

Together

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in Sussex

FRIDAY NIGHT ON THE STREETS OF CHICHESTER

Friday and Saturday nights are not the best time to be in any major city centre and Chichester is no exception. Compared to Brighton or Portsmouth it is by no means a violent or dangerous place to be on a night out but unless you see it you may find it difficult to appreciate the stark difference between South Street and West Street during the day and late at night. By day you have streets bustling with a wide diversity of groups — university students, younger workers and, of course, an adult community. By night the numbers will be halved, depending on the weather, the season and the time of the month and usually busiest towards the end of the month after pay-day. Many people would think twice about going there, much less wandering there, unless they had to. The police, of course, have to. It's a crucial part of their job.

So when they approached one or two members from Revelation Church, about a mile away on an industrial estate in Quarry Street, for help they got the response, 'What sort of help do you want?' Back came the answer, 'to cut crime'. Hardly likely to appeal to a group of respectable, law-abiding citizens with a busy life and no shortage of commitments but that was eighteen months ago.

In the meantime City Angels was born. To date they have trained 80 volunteers to take up the challenge and no fewer than twelve of them can be seen regularly in South Street and West Street on Friday and Saturday nights from 10 till 1. So what did they find? Early reports suggest that it is not quite as bad as might have been expected, though that is not to say that most of them were not a little apprehensive when they first embarked on it.

The majority of people in Chichester are out to have a good time, know the local area and have a safe, enjoyable evening. Fights are rare, occasional outbreaks of violence between individuals in pubs are usually quickly dealt with and, thanks to good relationships between the police and the bouncers, the police quickly take over once the troublemakers are in the street. Some say the most difficult part is not coping with the noise, the dangers and certainly not the personal threats you might worry about but the vomiting, followed by a young person hiding in a doorway to sleep it off and cleaning up the mess which is all part of the job.



Exactly what else they do is not clear, and maybe that is the wrong question. Their value appears to be that they are there and their physical presence seems to be effective. If initially they saw themselves as going out to find people in distress and help them one of their surprises

has been not that *they* 'find' anyone but that some of the 'nighters' — the lost, and the left, the deserted and the forgotten — find *them*, and they have a number of incredible stories to tell. Many want nothing more than a listening ear. A few need cleaning up, first aid, flip flops, lollies, sometimes simply water, and in some respects that is the easier and more satisfying side of the job.

So does it do what the police were looking for? Apparently it does. The police report a 57% reduction in violent crime, 24% reduction in anti-social behaviour and 61% reduction in alcohol related admissions to A&E on the nights the Angels are out. Not a bad achievement for a relatively small number of people and only eighteen months.

On Other Pages

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Ian
says . . .

This edition of Together tackles some of the issues often talked about but not always in a way that enables us to really understand one another and change our own behaviour. The issue of Sex, for example, as Maggie Ellis reminds us, calls for much more open discussion in our churches, going beyond the sort of embarrassed discussions that young people have with a parent in the stereo-type of family life, or in the tutt tutt conversations that our daily newspapers can easily precipitate.

I recall someone who I was close to when I was growing up. He explained to me that his father had raised the subject of sex with him in what was destined to be a birds and bees conversation. His dad explained that he was happy to have a discussion if Steve wished to, but he suspected that Steve was already reasonably knowledgeable. My young friend then offered to inform his dad in case there were any gaps in his own knowledge. Father and son laughed and they never spoke about such matters again. Not a good example.

But if we cannot breach the embarrassment and fail to put controls in place when there are no problems present, the risk is that any problems that do arise will have an impact on the whole church, simply because we are all too

embarrassed to admit to our concerns and doubts about a potential wolf in our midst. Much the same is true of current discussions related to same sex marriage.

