

## From our Chair – The Right Reverend Colin Fletcher.

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

"A week is a long time in politics".

That phrase, first coined by Harold Wilson in 1964, following the sterling crisis that year, could be repeated many times over, even if in a slightly transformed version, as I look back over the past 12 months.

Most recently it only took a few days for the former Government of Syria to collapse ignominiously. The General Election, back in July, predictably went Labour's way but few had predicted the size of the landslide majority with all that that means for the Government. The publication of the Makin Report was always going to present major challenges for the Church of England to face, but, again, very few were expecting it to result in the resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury. And even today, as I write, the Archbishop of York is coming under pressure to do the same.

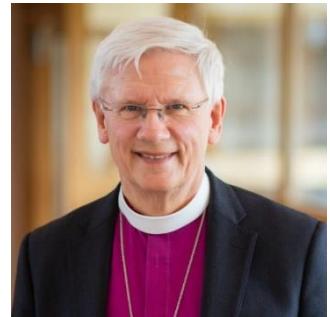
As a Church we seem to be lurching from one 'crisis' to another - a week can be a long time in politics, but, equally, a week can be a long time for other institutions as well.

And yet, as any observer of history knows, in the midst of such 'crises', much continues as normal as the ordinariness of the rhythms of life run their course.

It may have been true for you, but one of the things I had to learn, as a Vicar, a Chaplain, and then as a Bishop, was to think twice before reacting over-hastily to whatever was deemed to be the latest crisis (or, come to that, the latest 'answer' to the challenges) facing us as the Church of England.

I realise, of course, that that could sound horribly complacent, or a reason never to alter the status quo. I wouldn't want, for instance, to minimise in any way the challenges we face now, and the horrific damage that has been done, by not addressing safeguarding issues properly in years gone by - but the 'ordinariness' of the Church's life is something that I continue to give thanks for on many occasions. Alongside the rhythm of the liturgical year and the regular round of services week by week, are the thousand and one ways in which our parishes, cathedrals and chaplaincies are engaged in the lives of their wider communities - something so many came to understand and value in new ways at the time of the pandemic.

As your Chairman I am also becoming more and more aware of the vital roles being played by the (so-called) Retired Clergy in the life of our Church. Estimates vary, but it is believed that somewhere between a quarter and a third of Sunday and Weekday services are taken by those who could be members of this Association. Yet, as I talk to people, and travel the country, all too often I hear the observation that the contribution we make is unacknowledged and undervalued.



At the same time, and I give thanks for this, a new movement seems to be catching on in some dioceses for ordaining people as deacons and priests long after they would have been told they could not be ordained in the past. For instance, it was at Petertide last year that Elinor Delaney, then aged 79, was ordained deacon in St Paul's Cathedral after being an ordinand on the St Mellitus Caleb stream. All things being equal this means that she will be being priested at the age of 80 - a time when, in a number of dioceses, clergy have been being actively encouraged not to seek to renew their PTO. To use a phrase much beloved by some politicians, there is a lack of joined-up thinking here which the House of Bishops and General Synod needs to address.

In that context the work recently undertaken by Canon Julian Hubbard on our behalf on the roles of Retired Clergy Officers (RCOs) is of particular value. See <https://rcacoe.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/the-role-work-of-rcos-.pdf>. In it he has focussed on, amongst other things, their job descriptions and the resources that they have to deploy in carrying them out. The former clearly reflect the tradition in most dioceses that the functions of RCO's should focus on the invaluable task of providing pastoral care both for the retired clergy and, in many cases, their spouses as well. However, very few encourage them to think about the roles and skills of retired clergy and how they can best use them to support the wider ministry of their dioceses. Nor, sadly, in many cases are they given much of a voice in the councils of their diocese. Likewise, very few have much by way of resources to fulfil their ministries. His aim, shared by the Pensions Board amongst others, of creating a network of RCO's who can learn best practice from one another seems to me to be a very good first step in addressing some of these issues. Happily, there is evidence that some dioceses are catching this vision as well. In that spirit I long for the day when, in every diocese, there is a body of RCO's working with adequate resources to enable their retired clergy both to fulfil their ministries and to support them pastorally as well.

I say that because I am convinced that, as a Church, we cannot afford to continue to downplay or neglect all that we as retired clergy have to offer. The Caleb Stream honours age and vocation and I long for that to be reflected throughout our church.

But enough of my longings. May I conclude simply by saying a big 'thank you' to you all as we get into a new year and may you and your ministry flourish in all that lies ahead.

Your Friend and Brother

+Colin Fletcher

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### **From the Editor – Charles Chadwick**

Welcome to our first newsletter of the year. Thank you very much to everyone who has submitted articles and who has written to me with their observations about our newsletter. Please do keep sending me potential articles. It is good to have a few lines of CV and a photo of you is good too. In common with other editors, I reserve the right to edit articles. You will see that we have some new features, *Person in profile*: in which we gain insights into the life and calling of one of our colleagues, and *It seems to me*: which is an opportunity for someone to make the case for a topic that interests them. The complexities and challenges of everything pertaining to safeguarding and how it is handled is a key issue in the Church of England at present. It is a topic that has been well aired in our newsletter recently and we need to let the matter rest for the time being.

The views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Retired Clergy Association of the Church of England. Items from members for the April newsletter should be with me please, by the 31<sup>st</sup> March at [cjpchad9@aol.com](mailto:cjpchad9@aol.com) preferably in Word, Calibri 12 point narrow margin. Thank you.

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## Person in Profile - Tina Rollings



*Tina Rollings spent 46 years as a Ladies hairdresser and so likes people and their stories. She was licensed as a Lay Reader but felt the calling to Ordained Ministry and has worked in communities as a self-supporting minister with a particular call to Baptism, Funeral Ministry and the Eucharist. Her hobbies include cooking & baking, cake decorating and various crafts. She enjoys the outdoors and growing plants and vegetables.*

**1. What is the first thing you can remember?**

Being Baptised with my twin sister and elder sister at the age of 2-3.

