

Outside the Camp

Reflections of a Community Activist

Second Edition

by

John Barber

*“... we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body ... And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him **outside the camp**, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”* **Hebrews 10 vv 19-20, 13 vv 12-14**

“And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.” **Mark 12 vv 29-31**

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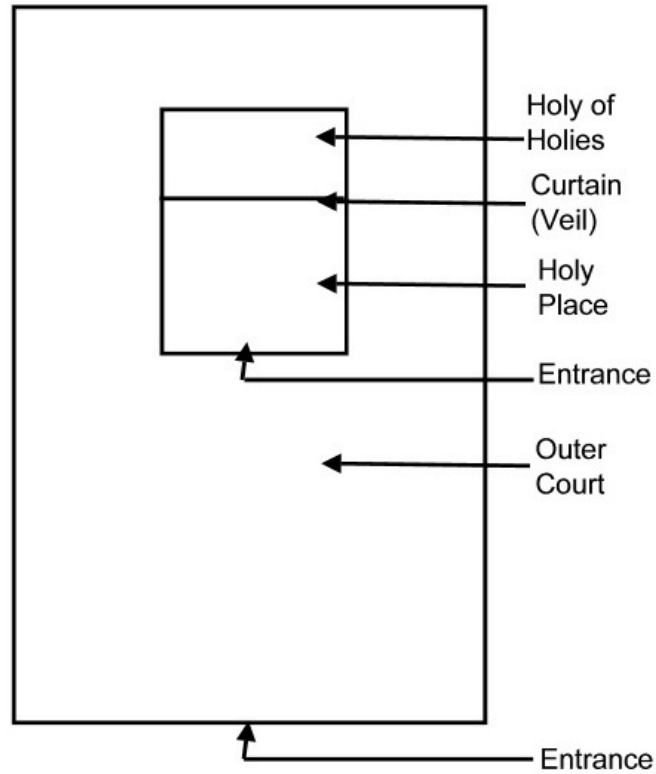
The Scapegoat



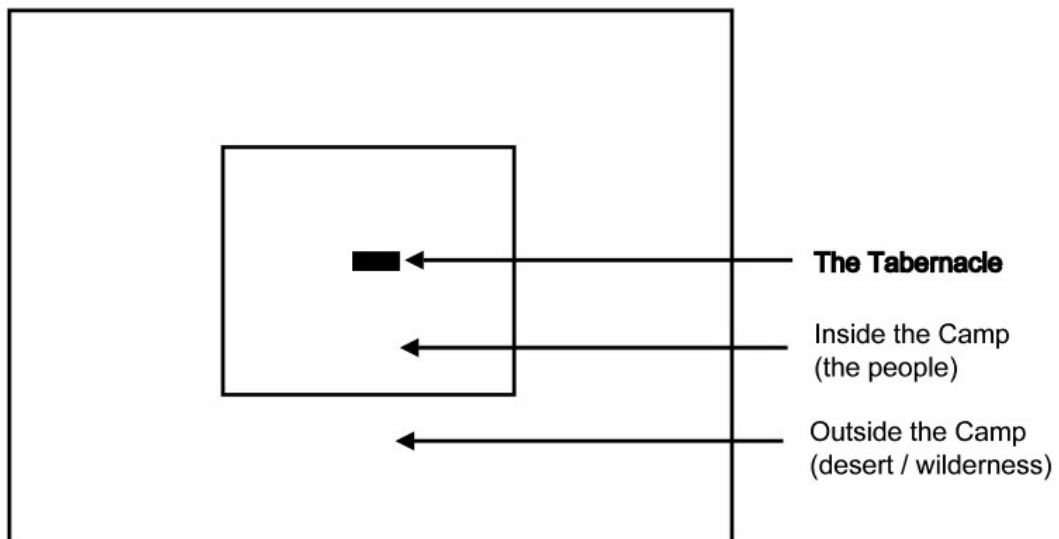
About the Cover: *this includes the painting *The Scapegoat* by William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Besides the author being an enthusiast of both Holman Hunt and the Brotherhood, the *Scapegoat* relates to the theme of this book. We learn in Leviticus 16, after the High priest had laid hands on the Scapegoat in order to transfer the sins of the people, that it was then released “outside the camp” (in the wilderness) bearing the sins of the people. Holman Hunt saw the Scapegoat as a type of the Lord Jesus Christ.*

“Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.” (Isaiah 53 v 4)

The Tabernacle and the Camp



The Tabernacle (Tent)



Inside and Outside the Camp

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Acknowledgements

While the work is my own, lots of people have played their part in the story. Some have been mentioned (especially some of those who I see as being among the “good guys”) but many haven’t, including those who have played important parts; but even if I were to try hard, it would be impossible to include everyone. Many have encouraged me along the way. I especially appreciate those who share my Christian inspired passion and understand the need to be theologically sound, spiritually focused and socially active, including taking a full part in the community. There are a number who don’t go along with my Christian views but, nevertheless, they serve the community well. I value their contribution and, when it is given, their support. I would like to mention my family, who have encouraged me to write my story and, while doing so, I may have neglected them more than usual. My sister, Linda, has been helpful in helping me to recall earlier details.

A number of people have seen earlier drafts and have made comments, for which I am grateful. I thank Paul Slennett, owner of Southend Christian Bookshop, who is not only a good example of a “golden oldie” community activist but who has provided sound advice due to his knowledge of the book trade. I appreciate the help and advice given to me by Ed Harding and David Nickalls about some of the practicalities of self-publishing, although I was sorry not to do business with them on this occasion. I am grateful to Paul Barnes and John Simmons (who are also community activists, and of a more pedantic ilk) for proof reading the earlier drafts and making helpful suggestions. I thank Amit Popat and Mark Churchward who, in their very different spheres of interest and influence, are community activist good guys, for kindly writing forewords. I should also mention Ian Hutchins (www.hutchinscreative.co.uk) for doing the type setting and final cover design and Norman Stansfield, and his colleagues, for printing the book (www.4edge.co.uk).

This book is work in progress and there are new developments all the time. The picture being presented is continually evolving and some material might seem unrelated, and there is some repetition, for which I beg the reader’s forbearance for this as well as things that could have been better said or left unsaid. Finally, I acknowledge that the people who matter most are the poor and needy; it is these that we must be serving as community activists. As for me, I am “*an unprofitable servant*” (Luke 17v7-10), but privileged to be in the service of the King of kings.

Dedication

I thought long and hard as to whom I could dedicate this book to, including my long-suffering wife, my son in whom I have such high hopes, the memory of my dad, who was often on the side of the underdog, and my father-in-law who, while he might not quite go along with my ideas on community activism, is one of the most active people I know when it comes to serving others. But no-one sprung readily to mind, even though there have been these and other inspirational figures, some well-known on the world stage and some known locally to just a few, for all of these have encouraged me along the way. As for many of the local folk I have worked with, I admire the commitment and forbearance of several, even when we disagree. I think of those people who, without ostentation, just get on and work with and for the community, for these are the true heroes, including those who are around my own age and older, who give so much to their communities and expect so little in return. There are many also, some now dead and forgotten, who truly laid the groundwork. Some of the golden oldies (or nearly) I have worked with, often in quite different ways, that fit this bill because they do fully engage with the wider community, include: Andrew and Avril Betts-Brown, David and Brenda Sims, Paul Saunders, Paul Slennett, Albert Wallace, Peter Marret, Brian Efde, Ron Wright, David Ince, John Bastin, John Simmons, Ray Davy, Chand Sood, Ahmad Khwaja, Frank Gulley, Rick Williams, Peter Dominey, Rona Hart, Mara Chrystie, Della Carr, Ruth Verrinder, Sandra Wilkes, Cherry Higgins and Pauline Bowyer. I would particularly like to mention the next, up and coming generation, who will carry on the work of community activism, mostly out of altruistic rather than selfish motives, when I am long forgotten and have departed from the scene. I am heartened, while there are many I don't know, there are some I do. I shouldn't name them to save embarrassment, but I will. Those younger than me, in my town, who often "get it and "do it", when it comes to being active in the community, include a varied bunch: John Cheek, Del Thomas, David Elcock, Kamil Pachalko, Simon Matthews, John Williams, Rob Walters, Dan Turpin, Louise Frood, Gill Ioannis, Jacqui Wilson, Aline Clayson, Ashley Dalton, Jackie Jones and Jack Monroe. I see new community activists coming through all the time, often in small ways to start with. More will surely follow, including some who will surprise us, who are presently unrated, who will seize the opportunities that present themselves, and may outshine us all. I would like to dedicate this book to this new generation.