Alongside this goes an important pastoral issue often overlooked. It is easy to assume that everyone present (or within hearing) has the same understanding as we do. There are, however, far more points of view than the media, including the church media, might suggest. There are those who are opposed to change and those who are desperate for it, but there is also a huge range of points of view inbetween and with many variants. We shouldn't become obsessed with sex and sexuality, but (as the Bat suggests on page 8) we all need to have the confidence to articulate our views and hear from others who have other points of view in a calm and gracious manner. In this sort of environment we all have a great deal to gain and nothing to lose, apart from that embarrassment.

On a final note we would love to hear from you with your own reflections on this important matter and any suggestions to enable our churches to be safe places for all of us.

Ian Chisnall
Mission and Unity Co-ordinator

THE VALJEANS v THE JAVERTS

Having read *Les Misérables* and seen the musical some while back the recent film led me to re-read all 1200 pages, and in the current climate of church, government and community I found and felt things I had never seen first time round.

This time it came across as a story of eternal tension between a world driven by love and human understanding (Jean Valjean) and one driven by the law, dogma, ideology and the rule book (Javert, the police officer). In some respects it struck me as Old Testament versus New Testament, to the point where I began to see Jean Valjean very much as a Christlike figure.

He was a man of outstanding mental and physical strength, with clear objectives, able to walk on water and achieve things which to any normal person could only be described as miraculous; he has the capacity to appear and disappear, often at unexpected times and places, under a different guise and not always immediately recognised by former acquaintances as the man they thought they knew. Much of what he does seems unreal, improbable and often questionable, but overall his life and the way he affects and changes the lives of others is outstanding. And all the result of an exceptionally understanding bishop who put humanity before law, giving Valjean his first experience of love and forgiveness which transformed his life and led him to use all his gifts for the benefit of others.

Set in France at the time of the French Revolution, the extremes of rich and poor, the lot of ordinary people and the constant clash on a variety of subjects between the hardliners and those who show some signs of humanity, the story will ring bells for many, but the emphasis falls not so much on the poor or their misery as on the battle to do something about it, at the heart of which is Gavroche, an urchin, almost a younger version of Jean Valjean, who quite unintentionally emulates him in a time of crisis. When the barricades are up, the battle is on and the fighting spirit is at its lowest ebb, what raises the spirits and saves the day is the melodic voice of Gavroche breaking a stunning silence with the theme song of the republic. In a world which rightly shows increasing recognition of the role of women and rightly so, we do well to remember Isaiah's little child who leads them (Isaiah 11:6). Little seems to change as a result but the vision, the spirit and the determination are what matter. (Ed.).

Father God, enable me to spot the people who are doing your work, whoever and wherever I find them, to embrace their dreams and visions and lend my support to their achievement. Let me judge them not by their success but by their capacity to perceive, to encourage others and to fight their corner.

SHOULD THE CHURCHES BE WORRIED ABOUT WIND FARMS?

A wind farm on our horizon is guaranteed to generate more heat than light. But what sort of lead should churches be giving? To support or to oppose?

Edward Echlin examines the arguments

The churches, representing Christ today, confront climate change and resultant food insecurity. In July the government's Committee on Climate Change (CCC) reported that increasing droughts and flooding pose a long term risk to UK food security. Chairman Lord Krebs explained, 'If we don't start acting now we will be in serious trouble'. The Committee advised farmers to build more reservoirs and to use less irrigation. The erratic climate, making food production difficult, is the result of burning fossil fuels for energy, thereby emitting climate damaging carbon. In 2012 we imported 2.5 million tons of wheat, the amount usually exported. Without radical decarbonisation, says Jonathon Porritt, 'the lives of billions will become too horrendous to contemplate'.

is exported to the national grid and not wasted. But without that storage capacity, I'm hardly self-sufficient in energy. Turbines, unlike solar panels, have the advantage that they can be placed offshore without damaging views. Wind farms – or fields! – can also be found with animals contentedly grazing beneath. Wind farms therefore are 'dual use'.