**2. Who has been the greatest influence on your life?**

My parents, my children, and my grandchildren. They have all taught me that life is for living and we must never be afraid to follow our dreams and our hearts because we are loved.

**3. If you appeared on 'Mastermind' what would be your specialist subject?**

I am a jack of all trades but master of none so possibly Julian of Norwich as she inspires me most days.

**4. What is your favourite prayer?**

God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, and Wisdom to know the difference.

**5. What brings you contentment?**

Baking, gardening growing my veggies, crafting, celebrating the Eucharist.

**6. What is your favourite piece of music?**

The hymn: I the Lord of Sea and Sky. It calls us all to answer and it inspires me. If not this, then something to make me want to dance.

**7. Who is your favourite fictional character?**

Winnie the Pooh as he is not afraid to ask questions and to often seek the wise owl

**8. What advice would you give to a new ordinand today?**

Believe in yourself as you believe God called you not to change you, but to change the world. Be strong in your Faith and in your Prayers. Serve his people, bringing them joy and love with

compassion and sincerity and conviction. Don't worry you will be given the tools and one day you will recognise for yourself how you have grown and that you "Are a Priest forever".

*9. What do you enjoy the most about being retired?*

Ministry at the Bus stop!!

Having the time to spend with people and family

PJ days with the grandchildren.

*10. How would you like to be remembered?*

Always thankful and positive. Always there for others, encouraging, helping, hospitable, loving and caring, also very silly at times (never feel old).

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### **Clergy and trains by David Marshall**

If love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage, I wonder what phrase we would use to talk about vicars and trains? Because it is not an uncommon thing. There is a vicar near you who has a passion for trains. When we were asked on my pre-retirement conference what interests we had to sustain us in retirement, eight of the twenty present said trains. One vicar present admitted to already spending every day off driving a real train at a preserved railway and was looking forward to that activity becoming full time.

What is it about trains that prove so attractive to those of us in ordained ministry? One vicar commented: "It's the only thing in the parish I don't have to push." I wish I could agree with him, but I find my trains all too often need a helping hand to get going!



Perhaps the only way to answer the question is to tell my own story and share what insights I have gained over the years. I have always loved kits and making models. As a child, my bedroom ceiling in our NCB house was adorned with aircraft. My love for trains developed early on. What better sight than to see a Coronation Class steam engine thundering up the line between Crewe and Manchester? Or to see a "Brit" (Britannia Class to those not in the know) gently idling in Stoke

station. And of course there was train spotting, something I have never been quite able to shake off. I remember one incident during my time as Chaplain of St Mark's Versailles that nearly got me into trouble! I had gone to Gare du Nord to pick up a retired Bishop who was booked to take a confirmation service for us. Getting there in good time, I found myself wandering up and down the platforms taking numbers of all the TGV sets in the station. I lost track of time but eventually 'came to' and hurriedly went off in search of my Bishop whom I found, standing alone clutching a piece of cardboard with the word 'Bishop' on it!! How embarrassing!

Like many children my first train set was a simple oval - a *Triang* set with a green Multiple Unit that just went round and round. We didn't have money or space to develop it further and it was very tedious getting the track out on the carpet. I was one of six, so space was always at a premium as well as the occasional scrap over who could drive it.

Approaching ordination, I felt I needed to have a sustainable hobby into which I could escape and find refreshment. My wife (also an ordained priest) found hers in a passion for gardening whereas my interest in trains was developing apace, aided (I confess) by a train loving parishioner in my first curacy. His wife, knowing my love of trains introduced us in the hope I would have some success in bringing his faith alive. He certainly got me more excited about trains and I hope some seeds of faith were sown along the way.



I bought my first locomotive in 1977 and decided I would like to model French Railways as I greatly admired SNCF. Little did I know this was a prophetic decision! As the numbers of engines and rolling stock grew, the first buildings arrived and by the time I had got to my first living with its four- bedroom vicarage, one of the bedrooms became the “railway room” and

construction could begin. I can't begin to describe the attraction and satisfaction of seeing model trains running in a realistic setting. Inevitably in ministry one has to move and the hardest part for me has always been dismantling a railway that would have to fit another house, another situation.

Whilst we were in Versailles we decided after prayer that we should buy a house in France, a country we have come to know and love. The decision was probably helped by the fact we could not afford to buy a house in the UK. Finally, I had the definitive space for my railway! It now occupies a 3 metre by 4 metre space in the roof and has given me the opportunity to develop a railway built around three stations. We continue to exercise ministry in retirement being part of an extensive PTO clergy team supporting the Chaplaincy of Aquitaine but we both now find more time for our respective passions – the garden and the railway.

Two years ago, after visiting a local exhibition, I was introduced to Jean-Marie who was at that time founding a local club to build a scale model of the line from Condom – Mouchan. I now spend most Monday afternoons in the presence of French colleagues which is good. There, I have to speak French all the time and have picked up many helpful tips and techniques whilst forming supportive friendships.

What conclusions have I come to about the link between vicars and trains? As with all good sermons I want to end with three observations.

First, model railways offer a counterbalance to the high demands of spiritual ministry. What I mean is that though the work of ministry is very valuable and can be extremely rewarding, we don't always see tangible results. That's in contrast to physically building something. I can see and take satisfaction in the result.

Secondly, model railways provide a creative escapist outlet. When I'm making a model or driving a train, I lose myself in that activity and forget everything else. So much is said about wellbeing today and we all need something in our lives that will stimulate and refresh us.