Synopsis

Outside the Camp – Reflections of a Community Activist contains the author's own "inside" story of his wide ranging, full time activities in the community, in the town in which he was born and grew up in, over a period of more than ten years, in the latter part of his working life. The author devotes ten chapters about the events leading up to him becoming a community activist, what those activities comprised and what is happening now and may do so in the future. He reflects on issues around community activism, from personal, local and global perspectives. Two of the chapters can be read as stand alone, yet do relate to issues relevant to his work: one is on mental health and the other is on homosexuality. Both are controversial topics but the author tries to examine these with sensitivity, exploring how, both as a community activist and as a Christian believer, he seeks to understand and address these issues and how they relate to his work and the approach he takes.

The book is aimed at a number of different audiences:

Firstly, there are those who themselves are, or wish to be, active in their own communities, or who have a professional interest in community dynamics, and how they might work effectively with the various communities to achieve maximum impact. The author's approach has often been to look for common ground with various groups and individuals and then to find ways to work together for the common good. The author's experiences and insights working with disparate partners and wide ranging agendas, often making mistakes along the way but making a difference also, may prove to be helpful to other community activists.

Secondly, there are the Christians, especially the movers and shakers and those who do or want to work with the wider community and serve others, yet still wish to maintain a good testimony and not neglect more "spiritual" matters. The book proposes a radical yet biblical approach, arguing Christians need to go *inside the curtain* (communion with God) and *outside the camp* (into the wider world with all its challenges). He commends his method of working with the wider community, on a whole range of issues which ought to be of interest to Christians, especially that which impacts the poor and disadvantaged, rather than the traditional one of individual churches running their own church-based programmes, often in isolation. The author believes, as a result of adopting this approach, opportunities

arise that might not otherwise happen for churches to play a more crucial and expansive part in effectively, fragrantly serving their community and availing themselves of the enormous opportunities for Christian service.

Thirdly, there are those who know the author or are curious, and/or who are familiar with some of the projects mentioned in the book, and want to know more.

Fourthly: the book is aimed at the general public, all of which are involved, whether or not they want to, in one or other community, usually several. The book suggests ways how and reasons why individuals can and should be actively involved in their communities and how they can make that all important difference.

The author has written for a wide ranging potential audience because he believes that all can play a part in making our communities better places and, moreover, there is room for all. While there will be some things we won't agree on, there will some things we will and just maybe, as a result, we can work more together to make that all important difference. The author hopes this book may contribute to the debate as to how we can best go about serving the whole community and, more importantly, for people from all sorts of backgrounds to go out and get involved.

The role of a community activist is often seen as having to campaign on behalf of some issue or cause, usually advocating change, often vociferously, and in some cases being a proverbial pain. This could be part of it but the author's idea of activism is more to do with being active, in this case in the community and serving others, taking up one or more of the multitude of opportunities that are available to every one of us, even if only in modest, practical, down to earth ways. While for the author this has become a full time occupation, there is no reason why anyone can't incorporate these things alongside and included in their other daily activities.

As I reviewed this section for the umpteenth time, it occurred while my wife shopped and I hung about the town centre, I had spoken with a nice lady from the anti-capitalist group, Occupy Southend, a member of Anonymous, campaigning for freedom of information on the Internet, a councillor with ideas on how to alleviate Southend's housing crisis and a friend involved in a project helping victims of that crisis, that all these are activists. While readers may have other ideas in mind, these are among so many different areas of activism that the reader can take up. So the message is simple: go out and get involved. I hope this book will be of help.

Prefaces

First Edition

The original first edition didn't have a preface as what might have been said if there was had already been said elsewhere in the book, but since I do need to do one for this second edition, I thought it would be worth mentioning the fact here. To save confusion, I should say the book as a whole relates to the first edition. Since then some material has been removed and some situations referred to have changed.

Second Edition

As has been stated elsewhere, this book is an account of my experiences and observations as a community activist. As a Christian I see going "outside the camp" as something I need to do. Since producing the first edition, I have produced a lot more material and this has been included in four separate books (papers):

- Spirituality and Mental Health
- The Gay Conundrum
- Onward and Upward
- Theological Musings

I have removed chapters in the first edition to do with homosexuality and mental health, as the first two of these books are based on that material. Brief descriptions of all of these books are included in chapters with those titles. As I write, the main aim is to make this book, along with my other writings, available as free Internet downloads, and do a print run to include these four new titles under a single cover, titled: "Further Reflections of a Community Activist". Other than removing two chapters, the original text of this book remains mostly intact. I have used the opportunity to make minor corrections and improvements and remove material if it is covered elsewhere. I would like to thank Gill Kimber and John Simmons for assisting in the necessary proof reading and a growing army of community activists that have inspired me to continue with my mission of sharing what is involved and what should be considered when we do decide to venture "outside the camp".

Third Edition

This is yet to exist but one day it might, although the current position is there are now two new books. No doubt there will be updates and new material in the future.

Foreword

By Amit Popat

I am honoured to be asked to write this foreword for a fellow community activist. I have followed John's work since I arrived in Southend in 2010. I believe that the cosmos has a way of connecting people who have synchronicity in thinking, speaking and acting. Mostly, John falls in the sphere of acting. Activists have a tradition of "doing" and inspiring others in this way. If John was asked to help in the garden, he would not be afraid of "getting his hands dirty". Activists are social gardeners. They know that digging, weeding, and pruning are necessary to transform any landscape. They also know that every rose has thorns, stinging nettles can cause harm – but good gardeners also know that nettles can be utilized as a source of healing and nutrition. In his book, John teaches us these very lessons that are, for me, a practical example of 'Glocalism'¹.

Every productive activist I have known has been engaged with conflict in some shape or form: conflict with themselves – keeping a watchful eye on one's own contradictions – and conflict with institutions that express commitments to equality and yet shy away from dedication to meaningful anti-discriminatory outcomes. Activists give their time, wealth, and determination for the benefit of the greater collective good, often coming face to face with conflict. In relation to conflict, the Suffragettes, Schindler, Gandhi, Mandela and recently, my good friend Dan Biddle², have a significant attribute in common: they face and welcome the consequences of saying and doing the right thing to influence positive change.

This book has many important messages: some apparent, and others where you will have to dig a bit deeper. Take the time to explore the lessons, not only as a reader but as a current or emerging activist. There are so many projects that John has instigated, or as he would say, "been involved with". Find the time to engage with them in the spirit of inter-dependence.

¹ individual, group, division, unit, organization, and community which is willing and able to "think globally and act locally".

² Dan Biddle is a disability champion, a victim of 07/07 bombings in London who is now working closely with Amit in Southend on disability issues.

I am what people would commonly call a Hindu, and in the history of this tradition there is a collection of fables called the *Hitopnishad*. It quotes: “Udāracharitānām tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam”, translated “*This is my own relative and that is a stranger is the calculation of the narrow-minded; for the magnanimous-hearts, however, the entire earth is but one family.*”

In all of my encounters with John, he has never presented his way as the right way, and despite having a vast knowledge of local communities and politics he has never assumed an attitude of superiority. It is these blessings of character that inspire me and others to follow the journeys of such activists. John has always maintained a spirit of humble service. May he continue to serve and lead for years to come.

Amit Popat

Diversity Consultant³

By Mark Churchward

Passionate and humble; resolute and honest; critically engaged and far-reaching; and always faithful to his relationship with God in Jesus and his understanding of God’s revealed will in the Bible – these are the qualities I have come to respect and admire greatly in John. Understanding as I do something of the church and theological “stable” to which John owes his spiritual inheritance, the journey John describes in this book is remarkable. His own engagement so deeply and fully in his local community focused on the needs and aspirations of the marginalized and oppressed makes him a living example of the title of his book in relation to his own spiritual tradition. This willingness to think and act “outside of the box”, rooted in his convictions derived from his Christian faith, has won him the respect of many of his local fellow church-men and women from traditions different to his own.