Rather than worry about wind farms churches may be wiser to concentrate on the wider picture. When issues such as wind farms threaten to divide communities, a positive step would be to provide venues, promote discussion of the pros and cons and help people to live in community even with differences. When business, politics, the media and vested interests in fossil fuel or nuclear energy deny or downplay climate change,



Wind farms help to provide energy without emitting carbon. Their profiles are controversial, especially when placed in scenic landscapes. At present they are imported, which adds to their expense. Several companies, however, are prepared to manufacture turbines here, with British workers, provided the government commits to wind power as 'part of the mix' of alternative energies. Significantly, however, according to the World Development Movement, several key ministers are financially involved in fossil fuels.

Wind, solar, tidal, hot air, and other alternatives are still fledglings and not without teething problems. Solar panels for example, of which I have fourteen on my south facing roof, are controversial among protectors of 'conservation areas' with historic buildings. Hence the difficulty installing them on church roofs. Estuary, tidal and wind power can interfere with coastal views. Nuclear, whether for energy or deterrence, is perilous. Fracking damages the depths of the earth and may pollute soil and aquifers.

So should we worry about those wind turbines? On the positive side they certainly provide energy from clean renewable winds, without CO₂ emissions. But then again they do not please everyone, are expensive, and unsightly when tastelessly placed. Like my solar panels they also need 'storage capacity' whereby their energy can be stored for those hours or days when the sun is not shining or winds not blowing. What is urgently needed is premier scientific research and technology for the production of storage capacity for wind and solar energies – as, for example, during our 2013 summer heatwave. Presently what I don't use

food insecurity, biodiversity loss and overpopulation, churches can assist by drawing on the riches of our tradition of care for creation and community love.

Churches might also recommend the best contemporary scientists such as James Hansen, David King, and Sir Ghillelan Prance. We can introduce people to our own Christian climate caring groups such as Operation Noah and Christian Ecology Link and other earth caring NGOs, including them in our prayers as at communion service intercessions. The Church of England Chichester Diocese has a Diocesan Environmental Group which hopes to provide leadership in earth and climate care, which we can encourage and other churches may emulate.

Together we can encourage sustainable alternative energies which, unlike traditional fossil fuels with their climate damaging carbon emissions, do not threaten our children's food security. Meals were an important part of Jesus' ministry and preaching. With alternative energies we anticipate and prepare for the kingdom, when in Jesus' words, 'men will come from East and West, and North and South, and sit at table in the Kingdom'.

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The picture comes courtesy of Ecotricity, a GreenEnergy supplier working on a not-for-dividend model which uses the money customers spend to build new sources of green energy and claims to have invested more per customer in building new green energy sources than any other energy supplier. (www.ecotricity.co.uk).

DID YOU KNOW?

80,000 individuals are currently estimated to be involved in Prostitution in the UK, 80% working in OffStreet establishments, such as massage parlours, escort agencies or private flats.

95% are problematic drug users.

75% in escort prostitution have attempted suicide.

70% have spent time in care.

Four out of five women in London Brothels are foreign nationals.

One in ten men have paid for sex in the UK.

Girls can be requested on the net, or ordered over the phone (like a pizza), with specified hair and eye colour, and be on your doorstep within twenty minutes.

Traffickers often target rural communities because they are thought to be safer.

A pimp can earn anything from £500-1,000 per girl in a week.

The average age of entry into prostitution in the UK is 12. Ten years ago it was 16.