Thirdly and finally my model railway gives me deep joy. When leaving one of my curacies where among other responsibilities I had shared leadership of the CYFA group, one of the Youth Leaders said to me: *“The thing I like about you Dave, is that you'll probably never grow up!”* And he is right in one sense. The toys just get bigger and better! But I hope I never lose my sense of God given fun and joy and if my model railway in part fosters that, so be it. As to what phrase might match *“Love and marriage....”* any suggestions? If you are a retired priest reading this and you share my passion, would you consider joining my Facebook group: **Retired Vicars Railway Group**

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/758949059608016/>

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## **Hey Mr Ex-Vicar man! (Don't play a song for me) by Hugh Wright**

A few weeks ago, I was addressed as 'Mr ex-Vicar man' at a folk club I've started attending in the last year. I've run this title past a few people – not all of them clergy- and most find it pretty offensive, which I'm fairly sure it was meant to be. Of course, on one level it's true. I am the ex-Vicar of a few parishes not far away from here. Yet I'm fairly sure that this man had in mind the other meaning of Vicar, that is the generic term for 'Anglican priest'. In that sense I am not an ex-Vicar, but a retired priest still practising my ministry in many and varied ways, even when playing Bob Dylan in the Folk Club.

This little incident has led me to reflect on the past 13 months since my retirement- the different things I have done and the ways I have been- and the change from being at the heart of a community of faith to living an anonymous life on a big housing estate in our secular society.

I remain a priest and of late have been answering pleas for Sunday help from churches on the basis of their need. We will see how this develops as parish vacancies are filled, which they are, at a surprising rate! Having said that, I also decided, soon after retirement, to take a good break from church and to do a mixture of things I enjoy -including guitar playing and music making with others- and socially useful work that puts me in touch with a wider range of people than I met as a parish priest. For me, the latter has led to volunteering for Citizens Advice. Both have presented challenges and opportunities for which I have felt both equipped and ill-equipped by my life's work.

First, music making. In my last parish I joined a local Guitar Club soon after I arrived. This is a gathering of local guitar players (mostly but not exclusively men of a certain age) who meet once a week in the back room of a pub or coffee shop to rehearse 5 or 6 rock/pop songs. Someone turns up with a song complete with printed out chords and lyrics and usually takes the lead vocal; most play chords, one plays bass and our tutor, who is an ex-Rolling Stone, plays lead. It is a very pleasant way of spending a weekday afternoon, leading to a monthly Evening at a pub where songs are performed, followed by an Open Mic for all.

When I retired to a town 10 miles away, I kept this up, making a seamless transition into my new life. However, after a couple of months the convenor suddenly gave it up and I realised that 36 years as a parish priest, trying to form community, and blend the gifts of volunteers had equipped me to lead the group. I am glad to say that the Club has survived and is attracting new members and above all remains fun!

Volunteering for Citizens Advice is obviously completely different. It is a national agency - see <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>, working to very strict standards and employing a mix of volunteers and paid people, offering help and advice to all comers. My particular role, which I took on after three months training, is that of Initial Assessor, answering the phone or meeting people face to face, welcoming them, assessing their enquiry, putting it on the System to be dealt with by an experienced Adviser. Although we work to very clear guidelines, this role gives me freedom to welcome people in the open way that, for me, is second nature after so many years in parish ministry, even if I am welcoming them on behalf of Citizens Advice not the church. In other words, I have found some of my accumulated skills to be transferable.

There are, however, two important differences between now and then. The first is that the work I do for Citizens Advice is done as part of a team. When I've entered the case onto the system, it is passed on. This

could not be more different to my work as a parish priest. Many is the time I got over-involved and out of my depth with a person who just ‘turned up’. This was completely down to me to fix - a burden that was sometimes hard to bear, and one I certainly do not miss.

The second difference is the God factor- the One who, so it seems in our secular society, cannot be named. At Citizens Advice we have our own way of taking the religious temperature of the nation. When logging all enquirers’ details on the system, and in order to guard against discrimination, we are required to ask about the protected characteristics of a person: race, sex, gender, transgender, sexual orientation, disability, age and religion or faith. ‘Would you describe yourself as white British, straight, disabled, religious etc?’ I’ve tried different ways of reframing these questions, which are hard to ask, especially the religious one. My latest: Is faith important in your life? Yet the answer in this predominately white area, remains the same. No. None. Recently an 85-year-old thought about it for a few seconds then said, ‘No, a total atheist.’ Would he have said that even 20 years ago? Maybe, but I doubt it. The climate has changed. What a world away from the lady who checked my passport at Accra Airport in Ghana 25 years ago. When she heard we were on a church trip she asked ‘Father, could you pray for me please?’

I think back to the ease with which I moved from helping people to speaking about God. ‘God bless you’, ‘Would you like me to pray?’ I miss this, but I can’t complain, for I have chosen to volunteer in a publicly funded service where the common ground on which people stand is secular and in which faith expression, although protected by law, is at very least discouraged and frequently banned. This is the same environment inhabited by staff in the NHS, Councils, schools (excluding faith schools), broadcasting and so on.

I am not saying that God has to be mentioned to be there. I believe that, in words from the Delphic Oracle that CG Jung had carved over his doorway in Zurich: ‘Bidden or unbidden, God is present.’ I believe too that the work of community building, music making, and helping others in their need is intrinsically good and comes from God. Yet I am somewhat taken aback by the hostility with which increasing numbers of people talk about God, the church, and people of faith, many of whom are actively engaged in work for the good of society.

The final thought prompted by the ‘Ex-Vicar’ outburst is the importance of church and meeting together as Christians. Christians can often feel like strangers in a strange land in modern Britain. A sentiment I have discovered for myself in the past year, stripped as I have been of the supportive community that used to surround me. I have found that, for all its deficiencies (which are many and varied) the church and church worship has been a lifeline for me, a place where I can refocus and draw strength for my new life. It doesn’t replace ‘being the Vicar’, a unique and irreplaceable alchemy of faith and community which I miss, though not the stresses which accompany it. But I have learned to appreciate what I now voluntarily choose to do after 36 years of having to do it! That is no small thing for, in the words of the Westminster Confession, ‘The chief end of man is to worship God.’

Hugh would be pleased to enter into conversation with people and he can be contacted at [hughwright59@gmail.com](mailto:hughwright59@gmail.com).