³ Amit, like many community activists, wears many hats. While I first met him in his professional capacity with Southend Hospital, I have also worked with him with “the Equalities Board” and SREN.

I thought I had a pretty good grasp of John's involvement in grass-roots needs in Southend – until I read this book! How is it possible for one person to engage with so many different people and so many different issues in ten years of service to the community?! This account of John's work as a community activist is an inspiring testimony to us all that “little ol (or young!) me” really can make a significant difference to other people's wellbeing.

In these pages you will find a typically reflective account of John's engagement in serving the needs of many disadvantaged or minority groups in our local community. Though there is much biographical detail, John's purpose is educative, not simply informative; in his evaluations of the effectiveness of the schemes and issues he has been involved with he aims to provide lessons which will help others in their endeavours to enable the voiceless to be heard. And his summary checklists distilling his conclusions or suggested guidelines for engagement will find echoes in the experience of other “activists”, and provide a helpful starting point for those beginning the journey.

Elsewhere, John broadens his sweep to incorporate his personal perspective on controversial matters arising from his involvement with some groups, or from the application of his moral / theological perspective to those issues. These are thoughtfully and respectfully presented, but reflect John's willingness to be frank and direct about his strongly-held convictions. Whilst being a tireless bridge-builder he is as much an advocate of the truth he believes is revealed in Jesus and the Christian scriptures as he is of the issues of social injustice he seeks to address. Indeed, it is his obedience to these sources of his world-view that leads him to be as fully embedded in the life of his community as he is.

I consider it an honour to have been asked to write one of the forewords for this book penned by a man whose life and work are a challenging encouragement to me to go further in my own response to Jesus' command to “love my neighbour as myself”.

Mark Churchward

Member of the leadership team of Southend Christian Fellowship and of the leadership team responsible for Love Southend

1. Introduction

These past ten years or so have been remarkable (and arguably the most productive years of my life), as much because they have been unanticipated or planned for, as far as my working life is concerned. Little did I realize prior to then that I would be carving out a new career for myself – that of a community activist which, while not anywhere nearly as financially lucrative (being a mixture of both paid and unpaid work) as my previous one, has been immensely satisfying insofar that I have felt I have been able to make a real difference on a scale and in areas and ways hitherto unimagined and have got to meet some amazing people from all walks of life.

Having recently reached the ripe old age of sixty, when many contemporaries are retiring or contemplating retirement, I am conscious there is still much unfinished business to do. Some of it (God willing) I might yet get to do, although time is running out as, inevitably, one starts to slow down. One of the boasts older people sometimes like to make is that they have reached an age when they no longer care what people think and they can choose what they do and who they do it with. While I can identify with some of that, life is rarely that straightforward and being a community activist means working with the resources available and taking whatever opportunities are presented to do what needs to be done.

As for doing what needs to be done, I still have to hope and rely on others to take the baton from me and carry on the work, even if turns out to be in new and unexpected directions. This account contains the narrative of those aspects of my work in the community that I see as being significant and which I have been involved in, drawing lessons and principles that might be helpful for those who come after me or who are merely interested. It is not meant for self-glorification, for I admit that my mistakes and my faults and flaws have been many, and, as far as the successes go, many others have played their part and they deserve praise.

I suppose there are a number of motivations for writing this account. Besides indulging my habit of writing in order to get things off my chest, a very practical one is to explain what (at least in my case) community activism entails and why I do it, especially when it was not my paid remit. Many a time I have struggled to explain after someone has asked me (as often does happen) what I do for a living. I hope this account will inform those who want to know. I would like to think that

some of what have been worthwhile activities for me might be so for many of my readership. Not only would I like to think that others might be suitably inspired but they might be able to avoid some of the pitfalls and be better at it than I am.

I imagine two distinct audiences. Both I am keen to reach. Firstly, there is the wider public, particularly those interested in community either as a personal interest or in a professional capacity. I daresay some will have knowledge of the events about to be recounted and will therefore be attracted. Secondly, there are the “church folk”, interested in serving their community and thinking through relevant issues, who want to know how to go about this task. Notwithstanding ideological differences, my maybe naïve dream is seeing the two audiences joining forces to do so.

Quite a lot of what is written about in this account relates to historical happenings. While in the big scheme of things, some may say these are barely significant, it is also for others to judge. I think there is a case for presenting the relevant facts although I would also say to any serious student of history, check these out from multiple sources if you can. I am also keen to set the record straight.

The role of religion and faith in this story is a complex yet important one, even though many aspects would seem to have little to do with matters spiritual. Many of those I work with or serve in the community are not particularly motivated by faith (and many are). The same might also be said for my readership (I hope that will indeed be the case). However, faith has motivated me in much of what I do as a community activist and has informed and governed my approach. While I do not want to overdo the religious bit and thereby lose the very folk I would like to win, if I were not to consider these issues, given these are relevant, it would mean missing out an important part of the story which follows. Also, I realize that for some of the more earnest religious types that I associate with, these things are not on their radar and (in my view) they ought to be. Others, influenced by a more secular agenda, may see religious contributions in a negative light. I hope what follows will help those from both camps to gain a better understanding.

In my more cynical moments, I have tended to place people into one of three categories: fools, villains and the “good guys”, although in reality all of us are a mixture of all three to varying extents and according to the issues and circumstances prevailing at a particular time and place. If there is a secret for success in community work, it is as much about being able to understand (and even

accept) all three exist and being able to skilfully harness the talents and interests of as many of those we deal with we can, either out of choice or necessity, in order to do something for the common good and to make that all important difference.

While I would like to share all that I think and feel, I think it is wiser to be more circumspect (and maybe quintessentially English) in order not to embarrass others or cause undue offence. Besides, we all have our own perspective and, while I have tried to be fair and balanced in what I write, I realize that it is well nigh impossible to tell the story in a way that does complete justice to all the various viewpoints. That story involves many people (a few are referred to but many aren't), and many situations are described also, but this work is my own and is based on my own recollections. I apologize if I do not always give credit where credit is due. It was not intentional and, besides, that is not the prime purpose of this account. I believe though that what I do present is an accurate portrayal of what went on but I am conscious with advancing age that one's powers of recollection (among others) usually do go into decline, including not always having an exact chronology or all the details to hand. All the views expressed are, of course, my own.

About the contents of this book, as it now has become, the first half (five chapters) describes the various instances of community activism I have been involved with over the past eleven years. Following this introduction, I devote a chapter to giving a context to my work and follow this with three chapters looking at different aspects of the work. The first two relate mainly to my paid work; the third mainly to my unpaid work. This is not just a record of what I got up to but it also addresses the reasons why things happened, introduces some of the key personalities, throws in few anecdotes, including a few amusing incidents; at least I think so.

The second half of the book considers wider aspects of my community activism. Chapter 6 reflects on some significant groups involved. Chapter 7 reflects on three areas that relate to my activism: politics, education and enterprise, and considers how community and statutory agencies can engage. The next two chapters can be read standalone and are based on what I wrote prior to starting this book. Chapter 10 contains an assortment of topics, including: exploring the reason why we should be involved in community activism, the relationship between community activism and eschatology, advice for would-be community activists, a personal profile, some related websites, reflections on a related hymn, some quotations and a glossary.

Chapter 8 (Spirituality and Mental Health) is based on a booklet I produced while working for Trust Links, early on in my community activist career, although it has been completely revised and adapted to fit in with this book's themes. Mental Health was the main business of what I did and, while my role since has changed considerably, my various activities have given me plenty of opportunity to reflect and my passion remains. It contains my current thinking on many of the issues.

Chapter 9 (The Gay Conundrum) was written more recently and deals with a difficult subject that touches on the work I do in the community. Besides looking at a tricky topic with many ramifications, it illustrates my approach to the *how, what, why, when and where* questions of carrying out community work in a disparate and intricate setting and not merely reacting, as one frequently does, to the plethora of needs that present themselves. It also shows my struggles and desire to be true to my faith and still be able to adapt to the challenges of living in the real world.

