

It was great to be taking a service together in our



local church. With Janice Gear in the congregation we were six Ashramites in all! I have applied to join the congregation at Pitsmoor and hope to be accepted for Local Preacher training at some point. I have been helping out with various bits of office work, general tasks around the building and for John and have cooked the Wednesday Burngreave



Banquet on several occasions. I have got to know the people who regularly come along to the Ashram on weekdays and like to think that we have between us fostered an atmosphere of care and cooperation which has had a positive effect on the day to day upkeep of the building. Just having someone living there who's committed to the Ashram Community does make a difference I think.



The Eucharist that we hold in the Interfaith Chapel and Library after the meal becomes more profound and moving for me with each succeeding week. It is always a pleasure to join the gatherings at other members' homes and I enjoy walking through Burngreave Cemetery to spend time with John.



I have had a couple of "wobbles" and have been well supported by community members when I have most

needed it. There have been occasions when the steel city has seemed very strange to me and I've wondered how on earth I ended up here. Last week I started a new, permanent job with The Real Junk Food Project which I am very pleased about. I had for several years been involved in food waste reduction projects in Lancaster, my adopted post university home town where my children grew up, to find paid work in this area had been a long held hope and I am delighted that I have found it in Sheffield. The project has two pay-as-you-feel cafes around the city, and a mere stone's throw from the Ashram on Carlisle Street is their "Sharehouse" which is a depot for a vast amount of supermarket, wholesale and other discarded food that would otherwise go to waste. I and they are very keen to work with us at the Ashram going forward. So that all hangs together very nicely.

This weekend we have hired a skip, cleared out years' worth of accumulated junk from the Ashram cellar and from one of the Hallcar Street flats which has been vacated. At the same time we have moved books and papers down from John's house, the intention being to establish the ACT office here on Spital Hill. I have spent a very interesting couple of hours this afternoon reading old copies of ACT Together and have been struck how vast and varied have been the enterprises and initiatives undertaken by John and the community over the years. What rich lives of witness and discipleship have been led by members. I have much to learn. I hope to play a full part in the community's future and humbly follow in the footsteps of them and you all.

*Mark Wildman*



## Keeping Busy

I've been asked to write something about what I've been doing recently. The short answer is more or less the same old things. I've been trying without much success to take things a little easier, but then something else comes up...

Low paid workers in London are still fighting to get a living wage, particularly those who work for contract cleaning companies to whom reputable companies



*IWGB protest for low paid workers at the University of London to be brought in house*

outsourcing their cleaning. Outsourcing seems always to be something of a disaster, with companies bidding below what it would cost to do the job properly, then cutting staff and hours, saving on providing materials, employing workers on lousy conditions and of course taking out money for the shareholders. Workers who legally protest get threatened, harassed and often dismissed for minor reasons, and sometimes black-listed. Recently I've photographed protests by different groups at the Royal Opera House, British Museum, Royal College of Music and the University of London. The good news is that in the end the cleaners usually win, though often the cleaning contract will then go to a new company (some are small cowboy operators, others big firms with bad records like G4S, Mitie and Kier) who don't uphold the settlements.

On a wider political front has been the invasion of Afrin by Turkey, with the support of Russia and, on the ground, fighters who were formerly with ISIS/Daesh. President Erdogan's aim is to entirely eliminate the Kurds, but fortunately it seems unlikely to be achieved, despite the successes so far. The Kurds, who I first met in 1999 protesting over the handover of their popular leader 'Apo' (Abdullah Ocalan) by the CIA to be locked away in a Turkish prison, are resilient and indomitable. Afrin is one of the 3 cantons of Rojava, the Kurdish majority areas of Northern Syria, which operate largely autonomously from the Syrian regime, though remaining in Syria and the republic is perhaps a model for a future federal state of Syria, as well as a model for

democracy in the area and wider afield. If you've not read the Rojava constitution it is a remarkable document. At its centre is the declaration: "in pursuit of freedom, justice, dignity and democracy and led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability, the Charter proclaims a new social contract, based upon mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society. It protects fundamental human rights and liberties and reaffirms the peoples' right to self-determination."

Even in the current difficult conditions, the constitution has led to great leaps forward, in particular in the liberation of women, but also in establishing equal treatment of the Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens who live in the area. If Turkey gains control, the area would almost certainly get an Islamic regime imposed on it, with little or no place for the minority communities, women's rights and other more liberal views, and with any political opposition largely in prisons.

More recently there have been protests against the use of live fire against unarmed civilians taking part in the Palestinian 'Great March of Return' by s close to the separation wall in Gaza, with on the first two Fridays 27 Palestinians being killed and more than a thousand with gunshot wounds, many unlikely to walk unaided again, apparently with bullets being used designed to maximise wound damage. At yesterday's protest opposite Downing St, one of the speakers pointed out that some were shot in the back by snipers at a distance equal to that of Trafalgar Square 300m from where we were standing and clearly presenting no threat to the border. The protests, which began on Land Day are set to continue every Friday until May



*A woman pushes her walking frame at the the march against the Turkish attacks on Afrin. Behind her a banner celebrates British volunteer Anna Campbell killed fighting for the Kurdish women's forces.*

15th, which Palestinians mark as the Nabka, or disaster, when more than 700,000 Palestinian were expelled or fled from their homes in 1948.

Mentioning such things and supporting the Palestinian cause is of course enough to me and anyone else labelled as anti-Semitic, as is my support for the BDS movement (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions.) And while there is doubtless some anti-Semitism in the Labour Party, surveys show it is at a lower level than in the other main parties. There were many Jewish Labour Party members among the 2000 or so at Saturday's protest against the shootings - but since the media failed to report that protest they didn't get a mention, though a very much smaller event by the right-wing Jewish Campaign Against Anti-Semitism against Corbyn and Labour the following day made the headlines. Coming to the Labour Party (I'm not a member) perhaps the main concerns about them in London is not anti-Semitism, but the housing policies of some Labour councils. I was pleased to take a small



*A woman speaks at the protest close to the Israeli embassy condemning the cold-blooded shooting by the Israeli army of peaceful protesters on Land Day in Gaza.*

part in the widely-based grass roots campaign (Momentum, singled out by the media were a minor player) that led to the rejection of Haringey's 'Development Vehicle', the HDV, which

involved the giving away of huge swathes of council owned land and buildings to the a corrupt developer with current residents having little chance of remaining in the area after demolition and building of high-price homes.

Another campaign in Newham has resulted in the current Mayor, Robin Wales, who has similarly failed to address the housing problems of Newham residents, losing the fight to be selected to run for yet another term in office. There are high hopes that other councils in London will get new councillors with different views in the May elections, but far too many such schemes are still getting pushed through under the name of 'regeneration', with London's Mayor conniving with right wing Labour dominated councils. We might even see Conservative councils - such as Kensington & Chelsea, responsible both for making Grenfell Tower a fire risk waiting to happen and for the failure to deal honestly and properly with

the survivors - losing control.

Whenever I think about housing and planning in London I think of Frank Medhurst's book 'A Quiet Catastrophe' about his experiences in Teesside in the 60s. It's very a different situation but I think things have in some ways got worse since then, with the developers getting rather better at manipulating councillors and officers with lavish hospitality, future job offers and other bribes. Friends of mine from Architects for Social Housing during their residency at the ICA last year showed a huge map of London, studded with coloured pins, mostly red for Labour councils, showing council estates where housing at social rents had been or was planned to be replaced almost entirely by high cost housing. Their detailed alternative proposals to retain social housing while increasing densities to meet the housing crisis are summarily dismissed by councillors looking for personal gain.

Of course there are other issues too. In March I covered events on homelessness, Guantanamo, Family Courts, Immigration Detention, the Rohingya genocide, women's rights, violence against women, attacks by Buddhist mobs in Sri Lanka, freedom for Tibet, Fukushima, university teachers pensions, racism ... as well as



*University teachers march for pensions. Jeremy Bentham one of the founders of UCU is still kept there in a cupboard.*

pictures from a few walks including the Good Friday Procession of Witness in Staines. You can see more about them in my website My London Diary <http://mylondondiary.co.uk/2018/03/mar.htm> or on my Facebook page.

April I'm hoping to take things a little easier. I'm getting tired rather faster when on my feet and am finding late nights filing my work to agencies exhausting, but refuse to lower my standards by sending images unedited or without proper captions.

And should anyone be in Hull before May 18 I have a few pictures in a show 'DOCK' at the HIP gallery in the Princes Quay shopping centre, which shows the old fish dock over the years. Mine are from around 1980, a few years after the dock went out of use.