***Ordained in 1987, after two curacies Hugh Wright spent over 30 years ministering on the Isle of Wight.***

## The current plight of farmers by Arthur Champion



About 66% of our parishes are set in rural areas of England and there's never been a better time for clergy to make friends with farmers. After all, God really must love farmers for Him to be born in a cow shed and for shepherds to be first to view Him laid in a feeding trough! Jesus went so far as to be known as the Good Shepherd.

However, these days we could easily get the impression that farming is about driving around in big boy's toys and caring for cute animals. The reality is that farmers work long and unsociable hours in all kinds of weather conditions to care for livestock and to produce the food we need. When the media refrains from trivializing farmers, they often switch to accusing them of damaging the environment. Again, the reality is that farmers have a long-term interest in caring for their land. Many are accepting Government grants to switch from producing food to planting trees, but I wonder if this trend is already going too far. Even the CofE is coming under pressure to rewild vast areas of land that is currently used to for food sustainability.

I wonder what kind of country we are becoming when half our food has to be imported, and we depend on temporary migrant workers to harvest our home-grown crops. The Government offers farmers a short-term payment for tree planting but then they have fewer fields for grazing livestock or growing crops. How can farmers make a living? Ever since Brexit farmers have been struggling with insufficient Government support, high investment costs and low profitability. A farmer with 75 acres in the Derbyshire Dales recently told me that he survives on his State Pension, renting out some of his fields and a farming grant of only £2,000. He said: "We just have to make the best of it"; an attitude which I admire and opposite to the UK's growing dependency culture.

Last summer the Government spoke of a £22 billion black hole in the economy which they are using to try and justify all sorts of tax rises. New law will impose additional taxation on small businesses and may potentially bankrupt a number of small family farms. John McTernan, a former Labour special adviser, said on television in November last year that Labour could "Do to farmers what Thatcher did to the miners". (Ed. – for the sake of balance, Sky News subsequently reported that 'Sir Keir Starmer has distanced himself from comments by a former Tony Blair adviser who said Britain "doesn't need small farmers". The prime minister said he "totally disagrees" with John McTernan, who said he was in favour of doing to farmers "what Margaret Thatcher did to the miners".)

In addition to the immediate crisis over Inheritance Tax, farmers are also facing a slow burning crisis over the Government's plans to reach carbon net zero as soon as possible. The facts are that the UK is responsible for 1% (one percent) of global greenhouse gas emissions of which UK farming contributes only 12%. Never-the-less, in 2008 the UK set a legally binding target for an 80% reduction in these emissions by 2050, compared to 1990 levels. The UK was the first and only country to have set a legally binding target. Some 17 years later and despite frequent international conferences no other nations have followed our example. The fear of global warming, or as the UN Secretary General calls it "global boiling", is driving many governments to impose restrictions on farmers.



Whatever one's beliefs about Government policy and science, farmers urgently need some pastoral care. For us to be a Christian presence in every community surely involves leaving our comfort zone and reaching out in loving concern to local farmers. This may start with intercessions during worship, moving onto supportive emails and phone calls and hopefully making pastoral visits. In my limited experience, a warm welcome can be expected!

***Arthur Champion was ordained in 2008 and served as the Environmental Adviser for the Diocese of Gloucester as well as having pastoral responsibility for several Cotswold parishes. Since retirement in 2021 he's moved to Derbyshire and now serves on the local agricultural chaplaincy.***

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### **Letting Go by Hazel Whitehead**

When we retired just over six years ago, we had no fixed ideas about what we would do or how we might fill the long, lonely hours as we settled into a new home in a new county and diocese. Nobody could have anticipated Covid or lockdown; nobody told us the vicar of the parish where we chose to settle would move away and not be replaced for 33 months; nobody knew that the incoming vicar would be instituted on 19<sup>th</sup> February 2024 and go off sick on 4<sup>th</sup> July with a terrible ankle injury. Within the family, we couldn't have anticipated that two ectopic pregnancies, several rounds of IVF and two unexpected deaths would take up so much of our emotional energy. Thank goodness we weren't in full-time ministry and could drop everything and go.

So, we've decided retirement is a time of responding to the unexpected and letting go of any plans or strategies. Like others we read about in this publication, we wonder where the Church of England is going, why the baby has to be thrown out with the bathwater, and what would happen if all the retired clergy (were struck down).

But it's not all bad. Nick has spent hours in his workshop being creative and I have taken writing courses and written, amongst other things a mosaic novel. Mosaic is a publisher's word for 'a bit disjointed' but the process has been cathartic and led to all kinds of interesting chats with friends here and further afield. My ambitions were low: not to make a loss, and to engender conversations. I overheard one person saying,



'I was reading it in a coffee shop and had to stop because I was laughing too much' and another writing 'Every ordinand should read this.' This photo was taken on top of the highest mountain in Australia so I can boast now that I have an international reputation.

This is the back page blurb: *Father Dominic is dead, and Revd Bethan Davies is appointed to be the next vicar. She isn't expecting an easy ride, but neither does she anticipate finding so many complex crises hiding behind every door in Upper and Lower Swannery. When she is forced to confront her own issues of faith and identity, things take an unexpected turn.*

It was some time into the process before I realised that almost every human situation and relationship is about letting go of something or somebody and, in a rare moment of insight, it struck me that God's work is also about letting go – particularly demonstrated in the incarnation and the passion.

If you'd like to read it, it's available as an e-book on Amazon and Kobi, and the book itself is available from me for £7.99 at [hazelwhitehead54@gmail.com](mailto:hazelwhitehead54@gmail.com) (Amazon are still listing it as unavailable for reasons best known to themselves.)