While mental health and homosexuality appear as unrelated topics that just happen to be two of the many subjects related to this book I am interested in, there are at least three connections. Firstly, until recently, homosexuality has sometimes been regarded as a mental health condition. Secondly, although I can't prove it, gay folk may experience more than their fair share of mental health problems, likely due as much to the stigma and discrimination they have had to face as anything else. Thirdly, folk in both groups have sometimes been given a raw deal by the churches.

About the book's title, I am intrigued with the Old Testament description of what took place on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), when each year Jewish people sought covering for their sins. We see the contrast between the yearly visit of the High Priest, carrying the blood of a sacrificed animal, into the Holy of Holies (where God dwelt) and burning the bodies of those animals outside the camp (which was all desert). I see the contrast as applying to Christian believers, who can and should be continuously, prayerfully approaching God (*inside the curtain*) by virtue of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, but then going "*outside the camp*" (into the world, sometimes suffering as a result but intent upon serving others), as Christ did.

Most of my community activism has taken place in Southend, the town where I was born and grew up and have lived in for all but fifteen years of my life, and when I talk about activism it is being active in the communities where we belong. Finally, the book might be best read as separate but related chapters.

2. Early Influences

Before telling my story as a community activist, I feel it appropriate to give an abbreviated account of those happenings in my life prior to that time which have in one way or another had a bearing on how I went about doing work in the community. It may provide some insight into my own foibles and failings as well as those influences that have played a part. One of the later chapters contains some of my thoughts concerning mental health and some of these also apply personally.

Childhood

I don't have much recollection of life in my maternal grandparents' home in Westcliff during the first eighteen months of my life, this being the only place available for my parents. Then we moved into a Council house in Leigh, on the new Blenheim estate, until I was twelve. My recollections were mainly happy ones although there were darker moments, especially when my dad began to drink heavily when I was about eleven. The main trigger was the death of his father (my grandfather). But all along Mum and Dad tried to create a loving home and looked after me and my younger sister, even though we didn't have much by way of material luxuries. It wasn't until much later that things like a television, telephone, refrigerator, Hoover and washing machine appeared. Mum stayed at home although later she did part-time domestic work. Dad did unskilled labouring work when he could find it, interspersed with jobs as a waiter and anything else he could find. Some of my happiest memories were the occasional family outing, particularly boat rides starting from the end of the pier and annual trips to Never Never Land.

We were sent to the local school (Blenheim Primary) where I was mostly happy and had my most creative educational experiences. I don't recall being particularly liked by a number of teachers because when I was naughty it tended to be in front of them, and neither do I recall much by way of achievements, although I did the work set before me to a reasonable standard. I made it to the school recorder group, despite a lack of talent (I think my teacher took pity on me), and played an acclaimed cameo role in the school play. I recall one teacher who often sent me out of the class for (so I was told) disrupting it, being bored as I had finished my work ahead of the others, and where I fed the goldfish. I recently came across a Year 6 project I did, based on a trip to London, and was impressed! I also recall a project I

did based on a USA exhibition at the pier but was pipped at the post for the prize by my best friend. There were lots of children on my council estate and when school was not on we played, mostly happily and without restriction or supervision. The local park proved a great bonus and endless hours were spent playing there, including games of football, cricket and tin can copper. It wasn't until years later that the first swings appeared but, while welcomed, did not make all that much difference as we were well adept at improvising. My greatest joy was the wood at the bottom of my garden. This had a magical, mystery fascination and was the object of much exploration and adventure. For the bold, it was a shortcut to school. It was a sad day when, aged eleven, the wood was chopped down; overnight, it seemed, to make way for a new housing estate. Two organized activities that I did enjoy were the Sunday School, held at Blenheim Primary, and the local cub pack.

We moved as a family when I was aged twelve to the other side of the town (Southchurch). My mum decided it would be a good idea to take a larger council house so her ageing parents could live with us and, I think, my dad just went along with it. The upheaval of moving was considerable. For one thing, I lost contact with my friends and did not make new friends easily, being by nature somewhat of a loner. Dad continued his drinking although he was also capable of much kindness. This made for a considerable strain on my parents' marriage. There were frequent rows, with my mum on several occasions threatening to leave dad. Money was tight and I recall on more than one occasion my dad not getting paid for the work he did. There were other upsets in the family, including my sister having a breakdown and running away from home. I don't think the arrangements with my grandparents worked out too well either for when I was aged fifteen we decided to split. My grandparents went into a flat in Temple Court and we moved to St. Lukes Road. I later bought that house and the one adjoining it, and that is where I now live. Mum tried to hold everything together during this difficult time. She could be quite controlling and had a temper but did look out for our welfare and encouraged me in my education. Dad was often taken advantage of because of his low estate and simplicity. He had great empathy with the "underdog" and this rubbed off. He gave me my early work experience when I assisted him on some of his gardening jobs.

My secondary school experience, especially early on, was not particularly happy, because of incessant bullying. I felt unable to share this with anyone and became introverted and mixed up. While I had some good teachers, early learning was not

demanding and expectations were not high. I went to a Secondary Modern School and most of my peers left as soon as they could, at fifteen. One positive adolescent experience was joining the local Covenanter group, aged thirteen, by invitation of a school mate. It was held at the church I now attend. It combined a Sunday Bible class and a Friday activity session. Having opted to continue my education, I knuckled down, obtaining nine good grade O-Levels (adding two later) and four good grade A-levels, after transferring to the nearby grammar school.

Education

Education has always played an important part in my life and remains a great passion. I have always sought, formally and informally, to learn in a wide plethora of subjects, and not just those related to exams or work. After leaving school, I went to Queen Mary College, London University, and graduated in 1973 with Chemistry as my main subject. I don't look back with particular relish concerning my learning experience there but do when it came to the social experience. Two aspects particularly come to mind: meeting and befriending Christians from a wide variety of backgrounds (including taking part in the Christian Union) and doing the same with overseas students, a number of whom came to my home to stay. During my short time as a teacher, I gained a postgraduate teaching qualification. Toward the end of my time as a computer consultant, I indulged my interest in history, literature, philosophy and religion and undertook a further degree course with the Open University. All the time I read widely and took a keen interest in current affairs. I did several courses on various subjects, both work and non-work related. I even obtained a Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) certificate.

India

In 1983, I visited India for the first time. India had long held a fascination for me and I seized the opportunity to visit it. This coincided with my finishing one job, with an electronics company in the Poole area, and starting a new job with Marconi Communications, based in Chelmsford, and also moving back to the place of my birth and upbringing, partly in order to be close to my mother who had been widowed four years earlier. I felt then that my time in Poole had come to a natural end. I visited India as a traveller-come-backpacker, just as I did two years previously, when I visited Israel and Egypt. I arrived alone in the middle of the

night with nowhere to stay. I had a few contacts who I could visit in different places, mainly in the South, but I intended to visit all round this wonderful country.

For some, the initial culture shocks would have been a deterrent. Within a few hours of arrival I had experienced many: the humid and putrid atmosphere upon landing at Bombay airport, the squalor and dirt everywhere, luxury and poverty existing side by side and (for me) a disagreeable culinary experience (it is a definite advantage to be a vegetarian). Yet I fell in love with this amazing country and its people and I was to visit India many times afterward. My first journey was a two-day train trip from Bombay to Trivandrum. Here I met Varghese Matthai, a community worker whose main work was as a Christian evangelist, who had little of this world's goods. He took me under his wing. His daughter was later to become my wife. I also met and befriended many Indians, many who were in church leadership, and I was able to forge friendships that remain to this day. Without doubt, India is a land of huge contrasts and variety, containing areas of stunning beauty, amidst dirt and rubbish to be seen everywhere. Most who visit will come back deeply impressed, if not put off. In the years that followed there have been massive changes, not least in terms of economic development and material advancement, albeit sadly at the cost of family and other values. People should not be taken in though; there remains great poverty still. For me, the abiding memories are the opportunities to be involved with ministries that still go on *e.g.* preaching, church planting and compassion projects, being accepted and taken into the hearts of Indian folk, and much evidence of sincerity, simplicity and superb hospitality.