*Peter Marshall*

## Letter from Eurig



Hi Jenny,

I keep promising to write for Act Together and never do. So here is a small and off the cuff reflection of my news.....

Despite not attending weekends or engaging with email discussions, the Ashram Community and our shared commitment to discipleship remains very significant to me and my world. I continue to teach and research at Queen Margaret University, a small university near Edinburgh, which provides plenty of opportunities and challenges. Like many newer universities, QMU students are disproportionately mature students and drawn from local working class communities. I have been developing programmes in Public Sociology – at undergraduate and (new from September) at MSc level. Public Sociology is another name for what I have been doing most of my life – working with communities and campaigning groups to work out what kinds of social analysis will help interpret and try to change society around them. I've called it, at various times, liberation theology, community action and popular education, and now it is public sociology!

Being active in Higher Education also means, for me, being active in the University and College Union, where I hold branch and Scottish elected positions. The recent industrial action amongst some universities to defend pensions has brought UCU to the media headlines (and me to picket lines and student occupations up and down Scotland). Trying to defend members' pension payments from the desire of Universities UK to gamble it on the market has led to a

dynamic debate about the future of post-compulsory education – for the market or for the public good; for profit or for people; for elites or for all; for the economy or for democracy? To many academic workers, working for a university means insecure contracts, over-work, deprofessionalisation, in some cases periods of poverty and visits to food banks.

In my spare time, Palestine remains important, and the Israeli killing of unarmed protestors in Gaza on Land Day brings this home to the world. Last year, the choir I sing with (San Ghanny) took part in the Nablus festival and then went on to sing in refugee camps, demonstrations and land defence projects. Singing can be a remarkable form of nonviolent resistance, including when singing against Israeli sound bombs and tear gas, or whilst being evicted for tree planting by the occupying army. San Ghanny produced a book recounting our experiences: '1001 Olive Trees' (available for £9 including CD)\*. For the centenary of the Balfour declaration, we sang in the church on Arthur Balfour's family estate, near where I live (available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uw-WtPpmFNw>). I have convened the Iona Community's working group on Israel/Palestine, which published its position statement (<https://iona.org.uk/2017/10/06/iona-community-israelpalestine-position-statement/>) – which inevitably resulted in a backlash by Christian Zionists.

In this work, as with all disciples, it remains vital to challenge the powers and offer the kingdom in political witness. For this, my connection to the Ashram Community remains crucial.

Best wishes

Eurig

*"1001 Olive Trees" is available for £9 +p&p from [sunsh.portie@googlemail.com](mailto:sunsh.portie@googlemail.com)*

## WINTER NIGHT SHELTER, LEICESTER

'Over 350 volunteers helped to make beds, serve food, wash dishes, cooked, played games and talked to the guests at Leicester's winter night shelter. Over the 12 week period 30 guests were offered a night shelter bed and by the end of February all had been offered some type of permanent accommodation'.

Now at the end its second year, the Winter Night Shelter provided overnight accommodation for 11 weeks from December to the end of February. This was very much a multi-faith night shelter run by volunteers from the Hindu, Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith groups in the city, although the volunteers each night were from all faiths or none. Each faith group funded their part of the project.



The night shelter rotated around 7 venues in the city – a Synagogue, a Muslim community centre, 3 Anglican churches, one Catholic Church and a Hindu community centre. Every night, Bishop Street Methodist Church was the 'reception centre' where

guests met for a hot drink and chat before being taken in the mini-bus to their overnight accommodation.

At each venue, the evening volunteers helped with the cooking, served and washed up, put up the beds and put bedding out, played games and talked to the guests. 2 overnight volunteers took it in turns to stay away awake, backed up by a night worker. The morning volunteers woke guests, prepared and served breakfast, washed up and packed away beds and bedding. Minibus drivers and escorts picked up the guests to take them to



the venue, then dropped them off next morning and took the bedding onto the next venue.

On arrival at the overnight venue, the 10 guests sat with the volunteers and shared a hot evening meal together and were given the opportunity to play

cards, jenga, board games or talk to the volunteers. Breakfast was served before they left the next morning. Advice and signposting was an important element of the scheme.

The Winter Night Shelter is part of the work of the charity, One Roof Leicester. ([www.oneroof.org.uk](http://www.oneroof.org.uk)). In 2012 One Roof brought together all the organisations in the city involved in some aspect of homelessness,, so that they could ensure that there was daily provision for all homeless people, especially those sleeping rough, and that services were not duplicated.

Housing Justice - the national organisation which works on behalf of homelessness and bad housing and helped in the setting up of the winter night shelter, awarded the shelter their 'excellence standard'. They said that this high standard is usually only received when a night shelter has been run for three or four years!

When Housing Justice visited for the day, comments were: 'impressed by the attention you pay to each other and the guests; the equality between guests and volunteers (difficult to distinguish who was a volunteer) the fabulous welcome everyone receives; the incredible show of support around Chewy's death (one of the guests); the use of the minibus as most shelters get their guests to walk to the different venue and the multifaith approach.



Listed below are some comments made by guests, volunteers and one of the venues:

Never been in a faith venue before – guest  
The boys gave me a lot as well – volunteer  
Even if I feel bad, chance to change your mood playing games with volunteers – guest  
A new experience. I thoroughly enjoyed it and am looking forward to next year - volunteer  
The service users are referred to as 'Guests' and are welcomed with respect, warmth and care – Jalaram Madir community centre.

*Margaret Mackley*

## More Fracking protests

The word fracking does express something of the violence inherent in its meaning and gives a certain edge to the song accompanying this. The following account relates to my involvement at the protests at the Cuadrilla Fracking site at Preston New Road near Blackpool.

Cuadrilla have been drilling at this site for over a year, exploring for shale gas. This is now at the point where fracking is imminent. There is nearby a small, more or less permanent camp of 'protectors', as they prefer to be known. Others join as and when they can in attempts to slow down the drilling operation, draw attention to what is going on there and hopefully eventually stop further drilling there. I have now been several times. If over 100 people come, the police close the operation down for the day. The Quakers have been holding Meetings for witness once a month. We have 'permission' to be there for about an hour.

One occasion in January I attended and wrote the following account of what happened. 'The Meeting was planned for 1pm -2pm at the main entrance to the site. As you arrive the rig is very obvious and was working, so noisy. It is in a field just off a very busy road with considerable traffic noise so holding such a meeting is not easy. I helped hold a Quaker banner until the main core of Quakers arrived. This simply says 'Quakers say keep fossil fuels in the ground'. This was visible to the drivers of the three tankers which we saw enter and leave the site as well as passing motorists. Two I understand contained water, the other diesel fuel.

Around 1pm the police closed off the entrance and we started our Meeting. Most people had brought camping stools or chairs so we formed a small circle. Many people in passing vehicles honked horns in support of the protest. The driver of an ice cream van played his tune very loudly. This was quite funny as it was 'If you go down in the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise'! Some of the campers tied colourful ribbons to the fencing, where a number of Quaker banners had also been placed, as we held our meeting. Towards the end of our time there a few people shared readings. We all took a bit of time to get up as we had stiffened up a bit in the cold! The

police opened up the entrance again to let two tankers out. One Quaker interviewed a few of us for a short film she is making of the action and why people come.' (If you want to see this it is available at <https://vimeo.com/255967037>).

I went to the Meeting for witness again on Good Friday. The rig was working and to me the action of driving down into the ground had parallels with nails being driven into hands. Brutality to precious land.

For the next three months the action there will intensify. Different groups and sectors have undertaken to swell the numbers and types of action there because fracking is so imminent. The faith groups have undertaken to organise groups there for the week April 23<sup>rd</sup> -27<sup>th</sup> under the banner 'no faith in fracking'. I was there again on Monday April 16th with the Greater Manchester Group. The police were much rougher initially than my previous experience. There seemed to be some unnecessary dragging of people out from our group for simply being a bit outside the very arbitrary blue line on the ground demarcating the edge of the site. Our group was split in a kind of kettling with large numbers of police separating us. The rig was working and several tankers, some with no information to identify the firms involved, came in and out. As the sun came out and lunch arrived people began to sing and the whole atmosphere became less tense. It seemed absurd that police and protectors, majority all socially concerned people and in different ways doing best as human beings should be at loggerheads. We sang the song printed. We also joined in more folk like protest songs from generations of protestors. The chorus of our version of 'This land is your land' went:

*This land is your land, this land is my land  
From Preston New Rd, throughout our island  
From our native woodland to our river waters  
This land was made for you and me.*

This was very poignant as though at present there is only one rig, and that is bad enough more and more places are now under threat with planning applications from companies to explore for shale gas.