***Hazel Whitehead was ordained in 1994, served a title post at St Mary Oatlands, was Principal of the Guildford Diocesan Ministry Course until 2005 and Director of Discipleship., Vocation and Training from then until she retired in 2018. She was also Co-Chair of the South- Central Regional Training Partnership.***

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### **Promise in Darkness - A Life Journey by Geoffrey Johnson**

#### **Break-down**

In the paint workshop at Hereford Technical College (HTC), the daily routine was well organised and disciplined yet it was both a relaxed and a friendly environment; it was a perfect setting in which to gain painting and decorating (P&D) skills, necessary to survive in the building trade. As in the previous three months since early September 1979, we cleaned our paint brushes, packed-away our tools then headed home at around 4.30pm. I was one of a mixed group of ten students, on a six-month, government sponsored 're-training' course. There were former soldiers and policemen, others who had been long-term unemployed and at least one in the group who had been recently released from prison. All of us were facing life-changing decisions about our future, though I was the only ordained Anglican facing this dilemma.

In Hereford that evening, I caught the bus to Ross-on-Wye, where I was living in a farm cottage in Sellack, a small village four miles outside the town. Already dark, on this bleak November evening, there was nothing to distract my thoughts from ruminating on my self-inflicted career-crisis. A vocation, entered-into with whole-hearted enthusiasm, was after almost fifteen years, in total disarray. After theological college (1962-65) a happy curacy (1965-68), the Church Missionary Society (CMS) sent me, newly married, to learn Chinese in Taiwan; we moved to serve in Singapore in 1971. As priest-in-charge of a small church with a Chinese and Indian congregation, I had been encouraged by the bishop to take an active role in the newly founded Samaritans of Singapore (SoS). I had delighted in an opportunity to engage with dedicated people in a cross-culture and multi-faith community endeavour. Basic crisis-intervention training had led to counselling and group therapy training. Returning to Britain in 1976, still sponsored by CMS, I completed a two-year course in analytic group therapy at Aberdeen University.

Throughout the two-year, theoretical and experiential training, I had commuted between Ross-on-Wye and Aberdeen, where my wife and two children were living. We were grateful to my sister, who had married a farmer, for offering us a low-rent farm cottage. The Aberdeen course, completed, it seemed likely that we would stay, temporarily at least, in the cottage. After working across cultures, faiths and languages, as well as within therapeutic communities, I baulked at a return to a role within the institutional church. In need of an immediate source of income however, when a local builder told me that he would welcome 'an extra pair of hands', after adding with a smile 'as long as I don't have to go to church', I had accepted his offer gladly. Angry at the turn of events and appalled by my intransigence, my wife decided to seek a divorce. What had started as a vocational crisis had, perhaps not unexpectedly yet still devastatingly, exploded into a personal one too. With a confused mix of thoughts and with self-accusatory voices churning around in my head, I

alighted from the bus at the Red Lion pub on the A49, four miles from Ross. Huddling down into my hooded, winter coat and attempting to get some protection from the bitter November wind, I headed into the lane, for the two-mile walk trek to my cottage.

### **Break-through**

Bounded as it was by high hedges on each side, I entered a lane lacking any illumination; this seem to mirror how I felt. Trudging past the dimmest of light from the Red Lion, quite soon I became aware of some form of presence. It seemed to be behind the hedge to my right. Located in the heart of rural Herefordshire, my first thought was that there were sheep hunkering down for protection from the biting wind, yet there was no sound of restless shifting or the coughing of animals, which I might have expected. Only slightly unnerved, I continued my homeward journey along the lane, with this odd feeling that I had company. A little way further on, I sensed a comparable presence behind the hedge to my left. Slowing my pace, I tried to gaze beyond the hedges, but nothing was visibility beyond their blurred outlines. Hauled into high alert, my attention was next drawn to what was happening to my body. Generated deep inside me was an inexplicable warmth. Incredibly, instead of experiencing a weight of guilt on my shoulders, waves of joy washed over my whole being. Hopefulness had welled-up inside and a sense of peace surrounded me. Though there was no audible sound, I just sensed the words 'It will be alright'. Half an hour later, in the cottage but still filled with wonder, it finally dawned on me. I had been gifted an encounter with God. Alone, I laughed in astonishment at this thought yet however baffling it might appear, I became convinced that I was in a good place and still remained on the right track.

### **Break-out.**

With this unshakeable confidence, I determined to say nothing about the experience and to change nothing in my behaviour. Next day I attended the P&D course and continued to do so, until its completion at Easter 1980. For the next four years, my major source of income was working with my builder friend. It was reassuring to see the children regularly and to know that my former wife was doing well. I was happy and content. However, in the succeeding years, three further changes occurred in my life. The first surprise came later in 1980. To my amazement, I had topped the national results table, in the category of City & Guilds exams we had taken at the end of our course. On the basis of these results, I was given a 3-year contract, to lecture two days per week at HTC. Included in the contract was sponsorship to gain a Certificate in Further Education from Wolverhampton Polytechnic. Balancing my two roles made life interesting, but then it became even more of a challenge. In 1981, the Bishop of Hereford offered me a temporary NSM role with a rent-free, house-for-duty. I became responsible for a group of four village churches near Ross-on-Wye. But most importantly of all in 1984, I met and married Ann, who was at the time a working journalist. Our partnership was to provide a stable foundation for us both over the ensuing forty years. Ann has been able to extend her creative gifts in painting while chaplaincy posts presented me with opportunities to thrive within the dynamic, secular world of the National Health Service. Even now, in retirement, that transformative promise continues to guide my actions and to offer hope.

*Following ordination in 1965 and a curacy in the Southwell Diocese, Geoffrey Johnson spent ten years with CMS in Taiwan and Singapore. After a transformative five years in the building trade, he found his niche in NHS hospital and community chaplaincy. Retirement since 2013 has been a joy.*

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## A further reflection on the Hubbard review by Oliver Simon

I am grateful to Bishop Colin and the RCA Executive for commissioning Archdeacon Julian Hubbard's review of the place of retired clergy and widows officers within the life of dioceses in England.