Family

Like most families, mine has a wide spread of in-laws, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces and cousins. While I feel close to many in my wife's family, who are very supportive of each other, the same cannot be said with my own, except for those closest: Mum and Dad and Linda (my sister) and her family. I have a particular affection for my two nephews and their families. As for grandparents, aunts and uncles, they are all now dead. I had varying amounts of dealings with and looked up to them all, although they did not influence me much. I remember all with a degree of affection, and most showed an interest in and kindness toward me. I can now see the differences in character and outlook and their good and bad points. Sadly, with one exception, I have little nowadays to do with my cousins and their

families. Regarding my parents' own tempestuous relationship, this did improve and there was genuine love. I recall while I was living in Poole, a little before my dad died, they came to stay with me for a week and we spent a happy time together.

My dad's untimely death in 1979 was as a result of a road accident, and it proved to be a devastating blow. My mother is still alive and is being looked after in a nearby nursing home. She has Alzheimer's disease and is very frail. I visit her in the nursing home most days, and I feed her⁴. I sometimes think about Shakespeare's description of the seven stages of man, from infancy to old age, in his play *As You Like It*, especially the last one, and find it a salutary reminder of what was, what is and what will be. I did not get married until I was 44. I had imagined that I might remain single for the rest of my life and had come to see advantages in the single life because of the freedom it gave. But I succumbed and married Jolly in 1996. We have one son, Matthew, born in 1998. Both mother and son I love. They are both very important to me and have a considerable bearing on what I do.

Religion

I found God in 1966, during the week England won the Football World Cup. While not resulting in instantaneous, radical lifestyle transformation, my conversion experience had a profound effect on my life which followed. Some of the early influences therefore bore fruit. My parents, who were not religious at the time, insisted we go to Sunday school. Miss Raffan, a primary school headmistress, and her young spinster assistants, did an admirable job running the Sunday school and encouraging youngsters like me who attended it. Later on, Bryn Jones, my Covenanter leader, was incredibly patient when, as a youngster intent on mischief, I sought new ways to disrupt his class. He persisted with me and I found faith at the Christian boys' summer camp he encouraged me to attend. I went on to be involved at the church, Coleman Street Chapel, including the young people's Bible class.

Before going up to university, I took part in the first of my two overseas summer crusades with Operation Mobilization (OM), which had an important bearing on my thinking thereafter, as did the somewhat narrow (in the Plymouth Brethren tradition) but intensely Bible based ministry and life at the Chapel. My time at

⁴ My mother died 18th June 2013 – I have included a eulogy about her in my *Onward and Upward* book

university, and later on when I was away from Southend due to work, meant I was able to meet with Christians of different shades, although mostly of the more evangelical ilk. OM was important as it helped to give me that radical edge on Christian discipleship that remains still, albeit in ways I did not foresee then. While I felt, looking back, the folk at the Chapel could be harsh and legalistic in their outlook, they also helped instil in me a love for the Bible and a desire to serve God.

When I came back to Southend in 1983, I resolved to join a different church to that of my early years, partly as a reaction to the sanctimonious narrowness that had been previously evident. Despite checking out a number, mostly those considered to be “doctrinally sound” and “spiritually alive”, and trying to be involved in their programmes, I failed to settle in any. I suspect it was as much down to me as anything the churches did, but I did see many flaws in those churches and saw what I felt were significant reasons why there are so many “prodigal sons” around, who once were active but are now no longer involved in church life. I found myself in the late 1980’s back at Coleman Street where changes were many, including a much diminished congregation: most of its earlier leading lights had left or died. I have remained with the church from that day on and am involved in many of its activities, including teaching and preaching, and serve as its missionary secretary. I have also been much involved with Christians in other churches and, by virtue of my community activities, those from other religions.

Forty-five years on, I look back on what remains a real experience of conversion and can reflect that I am still going strong, but not without wobbles and wanderings along the way. By God’s grace, I am better than I was and would have been; I am what I am now and I will be something far better in the world to come. As for my own “brand” of Christianity and church, I quote from a paper I wrote eight years ago, *Who are the Brethren*: “*I am inclined toward a vision of the Church that is Catholic in spirituality, Liberal in social activism, Reformed in doctrine, Charismatic in experience, Evangelical in zeal, Puritan in living, Methodist in organization and Brethren in ecclesiology, but above all passionate for Jesus.*”

Politics

Except for a brief period during my youth, I have tended toward political neutrality. My views are independent of party dogma and mix and match the best aspects of

each party, while feeling all parties fall short of what is best. I feel the issues facing our nation and the world are too great for any political system to deal with, and what we need is a change of heart and a seeking after God. Because of my staunch working class background, it seemed inevitable I should first veer toward Labour and for a time was an admirer of Harold Wilson and a believer in state ownership in the interests of all the people. My experience as a student and later as a teacher, observing a disrespect for authority and the rule of law, and an increasing antipathy toward state intervention, inclined me toward becoming a Conservative; although when it came to voting it tended to be on the basis of which candidate would be the best for his/her constituency and, latterly, social justice issues. In the course of my community work, I have had cause to rub shoulders with politicians of all shades and have appreciated the frank exchanges I have often been able to have. While I recognize the fool, villain and good guy mix in all our politicians, I realize many have the good of the community at heart and the necessity of working together.

Work

I have had three main careers in my life. The third, that of a community activist, is the subject of the chapters that follow. When I left university, I did not have a strong sense of my vocational calling but was attracted to teaching and saw it as a way to serve my community. Soon after leaving college, I found a job at one of the local comprehensive schools where I was required to teach chemistry to the entire age and ability range. It was tough and a shock to the system, as I learnt that teaching was just the easy bit. Getting children to learn was a far bigger challenge. While I ended the first year mentally and emotionally shattered, I felt it was right to persevere. After taking a year out to do my Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE), I then taught at another comprehensive school where the going was even tougher. I taught physics as well as chemistry and tended to have more of the difficult classes. I decided in the end that as I could not gain the control I wanted, I would cut my losses and try another career. While I never went back to teaching after that (although a couple of times the opportunity did arise), I was able to use my teaching skills in my work in the church, *e.g.* teaching Bible classes and Sunday School and preaching, as well as in the two other careers that were to follow.

After taking some time out, including working in the factory where I once worked as a student, I did a further course in commercial computing and landed a job as a

software engineer at Plessey Controls in Poole. While nowhere near being God's gift to the computer industry, my career steadily advanced and I was able to do a job that in the main I enjoyed doing and could do reasonably well. My main area of expertise was in the telecommunications sector, working as a programmer and designer, and later leading teams and managing projects. I worked in three other companies in the Poole area after I left Plessey, and spent what was, in the main, six happy years there, indulging sporting interests, like hockey and sailing, was involved in the activities of two churches, especially including work among young people: Sunday school, Bible class, youth club and Boys Brigade. I still see Poole as a particularly lovely part of the country (next to my beloved Lake District) as it is close to sea, beaches, forest, hills and countryside, which I frequently visited.

I moved back to Southend in 1983, living in a house that I brought and later with my widowed mother. I sold my house and brought my mother's (then Council) house and later the house next door, which I let out. I worked five years at Marconi Communications, on software-based electronic applications that included network management, store and forward message switching and satellite communication systems, including working abroad, notably and memorably in Burma. By the end of 1988, I had responsibility for several projects and felt I was coping well. By that time, it had become evident this was a rapidly expanding industry and I observed there were many who took the opportunity (and risk) to start their own company and sell their services as computer consultants for financial gain.

I joined their ranks and between 1989 and 2001 ran my own limited company and did well, specializing in system testing and quality assurance, mostly in the telecommunication sector but there was some work in financial services, providing my services to a range of different clients, often large corporations. My later major projects involved helping to fix the "millennium bug" and then developing e-commerce systems. Things became more difficult toward the end as the nature of the industry changed, evolving technologies quickly rendered earlier ones obsolete, opportunities became less and tax incentives were tightened; and by then being newly married, I became less inclined to what was a nomadic lifestyle. I was faced with the question as to my future career direction, although it was becoming clearer. I could reflect at the end that I had been able to work almost continuously and was well rewarded for my efforts as a computer contractor. I also felt my experiences in industry, as in teaching, provided a good basis for what followed.