SIGNS OF 'GROOMING'

To coin a phrase, 'the price of safety is eternal vigilance' and that calls for all eyes in the community to be alert to telltale signs

- ❑ A rundown property, a shabby garden and lots of men coming and going throughout the evening.
- ❑ Older guys hanging round young girls in parks and pubs.
- ❑ Girls identified in parks, schools, leisure facilities, shopping malls and on the internet. Boys sent to befriend them, introducing them to young men, often referred to as cousins.
- ❑ Girls taken out in cars, bought drinks, given drugs and presented with a mobile phone as a gift, with which they can track her and send messages.
- ❑ Girls flattered by boys who make them think they are loved or pretend to be their boyfriend, until it is too late to get away.
- ❑ Girls encouraged to despise or mistrust their parents in order to control them.
- ❑ The younger they look the more saleable they are and once groomed and brainwashed they may be taken to wasteland and 'broken in'; in other words raped by the gang leader whilst other members watch and record on mobile phones.
- ❑ Girls (and boys) offered a weekend abroad or who appear isolated or distant from friends/family, depressed, unduly anxious or afraid, possibly secretive in behaviour.

Prostitution is often described as 'the oldest profession'. Old it may be but it is definitely not a profession and it is the responsibility not only of parents but of a whole community to be watchful.

KNOW WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHAT TO DO

TIME TO TALK SEX

In the aftermath of the Savile scandall and the recognition that the hands of the church are not always clean which has shocked the nation as never before, Maggie Ellis, a Counsellor with Life Centre in West Sussex which supports victims of sexual abuse through face-to-face counselling and helplines, believes it is time for the churches to be much more open, adult and mature in handling the issues.

With over 340 face-to-face clients last year, (20% children, almost 20% male and 38% involving the police), 1,717 calls on the telephone helpline, around 11,000 texts and 1,257 e-mails, there can be no case for complacency nor can we live with the myth that the church is a safe haven. In a recent survey locally the majority of sex offenders had done an alpha course and/or were active church goers, suggesting that unwary churches may unwittingly offer an easy cover for sex offenders who may even target them because of their emphasis on forgiveness and sometimes naïve definitions of repentance.

With current reports suggesting that in our society one in four women and one in eight men are victims of sexual abuse it is still necessary to emphasise that child sexual abuse is criminal and must be reported to the police or social services and never 'dealt with in house', this is clearly something we ought to have talked about long ago.

SAFEGUARDING, by Maeve Whitchurch (Baptist Safeguarding Administrator)

In the present climate 'safeguarding', like 'grooming', has found its way into the ecclesiastical vocabulary. Everyone today cannot but be more aware of the need for vigilance and not only for those within the church environment. If 'grooming' (becoming friends with a child, with a view to a sexual relationship) is criminal then 'safeguarding' is the first step towards reducing this particular crime, but before we get to the big stuff one or two basic points should not be missed.

First, over 90% of abuse is carried out by someone the victim already knows, not perhaps the stranger lurking at the back of the church but maybe one who has become the trusted friend to young and old, to parent and child.

Second, though parents and family members may be the biggest perpetrators, a perturbingly high amount of abuse comes from other young people.

Third, it is important to avoid an 'us-them' mentality where 'us' are in the church and 'them' are outside. Every church is a complex mix of children, young people, vulnerable adults, abused and abusers, and while always seeking to be open and welcoming the fact that they can all be in the same building at the same time calls for extra vigilance and an awareness of the potential risks.

Fourth, with an estimate of two to three million sex offenders in the UK, not all of whom are on the Sex Offenders Register, and with less than a quarter of a million known to the authorities, it has been suggested

that 70-80% are likely to be attending some church, making it more than likely that any congregation will have someone who has been a victim and possibly someone who has offended.

Fifth, as well as the need to be a safe community the church also has a responsibility to be a place where the abused can find a healing community and the abuser a redeeming community.

Fortunately there are increasing signs that the churches have taken the issues seriously and developed integrated courses of training at every level in all denominations. Ecumenical Groups of Safeguarding Advisers (comprising Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Roman Catholic and United Reformed churches) meet three times a year at local and national level and most denominations have national guidelines, integrated training courses and fairly clearly defined procedures: *Safe to Grow* (Baptists), *Creating Safer Space* (Methodists), *Protecting all God's Children* (Anglicans), *Towards a Culture of Safeguarding* (Roman Catholic) and *Safeguarding and Protecting Young People in the Church* (URC).