This week the hearing is taking place at Blackpool football club to go ahead with fracking at Roseacre Wood, an application previously turned down. This is just 3 miles from Preston New Rd, where a total of 4 rigs are planned. It is clear the intentions are to open up a much larger field for drilling than at present meets the eye.

The issues for me remain that because of Climate Change fossil fuels should be phased out and certainly

searching for and extracting ever more difficult to reach gas is appalling. The risks to water supply and pollution are further to be deplored. The threat to countryside and the safety of local people particularly from traffic is totally unnecessary, especially when renewable energy is available and the technology to use it improves all the time. Let us indeed hope the fracking companies don't get their own fracking way.

Sandra Dutson

## You won't be fracking long

*Chorus.*

*You won't be fracking long!  
You won't be fracking long  
Wherever frackings threatened  
We'll sing our fracking song!  
And if you fracking bankers  
Can't see there's something wrong  
You think you're fracking clever  
But you won't be fracking long.*

If you're in the fracking business  
You really ought to know  
That all your fracking progress  
Will be very very slow.  
We'll block your fracking test sites  
And your fracking engineers  
And we'll bring your fracking business down  
Around your fracking ears!

*Chorus*

They've had their fracking tax break  
From the Tories in Whitehall  
Which isn't so surprising  
When you understand it all  
The oil and gas investors  
Pay for many a Tory toff  
Yes they're all in this together  
Just like porkers in the trough.

*Chorus*

So if you have some money  
That you're wanting to invest

Don't put it into fracking  
That leaves the world a mess  
There's sun and wind and water  
That can power the human race  
And every green investor makes  
The world a safer place.

*Chorus and repeat faster and faster.*

**No Faith in Fracking Week**

<https://nofaithinfracking.org/events/>

**Monday 23 – Saturday 28 April**



**No Faith in Fracking Week at Preston New Road offers a space and a welcome for people moved by faith and spirit to express in their various and distinctive ways our shared resistance to fracking and our care for Earth.**

People of all faiths and spiritualities and none are welcome to all activities throughout the week.

Please join our faithful peace witness at some point in the week. Bring a brolly, a chair to sit on, food to snack on and colourful banners. Dust down your much-loved poems and readings that chime with our theme.



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<https://www.facebook.com/NoFaithInFracks/>

# Stories of Migration

Struck by Ian & Pat's article on the Transiberian I'd like to add a note on my trip on a Russian train from Moscow to Brussels. The train was packed with young men from the lower echelons of the mafia. All were wheelers & dealers with shady business contacts in Germany. There was a pecking order and those at the bottom (the nicer ones) were visibly being intimidated. An Azeri fellow was being particularly badly treated. There were some respectable folk. One was a Kazakh going to visit his son in Amsterdam. We had long talks in the corridor and he proudly showed me his Benelux visa. We became friends. It was the kind of situation where you feel you need a friend. There were also three elderly Russian couples going to see their children working in Germany.

Arriving in Warsaw representatives of the middle ranks of the mafia got on board. Common in Moscow and recognisable by their dark glasses, black leather jackets and arrogant manner. Maybe collecting their fee for letting the lower orders pass through their patch. I was getting off the train to buy a snack when an anxious elderly woman, her door open a fraction asked what was going on. In my less than impeccable Russian I tried to reassure her "It's only the mafia. Just shut your door and they'll go away soon." Back on board with my ham roll I find one of the nicer brethren had fastened my compartment door on the chain, is holding a knife and won't let me in. So I ate on a very chilly platform. It was late October '93 and snowy in places.

Leaving Warsaw our coach was now attached to the Polish section which had been joined on. I saw our provodnik with the Azeri, bang on the connecting door and talk to the Polish guard. As the door opened he pushed the man through. I suppose for his own safety. The door shut and was bolted again. Then at Frankfurt an Oder the frontier guards found that my Kazakh friend hadn't got a German transit visa and with a bit of shouting bundled him and his baggage off the train.

Germany was a relief. At the stops there were scenes of joy and relief as the old Russians who had endured the trip were reunited with their children.

Last November two members of our family visited us, they were working at the Calais Community Kitchen distributing meals to migrants. They told us the already familiar stories of vulnerability, lack of shelter, police harassment.

Calais is often on the radio. The town mayor regularly deplors the lawlessness and the consequent fear. A worker with Secours Catholique told of the police seizing tents provided for the migrants and refusing to return them. Lorry drivers describe the dangers on the road and consider the police to be lax.

In January after a meal distribution, there was a fight between two ethnic groups. About twenty people were badly hurt, five with gunshot wounds. Such events are provoked by the mafia of traffickers and racketeers who profit from the wretched conditions. They add to the misery. It is in their interest.

Recently we watched a film on TV about Le Mirail. It is a district of Toulouse. In England it would be inner city but it's actually in the suburbs. We know it a bit because a friend is a volunteer in a project run by a Protestant pastor there. Linda Marshall subscribes to their newsletter and can tell more. The film told of unemployment, school failure, delinquency, racketeering. A debate followed and a woman journalist from Le Monde told of how she had lived in another disadvantaged area, Trappes (near Versailles). She told how in the past the Communist party provided a network of support. The mosque had now taken over that role and has a very positive influence in curbing delinquency and petty crime in the young.

I quote these stories because they are my personal experiences of migration –people moving because of poverty or chaos. Here in the Périgord we hear vague accounts of a priest setting up a project for migrants at La Coquille, but it seems not to have been a success. In the neighbouring diocese of the Charente, Montbron parish set up a house for migrants but seemingly they moved on. There's not much work here. Locally in Busserolles the mayor proposed housing migrants in the commune. According to rumour he received death threats.

Last autumn our parish priest, René, wrote in the newsletter about Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si*. I knew that in England CAFOD had a study guide based on it and in a weak moment told René of it. He has now got me to translate it (into my less than impeccable French, but this time I've got a friend to correct the blunders).

In the encyclical, paragraph 52 says "We have need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalisation of

indifference.” and paragraph 232 “Around community actions relationships develop or can be recovered and a new social fabric emerges...with a sense that we live in a common home which God has entrusted to us”

We hope to form a group of reflection and action based on Cafod’s study guide. We must shake off consumerism; put our own perceived economic interests aside because they are illusory as we need 3 planets to

sustain our lifestyle. We must embrace the migrant here and now. We must witness for peace where there is social division as on that train, in Calais, or where we live. I think we should live simply. That is why the work of Ashram in Burngreave and elsewhere is so important and why we are members of Ashram.

*Donald Henderson*

## A Student in Her Sixties

During my lifetime many words have been used to describe me, hopefully mainly positive ones such as helpful, thoughtful, caring, friendly, loyal..... and those who know me well could probably add more, including untidy. In recent years I have found a new word to describe myself:-

### **OPSIMATH!**

Opsi what? Is it something connected to mathematics? Actually it is from the Greek and means “one who learns later in life.”

About four years ago, when my niece was applying to go to university I thought that I would like to be a graduate too. My first idea was to study for a BA in Contextual Theology at Luther King House (LKH) Manchester. Naturally I turned to John Vincent for guidance and he urged me to apply for the MA in the same subject, and added that I might like to study at the Urban Theology Unit (UTU) Sheffield. He persuaded me to aim for the higher goal and was happy to provide a reference for me. However I was not prepared to go to UTU when LKH was almost on my doorstep.

After receiving my application form, LKH invited me to attend an interview conducted by Rev Dr Jan Berry. I arrived, feeling nervous and clutching some examples of worship materials that I had written. Jan quickly put me at ease. The qualifications in higher education that I had earned in the 1970s were not at that time awarded as a first degree, but today the same qualification is at graduate level.

Jan was happy to accept me as a student at masters’ level but as it was approximately forty years since my previous academic study, suggested that I might benefit from a year studying at level 6, ie final year at batchelors’ level. This was offered as a means of “getting back into” academic study and updating my Biblical studies. We agreed that I would spend a year studying Old and New Testament and Social and Political Theologies.

September seemed to arrive very quickly and the next thing I knew I was attending the induction days. Due to major road works, I arrived a little late and sat on the first available chair next to a lovely young woman named Clare. I looked

around and started to feel a bit on the old side. During the various getting to know each other exercises I realised that not only was I the oldest student in my group, I was also older than all bar one of the staff! Clare was the youngest and by the end of the day a friendship was forming between us. Age, however, was no barrier when it came to fitting in with the LKH community.