Money

Most people who work in the community do so either voluntarily or are employed within a usually restricted framework, often with modest remuneration. It has also struck me that most projects run by the voluntary sector are constrained by a lack of financial resources, although a lot can be accomplished with little money. Because I was able to earn well and invest before entering community work, and my wife was able to develop a full-time nursing career, I could do my work, which comprised a mixture of paid and voluntary assignments, on a high full time basis. If I have a simple, personal view about money, it is to have enough to do what I need (rather than want) to do, which in my case is looking after my family (and the needy when I can) and being able to work, unshackled, as a community activist.

It has been mostly true that money has not been a major factor in many of the decisions I have made in life. While having relatively modest outgoings, I have not always been keen, especially in the early days, to make investments. Unashamedly, I gave a significant amount of my income away to where there was need, and used schemes, where I could reclaim tax, to add value. It became clear early on that the needs around me were many and I saw giving to be an important Christian principle, as well as trusting God (not without struggle) to provide for my daily needs. During the course of my working life, especially as I was beginning to earn well and had modest outgoings (being single helped), I saw the importance of investing and this included private pensions, stocks and shares and property.

If I could have my time all over again, I feel I would do better investing my money and start early. If I could encourage young folk, I would say firstly, get as good an education as they can and then, upon starting their careers, to work hard and invest wisely and early. For some, starting their own business, including employing others, seeking to make a profit, providing it is done ethically, is both viable and desirable. I would stress the need for good stewardship and encourage giving a substantial amount of one's income to where the needs are greatest, realizing how great those needs are and mindful of the biblical mandate "*to lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven*". If becoming a community activist is the goal, I can think of no better way than first becoming established in business. In a strange way, while money should not be an end in itself or even an overriding consideration, it still remains an important factor throughout life; at least that has been my experience.



Me (extremely young) with my mother and father



Me, my wife (in front of me) and son, and our India family

3. Trust Links – Growing Together

The early days

I did not suddenly stop being a computer consultant and then started to become a community worker. Rather, it was a gradual transition. Two people, Andrew Polson and Cherry Higgins, particularly influenced me in those early days and, with both, it had to do with mental health and how this related to spirituality and the work of the church. Andrew had for a long time been a psychiatric patient. He felt that too often the spiritual needs of patients were overlooked and, instead, should be part of the solution, for religious belief was often seen to be part of the problem. Andrew's desire was to see a better Christian / church response to the spiritual needs of people experiencing mental health issues. Cherry, a long time member of Earls Hall Baptist Church, had come to recognize that despite all the social, health and other provisions for people with mental health problems, there were enormous gaps in the system; and the churches, that were often places where such folk could and did seek solace and help, were too often not well enough equipped to deal with the issues that confronted them, and what was needed was a joined up approach that would bring together churches, the "community" and the various statutory services.

I found myself drawn to attend the meetings that Andrew and Cherry convened to air these issues, involving those who might be interested, in order to seek a way forward. One early example of a gap was when Cherry was approached by someone at the job centre regarding a client who could not access benefits because he had not registered with a doctor that could verify his right to claim. I agreed to accompany this man to my doctor's surgery, where he was able to register and get the necessary certificate that made it possible to access benefits. One logical step from those early meetings was arranging conferences that brought together some of the relevant parties to explore what could be done, which I also helped to organize.

Around that time, an opportunity arose where voluntary sector organizations could bid for money the government had made available to undertake activities that might regenerate parts of deprived communities. The Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) scheme attracted a widespread of community initiatives. Cherry saw the possibilities, including transforming a derelict piece of Council owned land into a community garden and involving folk with mental health issues in the project. She

was encouraged and supported by Ros Jack from the Council, who played a big part in compiling the bid. I joined the organizing committee and after a period of around a year we had entered a successful bid and were awarded half a million pounds over six years to carry out a project, which we called Growing Together. The organization behind this, Trust Links, eventually became a registered charity.

Planning the project

The project plan involved a number of key elements:

1. Transforming a piece of derelict land (that had been allotments but had been neglected for many years) into a community garden, allotment and wildlife area, involving folk who were experiencing mental health issues.
2. Supporting individuals who had mental health needs.
3. Providing mental health awareness training to churches, schools and work.
4. Developing a resource centre where we could facilitate the above activities.

Quite early on, we recruited four people to carry the work forward: Project Coordinator (full time – Jan Angelo), Horticulturalist (full time – John Williams), Project Administrator (part time – Angie Callahan) and Network Facilitator (part time – Cherry Higgins). I became chair of the management group.

It is sobering to reflect that when the Growing Together project began, other than having a team in place soon after starting, money to spend and a piece of overgrown wasteland that we could develop, which had over years of neglect become a rubbish dump, there was little else. The early base was a container in the Prospects car park, just across the road to the plot. Additionally, the community shop at Cluny Square allowed us use of their facilities for administration purposes. Later the project found a temporary base in an office in one of the Victoria Avenue tall buildings while seeking out a resource centre. Eventually an empty shop, a couple of hundred yards down the road to the plot, was identified and a lease was signed for us to move in. The work began to refurbish this for use by the project.

While this was happening, the torturous work of securing and clearing the site proceeded, including bringing in portacabins as an operational base and for storing tools. Also, services needed to be brought on-site: water, sewage, electricity, Ethernet and telephone. Much of the work for clearing the site was undertaken by

John and a small team of volunteers, many of whom were also clients with mental health issues. Besides only resorting to outside contractors when necessary (a team doing community service as part of their probation conditions also helped), John was keen to maintain an organic ethos, meaning chemicals could not be used even when they had the potential to considerably reduce the work load. Progress was inevitably slow but, like many of the subsequent developments, the transformation was eventually accomplished, mostly through the efforts of volunteers.

Project coordination

Around a year into the project, I became the Project Coordinator and was to retain that position for the next three years. Jan became the Client Support Worker, looking after the people who were starting to join the project. Cherry stepped down from her role as Network Facilitator and became involved with helping develop Trust Links. We also realized the importance of having a mental health practitioner on board and looked to recruit a Clinical Support Worker. Jackie St. John fulfilled that role at the beginning and, when she moved on, she was replaced by Vanessa Dodds. Also, soon after that, Angie decided to leave and relocate to another area. This for me was an especially hard blow because Angie's administrative abilities were outstanding and it wasn't until much later this role was satisfactorily resumed. I have often ruefully reflected that while I might happily give an *ad hoc* presentation on any subject to any audience at short notice, the thought of having to administer the petty cash system still causes me to break out into a cold sweat!

Looking back over the time I was involved, it is with a sense of pride I can reflect how much was achieved even though often things moved a lot slower than we would have hoped and lots of mistakes were made, but we were generally able to learn from them and move on. The team was well motivated and there was a sense we were breaking new ground and doing something that mattered. There was a lot of good will directed toward us, both those who wanted to support the work and those who wanted to work with us. We did deliver on the main aims of the project. In particular we managed to attract good numbers of clients and volunteers, who benefited from what the project offered (possibly the project's most significant accomplishment), and even had to turn folk away because of the interest. As well as those working in the office, we would typically attract around ten or more people each day, working at the gardens. We managed to attract significant amounts of

additional funding from Cory Environmental and other funders. Especially in the early days, the project was abuzz with ideas of what we could achieve.

The Garden

The garden was painstakingly developed and over the years it became a beautiful ornamental garden, wildlife area and allotments for growing our own vegetables. I would like to think in years to come the garden would be even more beautiful because of the attention to detail in the early days. We acquired our own polytunnel and this enabled us to propagate plants early and grow from seed. The volunteers built their own tea hut from the changing rooms of a local yacht club that was pulled down to make way for a hotel. We also obtained funding to buy and enhance a solid wooden building that was designated to be our sales hut (the idea being we could sell our produce to the general public). People joined us from various areas and situations and we attracted a number of groups, including from local schools. Lots of development took place throughout the whole garden as extra funding was obtained to pay for additional features. In the early days we constructed our own pond as well as a decking area, helped by young people from the Princes Trust. I particularly loved the pond; the only problem was that three times cars came off the road and ended up in it – weird! The final jewel in the crown was a bespoke centre comprising training room, office, kitchen, lounge and toilet facilities (in place after I left the project), thanks to the generosity of the mayor, Roger Weaver, who made it one of his two special charity projects for his year in office, and funding received from Peoples Millions (a lottery fund) as a result of being voted by the public.