In the country as a whole the pattern of response is still somewhat patchy but experience as Safeguarding Officer for the Baptist Union over the last eighteen months tells me that things are picking up. In Sussex the profile has risen markedly and over two-thirds of Baptist churches in Kent and Sussex have held training sessions.

Nevertheless, other contributions on this page make it clear that 'there is yet more land to be possessed' and that is one good reason for encouraging more people to be more relaxed and talk about it.

A Quote from a Survivor to a Counsellor

'As a child, my dad raped me for four years and I never had anyone to talk to about it. When I was older and my boy friend raped me to the point where the pain was unbearable, I would pray to God to rescue me, but he never heard my prayer and never did. So I came to the conclusion that he wasn't there and stopped praying. I never had anyone to tell what I had gone through. But now you, after 41 years, have been that person to understand. That's all I needed. You have been God to me.'



Prayer

Lets work together to make this a society where children are safe to be children, where sex is a blessing not a curse, and where Christians are truly the body of Christ: his ears to hear, his eyes to see, and his hands and feet to respond to those SOS prayers

'that God would rescue me'

and that we too may hear at first hand

'that you have been God to me'.

WHAT TO DO

Make it **easy for people to talk about sex**, especially in those places where sex is often regarded (like politics and religion) as beyond the bounds especially in church study groups and most of all in pulpits.

*When sexual issues arise, in church, in the community or maybe only in the media, form a group of likeminded people to **talk things through**. See it from the point of view of the victims, the survivors, the offenders and support workers. Be prepared to take action if needed but don't feel it is pointless if you don't. A ministry of shared understanding and increased awareness is not to be despised.*

Beginning with **Available Resources** below and continuing with a visit to your local library see how many resources there are for the wide variety of issues. How many were you aware of? How many do your friends know? Choose one which touches your heartstrings and adopt it, either as an individual or a local group.

*Get informed and **disseminate information** as widely as possible to alert people to what is happening and direct others (victims especially) as to where they can get help.*

Adopt a caring agency, such as Life Centre or Streetlight, read their publications, newsletters and websites and raise money for them.

Available Resources

Brighton Womens Centre. Tel 01273-698036.

Mankind UK (male survivors). Tel 01273-501447.

LifeCentre, Chichester, Crawley and Horsham. Counselling services. Tel 01243-786349. Email info@lifecentre.uk.com. www.lifecentre.uk.com.

Survivors Network. Supports female survivors of sexual violence and abuse. Tel 01273-203380.

Rights of Women. Free sexual violence advice line. Email info@row.org.uk. www.rightsofwomen.org.uk.

Rape & Sexual Abuse Support Centre. Tel 01483-546400.

Streetlight. Supports women at risk or involved in prostitution in Horsham and the surrounding areas. Email info@streetlight.uk.com. www.streetlight.com.

Saturn Centre. Information on Sexual Health Clinics. www.saturncentre.org.uk. Tel 01293-600469.

Useful Numbers

Police 101. In emergency only 999.

NSPCC 24hr helpline. Tel 0800-800-5000.

Childline 24hr helpline. Tel 0800-1111.

Samaritans 24hr helpline. Tel 0845-790-9090.

Acknowledgement

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Cynthia Parks describes what can happen when a congregation has A Pastoral Heart for the LGBT Community



British society has changed dramatically over the last 25 years in its approach to sex and sexuality. Sex education in schools and information on the internet mean even quite young people are relaxed and open about sex. Sadly the church has not caught up with this openness and congregations can be slow to support young people, particularly if they are confused by their sexuality or gender orientation, yet the counsel of wise adults who will listen non-judgmentally is often just what a person who is searching for self-definition needs and faith in God and trust in the church which can emerge through such caring support can transform lives.