Jan was so wise when she suggested that I audited some level 6 modules before embarking on the MA. At first I found attending lectures very tiring. Two one and a half hour lectures every Monday afternoon soon led me to trying energy drinks for the first time at “playtime” in order to keep my eyes open until the end of the second lecture.

Everything was so different from when I was studying in the seventies. Tutors use Power Point in their lectures and students have to get to grips with Moodle, a computer platform for all things educational. It was

a little confusing at first but I soon became aware of the positive aspects of Moodle. Firstly you have access to the tutors' Power Point presentations and often their notes as well. Recommended reading, chapters from books, full requirements for assignments and much, much more is readily available, and, most importantly, you can't mislay it!

It wasn't easy to begin studying again later in life, but it has certainly been rewarding and enjoyable. New horizons have opened up and I am once again part of a multi-cultural community.

At present I am over half way through my MA. I have learned much about methods and resources in contextual theology, become acquainted with the work of Jung Mo Sung, a South American liberation theologian who was born in South Korea, done battle with controversies in modern Biblical study and created worship material which I have gone on to critique. My lectures have finished and at present I am working on an 8,000 word assignment on Jesus and mission in the shadow of empire, a most interesting module.

Before I started at LKH my theology was quite radical and now it has become very radical, but, most importantly, it is accepted.

So what are the advantages of being an opsimath? There are many and include:-

- Spending time with a number of people considerably younger than I
- Having a deeper understanding of my subject even if it does take a little longer to sink in
- Learning together with people from a number of different cultures and backgrounds
- Keeping the brain in good working order.

One of the main things that is better about learning now as opposed to in the seventies is that the word count is calculated by your word processing program. Word processing programs cannot differentiate between the definite and indefinite articles and all other parts of speech, so now "the" and "a" are included in the word count. Now that **is** progress.

*After note*

*When Jan read the worship material that I had written she said that she thought that my work should be published and that she would do her best to get me published. She was true to her word and I have had a piece accepted by Wildgoose Publications. The book is due out any time now.*

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## Enid Johnson 1923-2018



Enid Johnson, my friend and member of the Northeast group, died on 16<sup>th</sup> March. We met when I moved into Middlesbrough Ashram House in 1977 and learned that we had both lived in and loved Nigeria, though not at the same time.

She was a Teesside girl, whose parents were both teachers (her father also played for Middlesbrough FC for £4 10s a week). She studied maths at university, trained as a teacher, and went to Nigeria as a missionary, first alone and then in 1952 with Kingsley, also from Teesside, after their marriage. They lived in Igede, a remote rural area in east Nigeria, later with their children Peter and Christine. When civil war devastated that part of Nigeria and led to terrible famine in Biafra,

they helped International Red Cross teams to distribute relief supplies.

They returned to the North East in the early 70's and plunged into youth mission work in Washington New Town, Co. Durham. Two of those young people spoke warmly at Enid's thanksgiving service of the open house she and Kingsley kept, and the way their lives had been transformed.

Retirement brought Enid and Kingsley to Stockton and after Kingsley's death Enid lived first with Peter and then in the Almshouses not far from Yarm Rd Methodist Church. The Church asked John Vincent for advice about how best to respond to the needs of the deprived area behind its grand building, where few of its congregation now lived. It was no surprise that Enid was part of the small group of people from the church who helped to establish Ashram House there.

Knowing what it was like to be far from home and family she warmly welcomed Roberto, who came from Brazil to minister at Yarm Rd with his family, and became the children's adopted grandmother.

She wrote a book "Land of Dreams" and a sequel about her life in Nigeria – all the proceeds going to provide clean water and improve the life of the people of Igede 'who so generously welcomed and adopted us'.

Later she struggled with hearing loss and mobility ( It was fortunate that when her scooter ran out of power one day as she passed the CAB on her way to visit Kingsley's home it was my day volunteering there!). And then memory loss made her wonder what God still wanted her to do. But it

was an unusual form of dementia, so that on my last visit she knew me, and looked well, and we had a lovely lively conversation which I treasure. She died three weeks later. There was a full church for her thanksgiving service - and it was wonderful that one of Enid and Kingsley's adopted Nigerian families came in traditional dress as she would have wished, and spoke and sang movingly.

Enid says in 'Land of Dreams' "We were just ordinary people called by God to work in a particular place....like any other Christians...The account in the gospels of the small boy offering his loaves and fishes to Jesus who fed 5000 people with them ( with 12 baskets over) has always been important to Kingsley and me- God can do so much with so little if it is freely given."

*Jenny Medhurst*

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## BELIEVE BY DATES

In the *Unvarnished Gospels* translated from the original Greek by Andy Gaus, pub. Shambala, Boston and London, 2001, is a translation a little more accurate in some respects. Matthew 16 has Jesus saying to Peter, "and on this rock I will build my assembly"; not 'church' as most Bibles translate the Greek. As churches in these islands go the way of dinosaurs, and are nearing extinction, a rethink about the Christian way is necessary. The creedal formulas, which sustained many generations are long past their believe by dates and are fit only to be trampled under foot and recycled

as waste for compost. Impermanence as Buddhists assert is the only permanence that exists. Church going as a habit is literally dying out. Gospel follower would be more appropriate than Christian. The rituals, prayers and hymns that sustained many generations are not so believable now. New models of Gospel following are needed.

*Cerys Brangwyn, Rock Street Ashram Community House  
Sheffield*

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## BRANCH REPORTS

### Sheffield - Burngreave Ashram

#### 1. 29 Hallcar Street

Jackie Davison has moved out; following renovation, a single person bedsit will be available.

#### 2. Ashram Community Office, at the rear of 86 Spital Hill kitchen

This new facility will house John's Ashram office, including the Ashram Community and Ashram Press offices and store room, as well as the Burngreave Ashram telephone.

#### 3. Office beside the 86 kitchen

This will become a food store for meals. Current office material will be moved into the new Community Office, and the large upright refrigerator in the kitchen re-positioned.

#### 4. 86 Flat

Mark Wildman has been resident here since January 2018, and has been a brilliant colleague. First floor residence for 1 other person, with access via the 86 shop.

#### 5. 80 Flat

Now separated from the 86 flat, with street access only. Residence for 2 people, or 2 single bedsits available, as well as a shared living/guest room and a separate kitchen/dining room. Now under construction. Ideally, we would like people connected with the Ashram Community – students, or a retired couple?

*Report from David Dale on behalf of the Burngreave Ashram House Committee, which consists of Brian Clewes, David Dale, Margaret Mackley and John Vincent.*

## Nottingham Ashram

The Nottingham group has continued to meet about every six weeks, on a Saturday or Sunday lunchtime. We start with a bring and share lunch, which usually is far too ample to encourage concentration later on, from Moby's samosas to Sheila's exotic puddings. However, we try to be disciplined and around 2pm focus on the theme for the session, which can be led by different members. We have been working through John's Radical Jesus, but if someone has a particular issue they would like to discuss, given sufficient notice, then they will be responsible for leading on that. For example, in November, Lorraine was very concerned about safeguarding issues in churches, following recent news items. But to lighten proceedings, she also wanted us to sing some Sydney Carter songs, which, thanks to Mike's musical skills and accompaniment we were able to enjoy.

We usually number about 8 or 9 members. It's interesting that the core has remained pretty much the same over the last 10 or 11 years, with some others coming and going. Because we live relatively close to one another, we can easily arrange other activities, such as the quiet day at the Convent of the Holy Cross, organised by Alice, besides going for occasional planned walks together. People have busy lives and responsibilities, so it's good to be able to come aside, spend time together and share what our faith means to us.

*Maggie Jones*

## London Agape Group

The "London Branch" of the Ashram Community continues to meet monthly, normally on the third Saturday of the month, and usually at the home of one of our London-based members rather than in Staines, Leatherhead, Bristol or West Wickham. Our group is made up of both members and associates and, as the name suggests, we meet in the context of a simple agape liturgy which was drawn up many years ago now, though with some modifications since then, and which includes at the beginning an opportunity for us to share our "news" - our joys and challenges since we last met. This is something we really appreciate; it contrasts for most of us with what happens at church on a Sunday, when there are always jobs to be done - stewarding, coffee-making, junior church... - which distract us from worship and fellowship.