The Resource Centre

The Resource Centre became our admin base and was also open to the public. It was where we could have meetings and one to one sessions with clients that came to us for help. I enjoyed the opportunity to be on the road, going out meeting partners and clients and anyone with an interest in the project, and loved to visit the gardens and, when I could manage it, which was not often, muck in with our volunteers in gardening activity. My role allowed me scope to support other SRB projects – and I joined the steering group of one that supported disadvantaged youngsters. I also joined a steering group that oversaw a scheme that allowed for a substantial distribution of government money for projects to help young people.

But a lot of my work was office based, responding to queries, planning ahead, producing reports, meeting people, supervising staff, dealing with suppliers and the public; in fact all the sorts of things one might expect from a Project Coordinator.

Influenced largely by my time in industry, in particular as a quality practitioner, I was keen that the whole operation met the highest possible quality standards. My experience as a technical writer helped in producing newsletters and publicity material. A “poor man’s” quality management methodology, PQASSO, helped. By fulfilling various criteria, which was fairly comprehensive, we managed to achieve the recognition we had reached a certain standard. John Perry from SAVS guided us through the process and was our critical friend, and we were joined by other staff members, partners, clients and volunteers. Areas covered were wide ranging, for example: planning, finance, policies, client feedback, staff training and appraisals, volunteer handling, governance. The main letdown, it seemed to me, was my own administrative weakness and the absence of an Angie-type figure to work through the detail but we did persist. The process was one I relished and provided the context for much of what I did on the project.

Mental Health Awareness Training (MHAT)

Intrinsic to some of those early aspirations that we had aired in our early discussions was that of making the public more aware of mental health issues, including through training. It seemed to us that not only would this help people deal with the issues and be supportive of those experiencing mental health difficulties but that it could have a massive socio-economic impact. The early focus was on rolling out training to churches and we partnered with Interact, a Christian mental health charity based in Chelmsford, to do this. Stuart Kimber, a local vicar and also a member of the management group, arranged the sessions and a number of these took place, with many from different churches benefitting from the training.

It was also our intention to roll out programmes for schools and in the workplace. We did run a day course for the sixth formers at a local comprehensive school (I still recall the sobering impact of the session that related cannabis use to mental ill health). We also arranged training for people in the workplace, especially emphasizing the impact of mental ill health and the employer’s responsibilities. Both the provision of schools and work training had a lot of potential but, with the

project resources being increasingly directed toward supporting the garden operations, we did not continue this line of activity and later, when we stopped providing training to churches, the other MHAT activities stopped at the same time.

Further developments

One of the significant changes to the organization was the appointment of a Chief Executive Officer that took place toward the end of my tenure with Trust Links. Our parent organization was slowly beginning to establish itself on the back of the success of its major project, Growing Together, and wanted to promote its brand and further develop the charity. The appointment of a CEO was a natural development and a necessary one, given that SRB funding was starting to reduce and we were expected to become self-sufficient. Ways had to be found to achieve this and tough decisions needed to be made, including consolidating the services that were provided. Sadly, I became aware in Southend of many good projects stopping when SRB funding ended, unable to make the necessary transition.

Tim Leech, our CEO, went about his task diligently and, while there were areas of disagreement and differences in outlook (*e.g.* Tim did not share my enthusiasm for PQASSO) we got on. I liked his straightforwardness and as one who did not share the faith that inspired the early vision, he was surprisingly empathetic to its Christian ethos. One decision made early on was to close the Resource Centre (it was, after all, costly to run) and relocate to what had been designated to be our sales centre. In a perverse way, I felt some poetic justice was achieved by our being beholden to the Council so long regarding access to money. They were landed with the lease and paying the remaining rent. My role changed, much of it in a positive way. The main change was that besides relinquishing some of my managerial responsibilities, I was also able to shed some of the administrative burden and take a wider view, including looking at areas outside of the Growing Together project.

I particularly enjoyed helping to develop the training side and also the garden, sales and maintenance operation, all vital for our long term future. I continued to have dialogue with partners, present and potential, *e.g.* JobCentrePlus, Southend Adult Community College and the health services. We looked at taking on other areas of land for our garden enterprises. While the taking over of parts of disused allotment sites, *e.g.* Manchester Drive and Norwich Avenue, did not materialize, we did take

over the management of an ancient orchard that was owned by the Council. I also had some involvement with the Carers Breakthrough project (providing support to carers of those with mental health issues) and was able to help safeguard its future funding. One initiative, that did not in then end transpire, was to arrange a conference focusing on the issue of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). This was and remains one of the loose ends I would have liked to tie up. OCD is one of the (many) areas around mental health that is often not properly understood, but where there remains a significant unrecognized, unrealized need.

I decided though that in the end I needed to move on. It is difficult, even now, to articulate all the reasons. The changes in the organization were a factor, to be sure, as were some of the differences in how we should proceed between me, Tim and the trustees. I also felt the intense time I had spent during the previous five years, particularly dealing with vulnerable people on a continuous basis, had taken its toll on me personally and also affected my family. The most painful part was giving up “my baby”, but that was already happening and it needed to. I saw that my role had been that of a pioneer and it was where my interests lay. There were some good people to take the work forward, including our CEO, and a good set of staff and volunteers. I had helped lay what I considered were sound foundations, but it was for others to take it on to a new professional phase. I felt a bit like Moses, who had led the Israelite people out of Egypt to the verge of the Promised Land, yet it fell on Joshua to lead them to possess the land. My main concern was: where was Joshua?

Therapy and work

One of the main aims of the garden project was to provide therapy through horticultural activity to those taking part. The same might be said, to a lesser extent, of those helping out in the office. The client and clinical support roles allowed folk to air their concerns and aspirations to those trained and dedicated to help. Often the needs were deep, even bordering on desperation, and we tried to provide the calm, safe and friendly atmosphere whereby clients could share their concerns and help could be offered. The opportunity for socialization could itself be therapeutic, particularly for those, and there were a number, who were socially isolated. For a time we offered a counselling service, using those training to be fully accredited counsellors, although it was later decided to drop that service. While offering social interventions to address mental health needs, we knew some of those coming to us

were under GPs and psychiatrists, and we generally encouraged folk to maintain those links and, as applicable, take their prescribed medication.

One of the quirks that often cause bemusement for those outside the project was how we regarded all those involved with the project, who were not being paid or seconded from outside, as volunteers. To some extent, the way people came to us had a bearing. A few could be deemed as *pukka* clients because they were referred to us by one of the mental health services, but many came to us by other means, including via churches, and some self-referred. Sometimes the line between being volunteers and clients could become blurred, although it was generally clear to us where to draw that line. By putting the emphasis we did on client support, we usually had a good idea of the needs and capabilities of those coming to us.

The reason we classed everyone as volunteers, including those with major care needs, was because we wanted to maintain personal dignity and were all too aware of the stigma associated with mental ill health. In some ways, we were all clients in terms of having needs, including the staff, and we all needed to be “growing together”. We realized there could be difficulties as a result of taking this stance. One area I recall with amusement, although it was a pain at the time, was the nigh impossible task of carrying out CRB checks for some of our more chaotic lifestyle clients, because our trustees decided that all volunteers must undergo such checks.

Something we never fully resolved was the relationship between our client-volunteers and work. Some were prolific in what they did and would have been a credit to any employer but for their mental health issues holding them back. Some did very little but often benefitted enormously from being with us. Most occupied the middle ground. This consideration was relevant because one of the aims of the project was to move people on, ideally back into paid employment. It was part of the reason we wanted to develop training courses, typically leading to NVQ qualifications in horticulture, and our garden and maintenance team, we would use to provide a service and be paid for the work that was done. The reality was that many, even despite being with us for a long time, were not ready to enter the world of paid work without significant support. One of the areas we never managed to fully resolve was that what we were offering was a brilliant therapeutic service which was hard to fund outside charitable giving and grants, but the way forward, at least from a sustainability perspective, was to become more work focused.