I discovered this during the ten years I served as minister in central Brighton at Dorset Gardens Methodist Church, a gathered congregation just off St. James's Street which has been committed to supporting the local community through thick and thin since its foundation in 1803. For the past 20 years the neighbourhood has been the heart of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community (LGBT) and the present congregation have learned to open their hearts to all comers, no matter how confused or curious they appear.

With many gay and lesbian people in the congregation and in leadership roles Dorset Gardens has been the home of the Clare Project for transgender people for the past five years, offering support, advice and counselling for those who are confused about their gender identity. Not being sure of your gender is one of the most distressing of human situations, but the Clare Project has enabled individuals to explore this dilemma, take appropriate action and so find peace within themselves.

A key ingredient to this exploration is trying to relate to people in a wider setting via a different gender. A church, with its public worship and varied activities, offers an ideal opportunity for such exploration but it takes much courage on the part of the explorer and total acceptance and open mindedness on the part of the congregation to make it effective.

For the confused person, being seen in public as 'the opposite sex' triggers the very real fear that they will be laughed at, stared at or mocked, not to mention violence, extraordinary vulgarity and rudeness. But given a safe space, where they know they will be treated with respect, acceptance and unconditional love, their self-understanding can begin to take shape, and when a church with such understanding is guided by the holy spirit and the people of God are listening with compassionate ears, confusion and fear come to an end.

In a wonderful way the Dorset Gardens congregation has always responded with such graciousness and the results for the confused and curious have been quite remarkable. Faith has been born and new life has been experienced. I commend their example to the wider church.

But how? It starts by simply being unshockable and welcoming. Responding to a man wearing women's clothes, for example, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The more we practice being unshockable, the more unshockable we become, and once unshockable, by the huge vagaries of human nature, the simple non-judgemental love that a congregation can offer bears witness to the powerful transforming love of God. In such love, new life is found and the kingdom draws near.

Elizabeth, whose story we tell below, is not the only transgender person who has found new life through the love of the Dorset Gardens congregation. I could also tell you about Martha, Rachel, James, Raymond and a host of others. All it takes is a congregation with a commitment to being Christ to all comers, expressing his unconditional and non-judgemental love.

Elizabeth's Story

The story is true; the name has been changed. Elizabeth came to Brighton from Ireland where she had lived as John, married and had children. But she was always deeply troubled by a feeling that her masculine gender was a mistake. She turned to alcohol to deaden her unease but that was not the answer. She was rejected by her church and family. After joining AA she became strong enough to get sober, begin presenting as a woman and come to Brighton where she felt she could get help. She came to Dorset Gardens Methodist Church for the AA meeting and discovered the Clare Project. With the encouragement of a church steward who acts as receptionist for the Project, Elizabeth came to church one morning in her new gender. She was as welcome as anyone would be and at coffee afterwards the steward introduced her to other similarly welcoming folk, who listened compassionately to her story. She became a regular worshipper; after a time she offered to read lessons in worship and took her place on the readers' rota. She then began the operations and hormone treatment necessary to transform her appearance. Both are very traumatic, but church members visited her in hospital, prayed for her and sent her church flowers. When she returned to church, she decided to become a Methodist. At her confirmation service she gave her testimony which gave glory to God and heartfelt thanks to the unfailing love of his people. Elizabeth has now returned to Ireland, started a bed and breakfast business, renewed contact with her family, is staying sober and continues to worship with delight in her Methodist Church.

ECUMENISM AS PARTNERSHIP Sussex Police develop Forums

Two years ago we reported on a unique gathering of Sussex Police and representatives of Sussex Churches at Slaugham Manor to explore the possibility of increasing partnership in the interests of the community both parties serve. Recently there was a further meeting to review developments.

There was a recognition of energy and enthusiasm in the churches and the need to harness it for the benefit of the whole community, an acknowledgement that seeds of partnership need time and nurture if they are to grow into healthy plants and an admission that there was suspicion of engagement on both sides calling for patient understanding and encouragement. Their common interests and objectives were unquestionable but the speed at which they operated still left much to be desired.