Both Bishop Colin and Hubbard have noted that support for retired clergy arose from concern over the welfare needs of clergy and their dependents. I suggest that this historic background informs the emphasis on the pastoral in the responses to the questionnaire in Hubbard's review. His 'word cloud' (§12.3 of the Review) is telling.

Recently, however, the critical findings of Professor Alexis Jay's enquiry into safeguarding have shifted attention to the probity of all clergy and laity in exercising public ministries. This, as Geoff Smith poignantly describes it in the October 2024 newsletter, qualifies relationships and makes them more bureaucratically referenced. It introduces a new emphasis – see Hubbard §11.2.

Whether retired or not, those who represent the Church of England are accountable to our brothers and sisters in Christ, before God. How is this accountability to be held within the life of the Church? Safeguarding scandals accentuate this question, and its urgency.

'PtO' has acquired a new, rather harsher (political) character. Following the Makin report some clergy have had their permission to officiate taken away ('withdrawn') by their diocesan bishop. Revised regulations issued by the House of Bishops in 2018 set out a comprehensive account of the nature of PtO: see <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/house-of-bishops-policy-on-pto-july-2018.pdf> However they don't, as I read them, address a foundational issue – which Geoff Smith recognises – the abiding (ontological) character of ordination. The implied 'theology' of orders in these regulations is functional, limited by capacity, competence and arbitrarily (?) by the bishop. The bishops say (§2.11) 'PtO is entirely at the bishop's discretion and may be withdrawn by the bishop at any time, and without any right of appeal'. Although this bald statement is subsequently nuanced in the regulations (§6), it poses questions which have not yet been addressed. The regulations state pre-existing practice without comment: unqualified authority (power) on the part of the bishop to give or withhold permission to officiate. That surely needs review before someone tries a legal challenge.

It is arguable that the direction of travel of ministerial accountability means that PtO no longer serves the purpose for which it was intended. Clergy who are currently authorised in this way – generically 'active [retired] clergy' – are increasingly subject to similar terms and conditions as their stipendiary and non-stipendiary peers. With the obligation to acknowledge this, to attend specific training, for example, to be subject to the same disciplinary regime, comes an obligation on the part of the diocese to resource this ministry, certainly to encourage a higher profile. Given that we are numerically greater than other clergy we might expect this to happen. We see how the 'bureaucratisation' of ministry is leading significant numbers of retired clergy to surrender their right to exercise public ministry.

The Bishops' regulations (2018), while not the last word, can usefully be revisited as the basis for a conversation in each diocese about what 'good practice' in relation to those with PtO should look like. I'm surely not alone in thinking how far current practice falls short.

**After several decades of parochial ministry, Bishop Oliver became involved in training for Ordained Local Ministry - on which his doctorate is based. Retirement is fulfilled in buckets. An overseas posting led to the oversight of a diocese in northern Madagascar followed by a return to pastoral-parochial ministries in East Devon.**

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## Book Review of The Gorton Gospel

Written by Geoff Smith. See <https://foreshorepublishing.com/product/the-gorton-gospel/> for further details

For 2000 years Jesus has been expected to return to earth. Rumours have abounded down the ages. Dates have come and gone. But when and where on earth would he be welcomed rapturously? The Gorton Gospel imagines that Jesus would return to Manchester and his return would be just as shocking now as it was 2000 years ago because he returns as a non-binary human *Grace Givens*. Grace challenges the Church and the entirely fictitious Bishop of Manchester simply can't cope with the news in which he sees nothing good at all. The Jesus story tells us that love is the key to life but Grace Givens in the Gorton Gospel is rejected because her love is unacceptable

Grace Givens is born to a single mum and discovers Jesus in a mobile cinema showing a film about his life. As Grace grows older their understanding changes as they begin to cause a reaction in their neighbourhood by performing miracles. Eventually Grace leaves Manchester but then returns to fulfil the mission they believe has been given to them by God. The Gorton Gospel translates the story of Jesus into Mancunian as a hymn of praise to Manchester.

Paul Bayes, retired Bishop of Liverpool has written a foreword for the book.

"Imagination is a gift from God. It's good to remember the Christian Gospel, and good too to re-imagine it. Because if you use your imagination then something of the world-changing shock of Jesus Christ can come alive again. This is what Geoff Smith has done in "The Gorton Gospel". His imagination is rooted in his experience as a Christian minister, and in his experience as a twenty-first century northerner. He holds these things together, and so his story of Grace echoes the shock of the Jesus story. If you read this book, perhaps Geoff's imagination will set sparks running in your mind and heart. Then your own imagination might lead you to tell your story, just as Geoff has told his. For all of us, imagining the good news is a grace-filled journey. Why not open the book and begin?

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## It seems to me by Charles Chadwick

In August last year it was reported that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government had decided that "beauty" was no longer to be a strategic priority in the National Planning Policy Framework. Commentators observed that beauty is thus now not a specific statutory requirement for new houses. Instead, the stated aim is for buildings to be of high-quality design. Angela Rayner, as the relevant Secretary of State, said that beauty had been removed from the Framework as it was "too subjective" a term.

It seems to me that we are living in an age which is strongly focussed on facts and growth, data and the measurable. The material and tangible dimensions to life are in the ascendant. Manipulating the material world to our own ends and to meet our own perceived needs, looks to be leading us to severe ecological trouble. Sadly, acquiring more things, sometimes at great expense, does not bring contentment either. There are, thankfully, other things of value, which we cannot measure and manage, such as the delight of small children's laughter, or the joyful love of a couple on their wedding day, or a flock of geese, or beauty in its many and varied forms, particularly in nature and the arts. For people of all ages to have access to

beauty is, I believe, an important part of our humanity. It affects how we relate to each other, and the world around us, and our mental well-being. Beauty can raise our spirits and touch us deeply. From the perspective of our faith, when we rejoice in beauty, are we not, to some extent, reflecting the image of God who saw all that he had made and declared it to be very good, and rejoiced in it? In Matthew's gospel Jesus commands us to 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin. And yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these'.