During the past year we have looked together at most of the chapters of *Radical Christianity - Roots and Fruits*, then moved on to two sessions discussing Bishop Philip North's lecture on *Hope for the Poor*, delivered at the Ebbsfleet Lay Congress and published

subsequently in two parts in the journal *New Directions*. To give you a feel for where he is coming from, this quote is a good summary: "I am astonished at the number of people Jesus is calling to plant new churches as long as they are in Zones 1 and 2 of the London transport system. It's the wrong place to start. Renewal comes from courageous mission to the places where it's toughest." I think we all found that this gave us challenging food for thought, and it reminded me of the idea of the "journey downwards" that was promoted in my early days with Ashram and which influenced my choice of direction at the time.

One member of our group has connections with Palestine and shares her experiences with us as the focus of our meeting from time to time. Our hope to jointly attend a workshop at St Paul's Cathedral on *Searching for the historical Jesus* was thwarted because it was booked up very early, but because so many applicants were disappointed they have made it available on their website, so maybe we will use that as the focus for one or more of our future meetings. As we fix the dates six months at a time, the only two definite dates at this point are 19 May and 16 June, but after that we will decide on the dates for the rest of the year, which will then appear on the Community's website: [www.ashram.org.uk](http://www.ashram.org.uk), or you can contact me on 01784 456474 to request a leaflet with the details.

*Linda Marshall*

## North west group report April 2018

A number of members of the north west group continue to meet regularly over lunch at Luther King House. Ian Parker continues to travel down from Ennerdale to Manchester and those of us who live in Greater Manchester greatly appreciate his faithful attendance.

During the last twelve months we have been studying the book "Radical Christianity" John J Vincent and Chris Rowland Eds. We take it in turn to lead a chapter. The end of the book will be reached shortly and we are looking for another book to study.

Our meetings do not follow a strict pattern of frequency. We aim to meet approximately every six weeks, however members are involved in a variety of projects so at each meeting we decide on the date for the following gathering.

Martin, the restaurant manager and Ian, the chef, continue to look after us very well. Access via public transport is good and car parking free. We continue to find the venue suitable for our needs.

*Josie Smith*

# Presenting Radical Jesus to a new generation

*A proposal to introduce John Vincent and his work to a younger generation through social media.*

## The problem:

The community is ageing. Most members are retired and there are few under 50. Whilst we, as members, are mostly comfortable with the Ashram processes and traditions, we have clearly failed to reach out successfully to a younger generation. The recent rise of Jeremy Corbyn shows that the radical messages that Ashram has espoused are not outdated and there remains a considerable appetite for a fresh, radical perspective – if only we can connect with people.

Most current members learnt of JJV through his preaching, national presence within the Methodist Church and his books. But none of these are easy for a youthful generation to access - John generally preaches to small numbers, has a reducing national voice and his books are of limited availability. Ashram has had a small online presence over the last 10 years, but it is not widely used and does not give the impression of a vibrant, youthful community in touch with current issues.

## Opportunity:

Although JJV travels less and speaks less in public than he used to, he remains an inspirational speaker, shrewd analyser and challenging commentator. His books and texts are as relevant today as they always were. We therefore have a large volume of relevant and inspirational material to share. If only we could find a way of getting his message 'out there'...

A *blog* is a discussion or informational website consisting of discrete, often informal diary-style text entries ("posts"). Posts are typically displayed in reverse chronological order, so that the most recent post appears first, at the top of the web page. Readers can subscribe to receive an email whenever a new post is made.

'*Twitter*' is an online news and social networking service where users post and interact with messages, called 'tweets'. These messages are restricted to 280 characters, but often contain links to websites, news items or blogs. Members of the public can 'follow' anyone on twitter to read their tweets, respond to it online or forward it to their own 'followers' on Twitter.

## Proposed solution:

- John to write a monthly 'thought for the day' (or short sermon if you will!) on a topic of interest

related to Ashram, the church, politics or local events.

- Ashram to hire a social media specialist to set up a John Vincent blog and Twitter account. This will be used to publish the commentary online (in a blog) and publicise it on Twitter. On weeks when JJV does not write, he will select a short piece from previous writings to put out on Twitter to inspire, provoke or challenge.
- The social media specialist would need to be highly skilled in social media technology so as to achieve a following for JJV (through optimisation and mutual contacts). They will also need to be sympathetic to the Ashram message so as to effectively promote it and interact with it online. (S)he will be initially funded to set up the sites, but then be paid for 2-7 hours per week to place the content online and link with other Twitter users. The ideal candidate might be already working in a Christian social media outlet / agency. There may even be an agency that can be hired to do this for us.

## Examples of social media

[www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)

[www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)

<http://jonnybaker.blogs.com> - one of the most famous Christian bloggers who writes a regular online update about his life, opinion and work.

<https://skwawkbox.org> - my favourite left-wing news blog by Steve Walker who writes a news piece 2/3 times a day. They are all published on the same website, but if you add your email at the bottom you will receive an email every time a new one is produced.

<https://alternativecarols.wordpress.com> this is a website that I set up (it took 2hrs) to publish my alternative carols. 'WordPress' is a free online tool that provides a simple template into which you can add text. It is set up for blogs, but is now the basis of about a quarter of all websites on the internet.

<https://twitter.com/derbychrisw?lang=en> - Derby MP who uses twitter to give regular news updates and a short weekly video commentary on Westminster

<https://www.youtube.com/user/tommcflytwitter> - a series of video blogs ('vlogs') by a musician that Emma Weeks likes! Shows how YouTube can be used to produce regular short video to get across a message.

*Andrew Weeks 13<sup>th</sup> January 2018*

# HOME BASED DISCIPLESHIP COMMUNITIES

Nirmal Fernando – Ashram Community Houses Rock Street Sheffield

This is a project to try to follow the way of life of Jesus and his disciples who lived in community in each other's homes. It is not a project of faith, belief or conversion<sup>1</sup>, but a model to cultivate a caring and sharing way of life in community with homes as bases, enabling the shift from the individual/family to the communal, engaged in contemplation/prayer, work, study (reading, writing), creative arts, recreation, service, action, and play; giving as able and taking only as needed<sup>2</sup>, also, to be examples to those outside the community and to each other.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Proposed Numbers:

To start with, a maximum of seven and a minimum of three, including the initiators is ideal. I do not advise a community unit to have more than twelve. If it gets to thirteen, 'split it'.

## 2. Proposed Stages of Implementation

- a) Discussion of this proposal – *Initiators*
- b) Discussion with group with shared meal – *hosting and cooking by initiators at home* – Following Jesus the initiator hosting in his home<sup>4</sup>
- c) Gatherings in each other's homes  
First Gathering
  - Hosting & Cooking – *At a participant's home*
  - Contemplation/Prayer – *Selected and facilitated by a participant*
  - Gospel Reading – *Selected and read by another Participant*
  - Reflection and Discussion of reading – *All*
  - Announcements and Future Gatherings
  - Community MealContinual Gatherings – At least monthly
  - Hosted in each other's homes<sup>5</sup> – ideally in rotation
  - Follow 'First Gathering' above

## 3. Possible Future Developments

- a) Caring and sharing outside gatherings among participants
- b) Caring and sharing in neighbourhood
- c) Living Together in each other's homes from time to time
- d) Being based as discipleship community homes
- e) Promoting the project as a model to others outside
- f) Promoting discipleship community homes outside the group as self-empowered, self-determining, and self-sustaining independent projects

## Some Views

In my experience:

- Do not have a name for the project or group;
- Do not make it an official body governed by law;
- Do not have a constitution;
- Do not have membership or subscription;
- Do not appoint any officers;
- Do not waste time on agendas and minutes;
- Do not write reports or keep archives;
- Do not keep accounts;
- Do not register, join, or affiliate with any body, particularly the State, Church, religious authority, political party, or any other under them;
- Do not forget to keep brief notes of what is learnt, understood, and not understood;
- Above all be accountable only to yourselves, both individually and collectively.

If necessary, ask for help and support to start this project

Contact – **Nirmal Fernando** –  
07932 017 929 / [curlsu@hotmail.com](mailto:curlsu@hotmail.com)

## Note:

- Recently, a proposal to start this project model was facilitated by Mark Wildman and John Vincent between residents of the Rock Street Ashram Community Houses and some members of the Pitsmoor Methodist Church, Sheffield.
- This project model has been also presented to the ABBC and Ashram's joint effort – 'Christian Communities alongside Church'.