In one case a Chief Constable in a major city (not in Sussex) met with a group of church leaders and presented his case for partnership. After the usual courtesies, examination of the arguments, evaluation of pros and cons the Chief (anxious to get a move on) said, 'I want something set up in three months'. Once the Church Leaders had caught their breath they suggested that for what he wanted they would be thinking 'three years'. Credit to both. Within four months something was up and running.

One of the more interesting developments in Sussex is the creation of **Faith Forums**. The Christian one is first off the mark with Tim Nunn as Chair but four others are on the way. The **Muslim Faith Forum**, led by Insp Zahid Khan, following a similar role with Yorkshire Police, meets regularly with community members to seek their advice and to discuss whatever issues the members wish to raise. Attention is paid to achieving outcomes

. . . and Sussex Pathways reports on Mentoring ex-Prisoners

People ask, 'does it work?' The answer is yes. Recent figures for Sussex show improvement from mentoring in 91% of cases and in the last year the recall rate for those with mentors was 20% lower than for those with no support.

So **who are the mentors?** Volunteers from many different backgrounds with a vision to work with those released from prison to try and keep them out of prison in the future. With 71% women there is clearly a shortage of men, but the age range is wide. By no means a cushy little job for the retired. 64% are between 20 and 29, 19% between 30 and 39, and the over sixties are in a minority.

Ecumenism, as long as it was limited to church unity (or even Christian unity) found itself up against a brick wall but now, thanks to a new emphasis on its original meaning in the New Testament, the *oikumene* is finding a new lease of life as 'the whole inhabited world', reaching out in partnership to the wider community, all peoples, all faiths. Signs are increasingly evident in Sussex churches as they form partnership with kindred organisations of which Sussex Police is but one.

and one item recently on their agenda was the recruitment of officers and cultural awareness. The **Buddhist/Hindu/Sikh Champion** (DCI Andrew Gooch) has links with community members and makes contact with them directly to identify issues they would like to discuss or to seek their advice over any matters arising. Interfaith issues relating to staff and officers are watched over by Organisational Interfaith Champion Insp Andy Kille who chairs the **Interfaith Forum**, which includes members from a range of religions and beliefs (including agnosticism and atheism) across the Force, examines policies to ensure they do not negatively impact any particular group, and discusses any internal matters arising. Chief Superintendent Neville Kemp presides over the **Jewish Forum** and Martin Walker oversees them all and chairs two meetings a year when all the Faith Champions get together to liaise on their strands of work.

Their qualifications? A sensitive approach to people and a desire to help. A listening ear. A resistance to making judgements or anything that suggests telling them what they ought to do. An ability to begin where people are, plot a practical course and stay with it for as long as it takes. A devastating fighting spirit to do battle on their behalf.

What makes it work? The capacity to convey warmth and friendship, confidence and hope to someone at rock bottom, to affirm them sufficiently to enable them to turn their life round, to tackle almost insuperable problems, start again with hope and confidence, and stay out of prison.

A Mentor's Commitment

Julian (not his real name) had spent much of his adolescent and adult life in prison. His mentor met him before his release from prison. At first he was reluctant to talk and it turned out that he had never really shared his feelings with anyone. Gradually her perseverance was rewarded, they established a good relationship and he began to open up. On the day of his release she met him at the prison gate and went with him to the housing department, having done the ground work previously. They were met by a bald statement, 'We have nothing for him. Why bother, he'll be back inside this time next week.' Julian was not at all surprised and turned to go. Typical. His mentor was furious. Drawing herself to her full height — all five-foot-two — she firmly told Julian to stay where he was. Off she marched straight up to the manager's office and within a short time came back with the keys for a flat. The flat, of course, was not suitable for a number of reasons but it was a roof over his head, and over the next few weeks she tackled one problem after another for Julian and gradually his confidence grew. That man has now turned his life around in a way that he never believed possible and so far has not been back to prison. The tenacity of his mentor and her commitment to him in those early weeks after his discharge made all the difference. She believed in him. Now, finally, he has begun to believe in himself.