Two authors who have written helpfully on beauty are Lord Harries of Pentegrath<sup>i</sup>, who was the Bishop of Oxford between 1987 and 2006, and Dame Fiona Reynolds<sup>ii</sup>, who was Director-General of the National Trust between 2001 and 2012. As Lord Harries reminds us, the creative arts can touch us at many levels. They can engross and make us laugh and cry. They can make us pause for thought and wonder about our own lives. They can bring comfort and cheer. They can challenge us. A good example of this is John Everett Millais's *Christ in the House of His Parents*, which is in the care of Tate Britain<sup>iii</sup>, which caused a great deal of controversy when it was first exhibited, not least relating to the dress and depiction of the characters, with Charles Dickens accusing Millais of portraying Mary as "an alcoholic who looks ... hideous in her ugliness" <sup>iv</sup>. To quote Lord Harries, "For many, music plays a role that is akin to religion. It stirs our deepest longings and makes us feel that, despite everything, life is worthwhile" <sup>v</sup>. Dame Fiona takes a historical view of how beauty has been viewed and how the British landscape has been handled over the centuries, drawing our attention to people such as John Clare, John Ruskin, William Morris and Octavia Hill. She tackles the oft-quoted sentiment of beauty being in the eye of the beholder, and the allied perception that beauty is subjective, by suggesting that "It doesn't matter if people disagree about exactly what they find beautiful: the process of debating and discussing it will lift our collective sights and help us strive for better things."<sup>vi</sup>

I believe that beauty is to be found where light is shed, when we are drawn out of ourselves, and our souls are touched. A good example for some people is JMW Turner's 1844 picture *Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway*.<sup>vii</sup> It conveys the dynamism of the future with the train in all its speedy, noisy and challenging glory, while also acknowledging the past with the other bridge and the two people crossing the river in a small rowing boat. Evidence of a continuing desire for and engagement with, beauty can be seen in a range of ways, including art galleries and art exhibitions being very well attended: The Musee d'Orsay saw records broken in early 2024 with a total of 793,556 visitors to its Van Gogh exhibition,: an average of 7,181 each day. The BBC Proms are enthusiastically supported each year, the National Trust has in excess of five million members, while the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has over one million members. One might surmise that opening oneself up to beauty meets a deep human need, not least in developing one's capacity for wonder, awe, and reverence, hard though it can be to articulate all of this. A church that takes beauty seriously and offers people opportunities to experience it and to reflect on their experiences may well engage with people at a deep level, and thus gently draw them towards faith.

This excellent nineteenth century hymn by J B Monsell brings an insightful approach to how we might respond to beauty.

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,  
bow down before him, his glory proclaim;  
with gold of obedience and incense of lowliness,  
kneel and adore him the Lord is his name!

Low at his feet lay thy burden of carefulness,  
high on his heart he will bear it for thee

comfort thy sorrows and answer thy prayerfulness,  
guiding thy steps as may best for thee be.

Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness  
of the poor wealth thou wouldest reckon as thine:  
truth in its beauty and love in its tenderness  
these are the offerings to lay on his shrine.

These, though we bring them in trembling and fearfulness,  
he will accept for the name that is dear;  
mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness,  
trust for our trembling and hope for our fear.

In a noisy, functional and impatient world, I think we do well to give time and space to contemplate, appreciate and admire beauty in all its forms. A common life that does not give time and space for consideration of beauty and our need for it is much poorer. Childhoods, as well as adult lives, that spend quite so much time indoors and on social media, will miss out on so much. Beauty is one of God's many good gifts for us and an important means by which he seeks to affirm us in our roles as good stewards of his creation but also to nourish our souls that we may indeed have life in all its fullness.

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<sup>i</sup> See Richard Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God: A Christian Understanding* Mowbray (1993) and Richard Harries *The Beauty and The Horror* SPCK (2016).

<sup>ii</sup> See Fiona Reynolds, *The Fight For Beauty: Our Path to a Better Future* One World Books (2016).

<sup>iii</sup> See <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-christ-in-the-house-of-his-parents-the-carpenters-shop-n03584>

<sup>iv</sup> See [https://web.archive.org/web/20211128174336/http://www.engl.duq.edu/servus/PR\\_Critic/HW15jun50.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20211128174336/http://www.engl.duq.edu/servus/PR_Critic/HW15jun50.html)

<sup>v</sup> See Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God*, page 5.

<sup>vi</sup> See Reynolds, op cit. p.309.

<sup>vii</sup> See <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/joseph-mallord-william-turner-rain-steam-and-speed-the-great-western-railway>

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### **A further reflection over time by John Howden**

I read with much interest Geoff Smith's article in the October issue of the Newsletter. Geoff and I trained together for Ordination in a college dedicated to producing clergy fit to face the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and on briefly into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Principal of the college, a dedicated educationalist, had the vision and ability to put together a training regime that did address many of the issues facing the church. In other words, how to be a caring, worshipping, praying people of God in an increasingly secular society.

Like Geoff I too deaconed in 1969 and priested the following year but in the south of the UK in Rochester Diocese. I served as curate in the Medway Towns before moving to Banbury to a second curacy living on a new housing estate and acting as arts chaplain to the town. Here I started to work as a freelance with BBC Oxford presenting their Sunday afternoon religious magazine. After a time of doing this, it became increasingly clear that I should think about a move to broadcasting. I offered to take up a house for duty role whilst extending my activities in the BBC. The Bishop of Oxford did not see my point of view and a little later that year I was appointed Sports and Arts Producer for BBC Radio Humberside in Hull, and I happily left the full time employment of the Church of England. My wife and I did not go to church for two years. I spent the next 13 years as a broadcaster and trainer of broadcasters. Presenting the breakfast

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show on Radio Humberside, a stint on Woman's Hour and a spell on World Service followed. Not exactly standard preparation for parish ministry.