<sup>1</sup> "The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort. His assenting to this or that scheme of religion, his embracing any particular set of notions, his espousing the judgment of one man or of another, are all quite wide of the point. Whosoever, therefore, imagines that a Methodist is a man of such or such an opinion is grossly ignorant of the whole affair; he mistakes the truth totally". – John Wesley - The Character of a Methodist originally published in 1742 - *The Works of John Wesley*, Thomas Jackson edition, 1872.

<sup>2</sup> See Acts 4.32&34

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 5.13-16

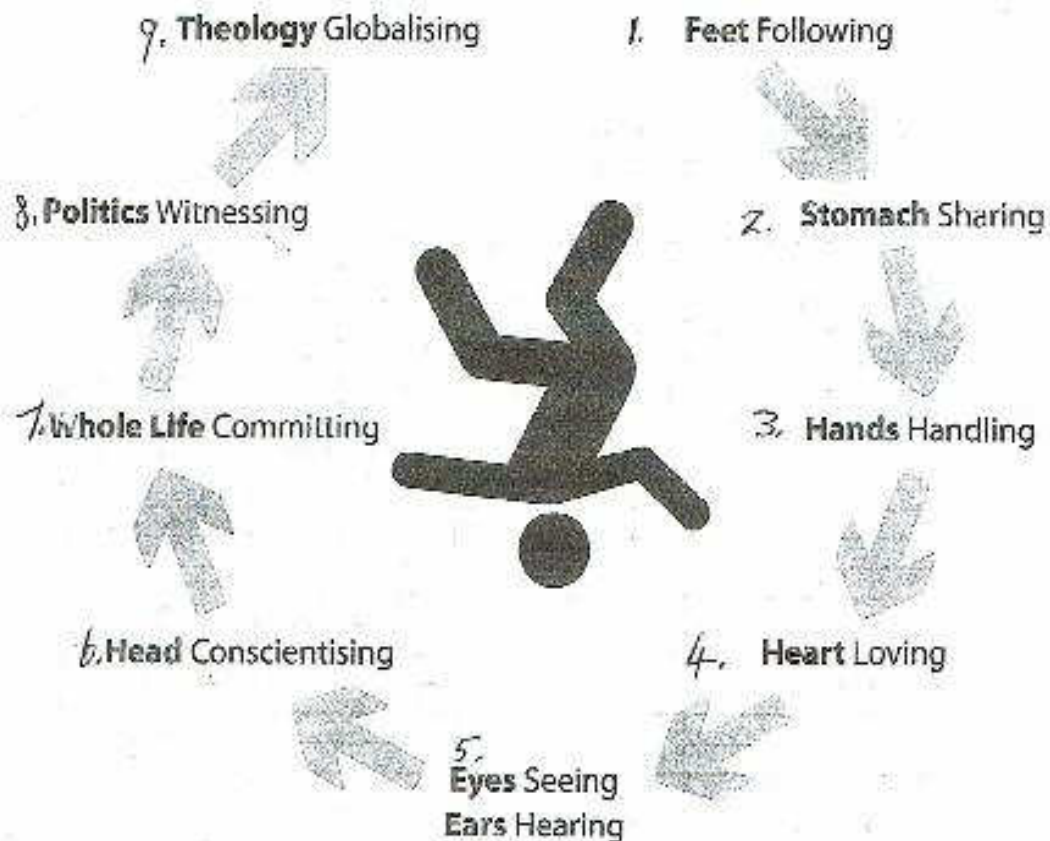
<sup>4</sup> See John 1.37-39; Mark 2.1-2

<sup>5</sup> See Luke 5.27-29; 10.38-40



The theological practice of the discipleship cycle is based upon the imitation of the practice of Jesus. Jesus does not initially ask people to believe in him with their heads or love him with their hearts: he asked them to follow him with their feet and share a common life. This is best expressed through the 'upside down' image to illustrate the different stages of transformation during the journey of discipleship.

## The Discipleship Cycle



*Based on Vincent, John J. (2013) Christ in the City,  
The Dynamics of Christ in Urban Theological Practice, (UTU) pp 60-62*

# ASHRAM STUDY CO-OP

From each according to their Knowledge or Experience.  
To each according to their Desire or Need.

Every Ashram member can join in a Co-op Course. There is no course fee. Leaders and participants agree together on how any expenses are to be covered, and what arrangements are made regarding how the course runs, methods of mutual working, times of meeting as a group, and any product that the group seeks to end up with.

A Study Co-op Course might last for 8 – 10 weeks with occasions totally determined by the Leaders and Members. The Course has two Leaders – perhaps one with knowledge of the area to be studied, with a second Leader who has practical experience of working in it or with it.

At the May weekend detailed sheets will be available concerning:

- Possible courses with named Leaders or Courses already offered by two Leaders.
- Subjects in areas that Members would like to be a part of, with Members names attached so that others may indicate interest in them.

First Course. Autumn 2018

Next Courses Spring 2019, Summer 2019.

A Prospectus of assembled Groups will be published for each for each team in ACT together in October issue for Autumn and Spring terms, May issue for Summer and Autumn terms.

Please send offers to John Vincent as soon as possible, suggesting a topic, the methods and a time plus the name of an associate Leader.

*John Vincent 25<sup>th</sup> March 2018*

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# A WORD FROM THE (STILL!) LEADER

John Vincent

The General Meeting of 17<sup>th</sup> February 2018 was for me at least a very important occasion.

For a start, there were around 30 of us, instead of the usual 20. That means that 30 people in the midst of their busy lives, thought it worthwhile to get to the meeting – and in cold weather. I deeply appreciate it. People were saying: This is important, I want to be here.

Secondly, Alice had put “Thoughts on Leadership” at the top of the Agenda. I simply said I had made a mistake last July about ceasing to be Leader. But there is a real question though of how we conduct the leadership issue, and we need to think well ahead about this. I’m happy to try another 5 years, or so if necessary. The voices of many members saying this was what they wanted was very encouraging.

Thirdly, we reported that 18 people were presently thinking of becoming Members – 8 former Associates and 10 with no present connection. We have never been able to report figures anything like this. It must mean something.

And also a wave of support came for our life together. Several old members put it this way: If completely new people like Mark Wildman and Gary Grief had spoken of their commitment in the way they had, then it was up to others to see if they could be more committed.

At the February meeting, we also found out the truth about Associates! Over the years there have been various conflicting reasons and functions for them. But then we were shown the Ashram Community Trust Rules, p5:

## **GENERAL MEETING**

*The corporate life of the Charity shall be directed by all its members assembled in a General Meeting. General Meetings shall be styled ‘Community Meetings’ and chaired by the Convenor. Decisions shall be minuted and communicated to the membership from time to time. Associates of the Charity, and other non-members, may attend General Meetings, with the meeting’s permission, but only members may vote.”*

We are thus like any organisation which has a Membership. If you want to join in its life, you become a member of it. Those who decide not to join, usually have other ways of being “associated” with it – like being a supporter, a friend or a subscriber. All this is currently being discussed. Solutions welcome!

A larger numbers of Members will give us much more scope for sharing leadership and we need more Members to do any of the brilliant ideas that were put on ‘post-it notes’ - which Helen and Margaret got us to do at Unstone Grange October 2017 in the session about Leadership. It is suggested that the July General Meeting looks into this.

Meantime, Sheffield Members have been seriously asking, if as John says, leadership and community are horizontal, in what could we exercise leadership? – or community?

For all this I am deeply moved and deeply thankful. Thank you, thank you Ashram Community. It’s rather good to be your “leader” (whatever we make of it!), after all.

# Easter Reflections

Just before Easter I was invited by John Vincent to write around the theme of how Christ's Ministry on Earth never really changed even after Death. This is what I wrote and was able to share on Easter Sunday with John and Mark Wildman at a Service.

Perhaps one of Jesus's most controversial statements is the answer he gives in Matthew 9:12, Mark 2:17, Luke 5:32 in answer to the question

"Why does he eat with Tax Collectors, and Sinners?"

Jesus replies,

"They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

The questioners were merely reiterating meanings we can see in Psalm 1:18, 119:63 and Proverbs 13:20, 14:7 and 28:7, this being Jewish Scripture, where there are warnings against being influenced by sinners. Yet Jesus talks, walks, eats, even parties with sinners and in retrospect we can clearly see that he was the one having the biggest and most lasting influence on those around him. However at the time, to outside eyes it looked bad, sacrilegious and Jesus was to encounter this Dogma over Divinity throughout his life. Jesus's repeated call as he walked and taught on the streets was to join him at God's banquet, where all share equally in whatever is offered. To be part of a true humility where no man or woman is higher or lesser than another. Sharing is a Key to the Kingdom and that Kingdom is everyone's birth-right. Even at the 'Last Supper', and this has the double meaning of not only being the last time they gathered together physically but also the last of many suppers, Jesus gives the 'Bread of Life' to Judas just seconds before he walks out the door to betray him.