The Bat
in
the Belfry



The Tangles of GAY MARRIAGE and CIVIL PARTNERSHIP

For the churches the tangles of Gay Marriage and Civil Partnerships are sometimes compared to similar problems relating to women bishops but there is one crucial difference and one acute similarity. The difference is that in the case of women bishops the church (clergy and lay) broadly speaking know what they want to do and are in fairly general agreement; their difficulty is resolving it in such a way as to satisfy opposing positions. Women bishops is essentially a problem for the Church of England (other churches either not having the problem or at least not being in such crisis over it) and despite being a National Church the issues are ones they can handle internally and without State interference. Civil Partnerships and Gay Marriage, on the other hand, affect all the churches in different ways and none can claim to be master in their own house.

The issues are deep and the consequences far-reaching — too deep and far reaching for treatment in a few hundred words — but the common factor is that the issues are very much in public domain, are being talked about widely in Parliament and the media, and need to be discussed in all churches and at all levels. What worries me most is not so much the issues, important though they are, but the way in which we talk about them, the extent to which we are prepared to listen to different points of view, and the need to show respect to those who differ from us.

From my usual vantage point it is clear that the views of people in the pews around me are often very different from most of the articles in the various newspapers that lie on the table beside the collection plate in the entrance of the church. Discussions on the need to provide some form of public acknowledgement for those in a same sex relationship are a classic example of this disconnect between the real experiences of many people and most of the public statements and the policy positions made by the church.

As a bat I don't pretend to be an expert on what constitutes theology but I do understand the need for faith to have an impact on people where their feelings run deep as well as where they think about such matters. It seems that the power of Jesus was his ability to reach out to people at all levels, sometimes simultaneously. Today however, when church leaders or spokespeople make pronouncements on same sex relationships, they can easily overlook the fact that so many of their own experiences are based primarily on meetings with people like themselves or of a like mind, and unfortunately some

of those who are most confident of their views and interpretations of the words in the Bible have spent least time in settings where the reality of what they say can be examined in context.

As a bat I love to fly above water where flies and insects are easiest to catch late in the evening, and from that perspective still water can look as firm as the wood of these rafters where bats live. Yet when Jesus invited Peter to walk on the water, it was far from clear that he would be able to do so. None of us needs to be persuaded that this is a miracle. We have all experienced time in water, either for fun or for washing. Yet, when speaking about same sex relationships to what extent do we ever pause to put our words in context and think how what we say will sound in the ears of those who are themselves, or whose family members or neighbours, are engaged in such relationships.

The words of Jesus in the Bible always appear to have the mark of someone who understood how what he was saying would sound to his listeners. Even when addressing large crowds and explaining that his standards and their behaviour were ultimately in conflict he still managed to speak in a way that would inspire and draw people to himself. Only rarely do his words open up a fissure between himself and his hearers.

Finally, one other point. Why is it that too often the churches seem to be more obsessed with procreation and sexual matters than with other things mentioned in the Bible? We bats understand the importance of those things, but we also understand and spend time and energy on other things equally important. We like to see everything in its place. And at times I find it even stranger that some of those who have most to say about same sex relationships tend to do so despite having a relatively small number of homosexual friends.

Jesus didn't speak at all about sex as we do but everything he said about relationships suggests that he really understood the people he was talking to and never for a moment does he give the impression that he despises them or indeed what they do. Recent comments by the Pope make it clear that he too is aware of the needs of the people who are affected by his pronouncements. Surely the time has come to encourage more debate on same sex relationships and also to ensure that it be carried out in a way that is sensitive to the pastoral impact of how we express ourselves about people who know only too well that we are talking about them.

Together is the Newsletter of Churches Together in Sussex though views expressed are not necessarily those of Churches Together in Sussex, its leaders or its officers

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