In 1981 I was appointed to a senior role in the BBC training local radio staff. I had to complete courses in adult education and management then fulfilled a role that included running basic training courses and putting new stations on air. I also did training on contract for a number of organisations, including the Church of England Bishops and the Police.

What happened next I described at the time as 'God and the Bishop conspired' and I was appointed as the incumbent of two parishes in Essex. Five years of life in a semi-rural parish proved hugely enjoyable. My only concern was that until I pushed the idea no mention was made of my BBC training and background, and it only came into focus when I was offered by the Bishop of Chelmsford the post of Warden to the Diocesan House of Retreat at Pleshey. Suddenly I had charge of a 24- bed guest house with a staff bigger than the Bishop's and no restrictions on what I did in the Chapel! We established an Aumbry in the Chapel and the Reserved Sacrament was brought back to Pleshey after an absence of 60 years. Incense was once again burnt in worship and people often asked why the worship in their home churches was not as good.

After 9 years I had a mental breakdown, and I was moved to what became my final parish. After suffering prostate cancer and successful treatment I retired in 2005. I have held PTO since and I do celebrate and preach once a month in our local parish church. I do not take baptisms, weddings and funerals.

I have no problem with the principle of safeguarding and have a very high regard for all those engaged in this impossible task. Priests like Geoff Smith and myself are really struggling with this whole issue and I would go so far as to say that the church has got its response to the situation wrong. There is an imperative to rethink how safeguarding is delivered otherwise I can guarantee that the Church of England will lose what many have hailed as the only way that the church can continue to operate.

*John Howden studied architecture in the late 1950s and spent a while as a scenic artist in repertory theatre. He trained for Ordination at Salisbury and was ordained in 1969, serving his titles in Kent and Oxfordshire before joining the BBC in local radio for thirteen years. He came back to parochial ministry in and around Chelmsford, including a time as Warden of the Diocesan Retreat House in Pleshey. In retirement he has become a filmmaker. See [www.vimeo.com/1025733523](http://www.vimeo.com/1025733523)*

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### **RCACoE needs your help!! There is still a vacancy on the RCACoE National Council**

In the last newsletter we had three vacancies, two of those are now filled which just leaves us with the need to find a regional representative/trustee for Canterbury, Rochester and Chichester dioceses. Any offers or enquiries about the role from members living in these dioceses should be forwarded to our Secretary, Malcolm Liles at [malcolm.liles48@gmail.com](mailto:malcolm.liles48@gmail.com) , as soon as possible. Council would especially welcome women priests in these roles to improve the gender balance of council. If there is more than one nomination an election will be organised.

The main role of a council member is to be a trustee of the association and to be in touch with the Retirement Officers in the dioceses they represent, to produce a regional report twice a year for consideration by council. These reports inform our actions and relationships with the national church institutions and other bodies. Also, to attend by zoom meetings of the national council on no more than 4 afternoons a year to guide us in our work. Unless we fill this vacancy the service we offer to our members will be much reduced.

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**Annual General Meetings in 2025** We shall be holding two meetings this year, one in each province. We have booked **The Charterhouse, London EC1M 6AN** for our **southern** meeting on **16th June**. The meeting will begin with coffee, etc. at 10.30am to start at 11am, there will be a eucharist before lunch, finishing around 3.30pm. Those attending will need to bring their lunch with them.

The **northern** meeting will be at **Bishoptorpe Palace** on **5<sup>th</sup> June** with the kind permission of the Archbishop of York. Again the meeting will begin with coffee, etc from 10.30am till 11am when we hope to have a national speaker, there will be a eucharist before lunch, and our General Meeting will takes place in the afternoon with plenty of time from round table discussion about members concerns, ending at about 3.30pm.

Suggestions for speakers at these meetings should be sent to the Secretary, [malcolm.liles48@gmail.com](mailto:malcolm.liles48@gmail.com) as soon as possible so that they can be followed up.

**I would be grateful for early indications of attendance from members for either of these meetings; please head emails “Northern” and “Southern” (this does not exclude members from the Midlands!!), those attending the Northern meeting need also to let me know of any dietary issues.**

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**New members:** Robert Cotton, Bristol diocese. Derek Simpson, Leeds diocese. Kevin Goss, St. Albans diocese. Geoffrey Calvert, St. Albans diocese. Tristram Rae-Smith, Salisbury diocese. Stephen Franklin, Winchester diocese. John Thomson, Carlisle diocese. Caroline and David Butcher, St. Eds and Ips diocese. Helen Morby, Lichfield diocese. Susannah Symons, Lichfield diocese. Geoffrey Fenton, Exeter diocese. Anthony Gilbert, Exeter diocese. Madeline Light, Norwich diocese. George Moffat, Gloucester diocese. Wilma Roest, Southwark diocese. Jane Kenchington, Gloucester diocese. Vivien Gisby, Chester diocese. Robert Burles, Gloucester diocese. Andrew Gardner, St. Albans diocese. Michael Lodge, Rochester diocese. Collette Jones, Chester diocese. Malcolm Pritchard, Chichester diocese. Ian Cooper, Gloucester diocese. Lucas Dean, Chichester diocese. Tim Wilson, Chichester diocese. Paul Farthing, Rochester diocese. James Nash, Norwich diocese. Peter Bevan, Gloucester diocese. Michael Coates, Liverpool diocese. Timothy Dawson, Norwich diocese .Frances Eccleston, Chester diocese. Gill Younger, Chester diocese. Philip Bosher, Derby diocese. Jonathan Cooper, York diocese.

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**Printer inkjets:** I have recently had to purchase a new printer and have a number of unused inkjets for the previous machine. They will fit any of the following printers: Canon Pixma TR7500 series, TR7550, TR8500, TR8550, TS6150, TS6151, TS8100, TS8150, TS9100. 5 are small black, one CL580 large black, 3 Yellow, 2 magenta, 2 cyan . I will be willing to post these for the cost of postage and a small donation if any member thinks they would be of use.[malcolm.liles48@gmail.com](mailto:malcolm.liles48@gmail.com)