Jesus's Ministry in that meteoric three years, ending in a spectacular firework of violence 'The Passion', then exploding outward into eternity with his resurrection and ascent never changes. We are called to love and forgive, to share not only food and clothing but our lives and our hearts.

It was on Easter Sunday 2013 that I raised my hand in an Elim Church in Rotherham to give my life to Jesus. I heard his call, and I needed that Love and Forgiveness, I needed Light. My journey toward this moment, being ready to meet this man Jesus whose Resurrection we celebrate today was a journey where over time I had become convinced that in this world Evil existed. That Evil had a hand, a tormenting influence in the lives of many, unwary, naïve people, mine included. Something has to balance that out. I knew that it was Christ. It's often far easier these days to believe in the existence of Evil as a force in

the world than the existence of a Loving God. But as someone pointed out

"If God's Love didn't exist then this world would have ended a long time ago."

'Gospel' can be translated as 'Good News' but which passer-by on the street today believes in 'Good News'? What good news? where is the 'Good News'?

Every Wednesday at Ashram Café on Spital Hill a free meal is provided for the local community at 6pm. Here we get the homeless, addicted, those suffering from Mental and Emotional disorders, anybody who needs a hot meal. As I sat next to John Vincent a couple of weeks ago I could not help but overhear the conversation of two men in their early twenties next to us.

"I'm going to stab him."

"When I see him I'm going to bang him out."

And this went on and on, threats to various people they knew who weren't there in the room. And it first it angered me, then it saddened me, and finally certainly due to a relationship with Jesus, I felt compassion. They were just scared boys. Trying to make themselves sound and feel brave in the face of overwhelming odds; this uncertain world, addiction, poverty. Yet to see and feel any light in that darkness. And Ashram fed them, and they left, and some of us went downstairs for Eucharist. Sharing Communion bread and wine with each other. Bread and Wine, the body and blood of Christ, who overcame death to forgive us all, and give us a new chance every time we hear his often repeated call

"Do not be afraid."

*Samuel Humphrey*

*Sam is resident at 79 Rock Street. Currently I am Directing a one man show written and performed by the poet Ralph Dartford called 'Recovery Songs' which is touring to London, Bloomsbury Theatre in May, Bradford Literature Festival in June, Wakefield Theatre Royal in September and Edinburgh Festival next year.*

*I am also involved in 'Shakespeare Showtime' working with local children in Burngreave and this year we are performing 'Much Ado About Nothing'. We take children to The Crucible for Costume Fittings.*

*I also volunteer three times a week at Burngreave Library.*

*Life is good.*

# KINGDOM CULTURE OR OTHER CULTURE<sup>1</sup>?

## Character of Kingdom Culture

What is commonly called ‘the sermon on the mount’ narrated at Matthew 5.1 to 7.29 was particularly addressed by Jesus to his disciples (see Matthew 5.1-2). That is by far the longest discourse attributed to Jesus in the canonical narratives and those left out of the canon. Most importantly it is entirely about his kingdom’s culture.

We know that the disciples had turned away from all prevailing cultures and followed Jesus having confidence in his proclamation of the kingdom, his one gospel (*euaggelion*) (see Mark 1.14-20). Obviously if one asks others to renounce their ways of life, and they do, then it is the duty of that one to tell them in no uncertain terms how to lead their lives from then on. And, that is exactly what Jesus does in this instance and other instances throughout some three years he was with them.

The meaning of the word disciple (*mathētēs*) is ‘learner, pupil, and follower’; and so Jesus had a duty to teach them, while they had a duty to learn from him, reflect on the words, en-flesh them in their beings, and act it out. To that end, Jesus while ending this discourse says “Therefore whosoever hears these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man ...” Also, the words attributed to Jesus at John 14.23: “If someone loves (*agapaō*: selfless love) me, he will obey (*tēreō*: observe) my teaching (*logos*: here meaning words) ...”

## Selectiveness

However, Jesus did not call each and every one to that culture. Throughout the narratives, it is clear that Jesus rightly exercised discernment of persons. He emphasises the importance of this to the disciples in this discourse (see Matthew 7.6). A disciple must learn and gain adequate experience to recognise a prospective disciple, from one who is not. Some are not suitable even at the first meeting; others join in, but later turn to be malicious and destructive adversaries. Also, there are those who intentionally or otherwise distort the way of life and teaching of discipleship.

Also, it is evident that Jesus hardly called to the kingdom culture those who sought help from him (represented by healing). To the only healed one who is recorded as requesting to follow, was sent to his home and friends (see Mark 5.18-19). Yet, we know that some of the healed women who were giving financial support to Jesus (see Luke 8.2-3) appear to have joined the culture. The disciples, of course never asked for healing. For example there is no record of Peter even telling Jesus of his mother-in-law’s sickness. Even in the case of Lazarus, his sisters who were disciples, didn’t ask Jesus for healing, but merely informed him of his ill-health. Selection is not being judgmental; there is no good and bad or right and wrong, it is merely based on suitability.

## Restrictiveness

Jesus also says in this discourse, that the way of kingdom culture is narrow (*thlibō*: constricted; troubled, afflicted) and only few will find (*heuriskō*: see, learn, discover, understand, find out for one’s self) and select it (see Matthew 7.13-14). When Jesus said these words he rightly saw the future of his mission – discipleship to him – the kingdom culture, which in effect has been only micro-minorities throughout its historical lineage to date. That way of life is restricted, also in one’s thoughts, emotions, decisions and actions (*hodos*). One is led away (*apagō*) by the kingdom culture - way of life and teaching of Jesus, rather than leading one’s life in any other manner.

## Is Kingdom for Community or Nation?

One may attempt to counter that interpretation by quoting Matthew 28.19-20. However, that will not carry, since translations are not unusually accurate, and it is commonly known that translators often don’t consider other relevant passages of the text when translating a passage. The *Koinē* Greek word ‘*ethnos*’ in the 1st century CE primarily meant ‘a group living together’; ‘a community’. Although it also was sometimes used to mean ‘nation’, it is inappropriate to use that word in this passage, given Matthew 7.6,13 and 14. The word ‘nation’ has been used in fourteen English translations known to me, including the KJV, NKJV, NIV, ESV, NASB, and RSV. I can only speculate that it was intentional. However, that usage justified the church’s intention

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<sup>1</sup> To me ‘culture’ is determined by way of life, following the common sociological definition – “Culture consists of the beliefs, behaviours, objects, and other characteristics common to the members of a particular group or society”. Through culture, people and groups define themselves, conform to their society’s shared values, and contribute to that society. From Latin *cultura* meaning ‘cultivating, agriculture’, figuratively ‘care, culture, a honouring’. The term took a semantic shift in 1867 to mean ‘collective customs of a people’.

of proselytising 'all' nations, ongoing even up to date.

The English word 'ethnic' derives from the Greek '*ethnos*'. In the early fifteenth century 'ethnical' was used taking a semantic shift to mean 'pagan or heathen – one who is not a Christian'. Obviously, the church's definition of 'Christian' was the test. On the contrary, it is clear that even Paul uses '*ethnos*' to mean 'Gentile Christian' (twenty three times in Romans, three times in 1 Corinthians, once in 2 Corinthians, twice in Galatians, five times in Ephesians, and once in Colossians). The word 'gentile' does not come from Greek vocabulary but derives from the Latin '*gentilis*'. Within a few centuries, some Christians used the word 'Gentiles' to mean non-Christians<sup>2</sup>. The Jews used it in past history as a word of contempt. Priding themselves on their peculiar privileges, it acquired unpleasant associations<sup>3</sup>. Around 1945 'ethnic' took another semantic shift to its current meaning 'member of an ethnic group'.

The King James Version of the Bible was published in 1611. King James 1 gave the translators instructions intended to ensure that the new version would conform to the ecclesiology and reflect the episcopal structure of the Church of England and its belief in an ordained clergy. The translation was done by forty seven scholars, all of whom were members of the Church of England. The translation was biased given the ordered compromise with Anglican theology. Further, the British Empire began to take shape exactly during this period. One justification of colonialism was the Christianisation of occupied nations, alongside supposedly 'civilising' the people by promoting the colonisers' culture.

### **Kingdom Culture and Other Cultures in Jesus' Time**

It is apparent that culture and law are interrelated variables that strongly influence one another<sup>4</sup>. As a rule, social beings are expected to respect laws and cultures. Jesus' kingdom culture was practiced primarily in territories where the Mosaic Law and Jewish culture were applicable and enforceable. It was the law of the land, which Jesus disregards. There were supposed 'health' laws mostly focussing on food, kitchen utensils, and cooking. Should any defilement occur, ritual purification by a priest was required (not a doctor to restore to health!),

<sup>2</sup> Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*, OUP, 2010, p. 16

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/gentiles/>

<sup>4</sup> See, Naomi Mezey, *Law as Culture*, Georgetown Law Faculty Publications, March 2010

irrespective of being unwell by the defilement. It is clear that Jesus and his disciples did not observe those laws, excluding them from the kingdom culture (see Mark 7.1-15).

Further, throughout the narratives it is evident that Jesus heals on the Sabbath. Hence, not working on that day is contrary to the kingdom culture. This, Jesus did from childhood – playing and making things on the Sabbath (see, Infancy Narrative of Thomas 2.1-5).

Another very pertinent example is Jesus' definition of adultery. In the kingdom culture it has nothing to do with 'the act of sexual intercourse with another's wife'. Instead the focus is on the mind's attitude which is the basis of the action, irrespective of whether it is directed at one's wife or any other woman. Lust (*epithymēō*) meaning, desire, craving; possessiveness, and the desire to be possessed, is impure for disciples in his kingdom (see, Matthew 5.27-28).

Throughout the narratives Jesus emphasises to his disciples to always have selfless love (*agapaō*) and express that when relating to others in any situation, even to enemies. So, obviously, it applies to sexual expression, and has no bearing to whom it is expressed. Surely, there is no record of Jesus prohibiting sexual relationships between any types of persons; it overrides gender, sexual orientation, and the mono relationship. This is supported by Jesus not encouraging disciples to bond in marriage (in modern terms even bonded partnerships), quite contrary to Jewish, Greek, and Roman laws and cultures of the time. But he says to his disciples that only some have the power (*(didōmi)* not marry (*eunouchizō* – not those with incapacity, but those who do not get into the bond of marriage) for the sake of the kingdom (see, Matthew 9.10-12). Jesus was certainly not enforcing celibacy on the kingdom culture, since *eunouchizō* does not mean that, and the words '*agamia*' (celibacy) and '*ágamos*' (celibate) are never attributed to Jesus' lips in some eighty four narratives about him available to us. Yet, the best evidence encouraging non-bonding in various relationships including marriage in the kingdom culture is at Mark 10.29-30 – the hundred times more, doesn't include wives. Also, speaking to the disciples he dismisses remarriage in no uncertain terms (see, Mark 10.10-12). It is interesting to note that the issue of marriage is yet another irreconcilable contradiction between the kingdom culture and the sacrament of 'holy' matrimony of the church culture. Also, the church appears to follow the Jewish and state laws on adultery, rather than what Jesus advocated in the kingdom culture. The end result is not to marry,

nether be celibate, but relate sexually to others mutually with self-less love.

I frequently hear people trying to disagree with the proposition that Jesus was not friendly to Jewish law and custom, by quoting Matthew 5.17, where Jesus most appropriately in the 'sermon on the mount' says that his task is not to destroy ('*katalyō*' here means 'overthrow'), but to fulfil ('*plēroō*' means 'to complete since it is lacking') the law. Once again one is faced with improper translation, inadequate understanding, and inappropriate interpretation. Now, that is absolutely correct since Jesus and his disciples had turned away from all extant laws and cultures of the day. Consequently, if one engages with them even adversely, yet there is linking – no turning away! Realistically, it is clear that there was not an iota of the laws and customs of the day which changed in conventional and popular society given Jesus' kingdom culture – they were certainly not overthrown by Jesus. Yet, they were lacking, and therefore unsuitable for the kingdom culture; therefore Jesus says that rightly, and one's attempt to disagree by quoting Matthew 5.17, must necessarily end in agreement!

### **Lifestyle in Kingdom Culture – Jesus and Disciples**

It is absolutely clear from all the narratives about Jesus that along with the disciples he was based in each other's homes and in those of others. The twelve he named apostles (*apostolos*: a delegate, messenger, one sent forth with orders) appear to be with him, live with him regularly, and in itinerancy unlike other disciples (*mathētēs*: learner, pupil, follower). It is probable that the disciples, who were not in Jesus' apostolic group, lived likewise in home-based microunits following that example. Apart from what is now called the sermons on the mount and plane and a few other instances, Jesus taught his disciples at homes. However, they were also outdoors, consistently among people in town, countryside, street, and village.

It is also clear that they held their money and goods in common, and no one thought it was one's own. There is evidence that others donated to that fund. So, 'private property' had become 'communal property', thereby aborting economic disparity, unlike in conventional and popular society (This is impliedly evidenced as a kingdom culture even in Jesus' time at Acts 2.44-45 and 4.34-35). As, for food and wine, they had whatever was at hand or offered, without avoidance or selection, and it was communally shared.

They did not identify with the unit of 'blood family'; yet that had no effect on relating to relatives. Similarly, there is no evidence of self or communal identity with any State - Galilean, Judaic, Greek or Roman. Similarly, with any religion, assembly, or place of worship, apart from their kingdom which were numerous assemblies (*ekklēsia*: gathering of disciples/followers – wrongly translated and commonly used to mean and justify 'church').

They did not go to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer blood sacrifices or on pilgrimage. Although they were in the temple sometimes, the narratives refer to them speaking with people and answering questions, often to the questioners' displeasure. We know that they went to synagogues as well; but more often than not, they were thrown out or faced adversity. Not one is recorded as having wanted to follow Jesus from there, while there is also no calling by him from those locations.

As for healing, it is clear that neither Jesus nor his disciples had 'healing missions'; they healed when requested, without any ulterior motive.

Jesus' one mission was to establish the kingdom culture. That he did untiringly, patiently, unswervingly, committedly, consistently, and having strength to remain brave and undisturbed in any situation. To that end, it is important to note that Jesus never initiated confrontation, apart from when 'cleansing the temple', but responded frankly and with authority to challenging questions, and with wisdom and skill avoided being trapped. Jesus and his disciples were focussed on establishing the kingdom culture, and had no time to oppose others, governments or religious authorities. Obviously they had no calling for that, and did not do that. But, it is clear that the kingdom culture disregarded the laws of the land and its cultures and did not allow false scruples, phobias, and behavioural patterns to infiltrate from conventional and popular laws and cultures. They lived in microunits beyond separating genders, laced with equality. Yet, all with selfless love. So, no one was lacking in any way in the kingdom culture, with social security from within, and with no need to seek it elsewhere.

### **Today – Kingdom Culture or Other Culture?**

You know! What do you follow or hope to follow? – It's your choice! – I leave it for individual reflection, decision, and practice.

- *Nirmal Fernando, Rock Street Ashram  
Community House, Sheffield*



## 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](mailto: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

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## DATES

### 2018

7 July General Meeting, Ashram Office, Sheffield  
9-11 July Summer School UTU/Ashram  
31Aug-7 Sep Holiday, Ennerdale, Lake District  
5-7 October Community Weekend, Unstone

### 2019

23 Feb General meeting, Sheffield  
10-12 May Community weekend, Middleton  
4-6 October Community weekend, Unstone

## COMMUNITY

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Act Together editor: Jenny Medhurst  
[medhurst@phonecoop.coop](mailto:medhurst@phonecoop.coop) Articles for the Autumn 2018 edition needed by Sep 15<sup>th</sup>  
Contributions from members/associates who do not attend national Community events especially welcomed!

## HOUSES AND PROJECTS

Burngreave Ashram Centre, Multifaith 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  
Tel: 0793 201 7929 (Nirmal Fernando)  
6 Andover Street Sheffield S3 9EG  
Tel: 0791 092 2462  
27 Hallcar Street, Sheffield S4 7JY  
29 Hallcar Street  
80 Spital Hill, Sheffield S4 7LG  
86 Spital Hill, Sheffield S4 7LG

## 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

**East – A46**- Twice Yearly 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, Brighton Grove, Rusholme

**Sheffield** – Tamara Donaldson– 0791 092 2462  
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