One of the perplexities I could never fully come to terms with was how our client-volunteers related to the benefit system. Most were on benefits and most could do work that could repay their benefits, if that system were around. It seemed to me that many were on the wrong benefit: those on Incapacity Benefit being able to do some work and those on Job Seekers Allowance being unable to hold down a paid job should their seeking (unlikely) succeed, at least without much support and understanding (which was mostly not available). I couldn't help feeling that projects like ours could play a vital role in reducing welfare dependency, although I recognize the practical difficulties. In fact, some came to us via schemes run by the JobCentre, and were often long term unemployed. They would be allocated a work and training placement with the view to eventually finding a permanent job. I also felt our own discussions with the JobCentre (along with health agencies) could hold the key to our future because of the funding potential. We also had people come to us (individually or as part of a supervised group), having had a community service order imposed by the courts. Both groups contributed well toward the project.

One of the last things I did while employed by Trust Links was to write two funding applications, both for significant pots of money. I felt we were well placed meeting the criteria. The first was health funding, to help people with mental health issues by providing meaningful activities. The funders did not place stringent demands, such as finding a job at the end, likely realizing those who would benefit from the schemes being funded would be unlikely to meet such demands. We were unsuccessful despite feeling this was the sort of scheme that would most benefit our clients. The second was European funding, which, despite the bureaucratic hoops one needed to go through, was within our capabilities for accessing. Like the health funding opportunities, it was to help people with mental health issues but the emphasis was on training and work related activities. Demands were placed on the beneficiaries such as entering into paid employment at the end. We were successful, although I later learnt that the project did have difficulties meeting its intended outcomes which, in the light of what I had seen, was not surprising.

Southend Mental Health Directory

One piece of work I found particularly satisfying was researching and compiling the Southend Mental Health Directory. One of the concerns raised at the first Trust Links conference was that it was felt there was a lack of quality information about

helps available for people experiencing Mental Health issues and their carers and this needed to be addressed. Some time previously a directory had been produced, aimed at folk leaving psychiatric hospital to live in the community, but a lot of that information was outdated. I was tasked to produce a new directory and was allowed a wider remit. Not only was I expected to describe the official services available that were specific to mental health, but I could include any service that could be deemed as helpful, as well as provide information on a wide range of issues. I was answerable to a multi-agency Steering Group which provided help and guidance.

The resultant directory was well received and found its way into the hands of many mental health practitioners and all sorts of people interested in the issues. One thing that became apparent was that while there were plenty of services, there were also many gaps. The directory went through two further editions, the last in 2005. I still come across people using the directory that find it helpful, even though a lot of the information has become outdated as things continually change. Having a directory that could be continually updated online was an idea that was not implemented. One area of possible extension that was looked at, and meetings with interested parties did take place, was detailing those services providing social rather than bio-medical interventions, especially but not exclusively psychotherapy (counselling). It was apparent to us there was a big need for such services that were affordable.

Producing the directory provided a great opportunity for finding out what services “out there” were available, including where there were gaps, *e.g.* where to find help in a crisis. In the process, I was able to meet all sorts of people concerned with addressing the issues. One mental health professional in particular provided some excellent leads in the early days. He was very direct in what he said. I recall his job had involved helping army servicemen suffering post traumatic stress in the line of duty. One piece of advice he gave me remained relevant. He advised me not to be taken in by starry eyed, youngish, ambitious professionals, who talked the talk but were near useless when it came to providing the help that was really needed.

Looking back

While it was with sadness I left Trust Links, especially because I felt the best years were potentially ahead of it, I felt it was the right decision. While I continued to take an interest in developments, I felt it right not to be too involved. I was a bit

disappointed that I was not consulted more than I was after I had left but then I also needed to come to terms with the fact that now, others having taken over who had their own ideas of what was needed, they should be allowed to get on with it.

My infrequent return visits to the gardens, usually on an errand, were well received and it was good to see old friends and, increasingly, new people involved with the project. While it received major injections of cash, specifically from the Lottery and the previously impenetrable health sector, it was not enough to maintain operations. Sadly, some staff were later made redundant, including John Williams, the inspirational figure that had the vision for developing the gardens and related so well with the volunteer / clients. While the training and sales sides continued, the providing of garden services, while looking promising, did have difficulties and stopped. As I write, it looks as if the fortunes of the projects have taken an upturn, with various pots of money being made available and a more robust model in place for receiving payment for services. One development has been forming a consortium with other organisations and receiving funding. Looking back, many valuable lessons had been learnt and, if in the unlikely case I was to do something similar in the future, I would do a few things differently in the light of this.

Working so closely with the Council was a mixed blessing. Like much of what we did, we were pioneering new ways of working and inevitably mistakes were made. Some of the council officers we worked with were marvellous, especially when providing timely help that was unexpected. The Parks department was a case in hand and we particularly valued the help of senior figures like Nick Harris and Sybil Wintermann. One of our problems was that we were amateurs and the Growing Together project was developed before Trust Links, its parent. This put us at the mercy of our senior partner, the Council. Sometimes the response seemed to me (and in hindsight still does) more bureaucratic and overbearing than was necessary, tending sometimes to bullying. The fact the Council held the purse strings was one reason why this was so, but it did not always help our cause. Some aspects of Council culture I had difficulty with. Sometimes there was a tendency to want to cover one's back above other considerations or tell us what needed to be done without helping us do what was needed. Sometimes different departments did not communicate with each other. But, it is also clear, the project would not have happened without the Council and the support provided throughout the time when SRB funding was being given, and also in formulating an exit strategy.

The church connection was an interesting one. The fear some had that the faith element could be a barrier, for example in whether we could operate an equal opportunities policy, did not materialize. In fact, issues around faith hardly featured in the work that was done among clients and volunteers. The churches' input to the project was mixed. Some clearly did recognize the value of what we did and gave us substantial practical help, in particular St. Andrews CofE and Earls Hall Baptist. But there was one area that was largely missed. As a project we could do many things but were not equipped (even if we could) to provide enough by way of social, spiritual and emotional support. I felt this was as important as other helps being offered. Only one church, I felt, made significant inroads into this area, and that was Church from Scratch. Not only did they refer two of its members to our project but they provided the important support that often we could not give.

Clearly, working with Trust Links was for me an enormous learning curve and an enriching experience. While there were inevitable disagreements and tensions, these were usually dealt with and ways were found to move forward. Mistakes were made and lessons needed to be, and some were, learnt, which include:

1. Don't apologize for having a Christian ethos. Every organization has values; they may as well be the right ones.
2. When you partner with others, don't be naïve as to think they always have your best interests at heart and will be there when you need them.
3. Be clear what you are about and make sure people you work with are also.
4. Plan for what you do; be realistic and (putting aside the God factor) try to be masters of your own destiny in order to survive and prosper.
5. While organizing may not be your forte, get your organizational act together or it may come back to bite you later on when operating in the harsh world.
6. Be flexible and innovative when working in the community.
7. Have policies and boundaries, especially if working with vulnerable people.
8. Recognize who are the people you need to work with who can do most good.
9. Despite often not featuring high on my priority list, financial and admin considerations may be as important as dealing with clients and volunteers.
10. Always be prepared to think outside the box in order to get things done.
11. Partner and network as much as you can; stick by your guns when needed.
12. Be prepared to "eat humble pie"; don't forget why you are doing this.



Me in the Growing Together Resource Centre



Me and John Williams in the Growing Together gardens (early on)

4. Community-in-Harmony

The idea was born

During my time at Growing Together, myself and Jan Angelo met with two police colleagues, Steve Dewberry and Lynn Fenn, to discuss ways we could work together for the greater good of the wider community. At Growing Together, we were keen to make more people aware of what we do and the issues we were seeking to address and, in particular, we were keen to spread the word to our ethnic minority community, many who did not know about us yet. If the research was to be believed, they had more than their share of mental health issues but were less likely to access services. The police liked the idea of engaging with the wider public, especially those from ethnic minorities, because they wanted to make people aware of their commitment to address issues around domestic violence and other hate crimes and recognized the need to recruit Special Constables from ethnic minority groups. Given that earlier Growing Together had put on a successful open air event, held at the Growing Together gardens, to officially launch the project, it was felt that a further open air event, involving community groups (between us we had several community contacts we could follow up), would be a good idea. We then wrote to representatives from a number of these groups, several attended our first meeting. The idea of Community-in-Harmony was born.

Eighteen months later we held our first event. It was realized organizing the event was a big operation and Growing Together didn't have the capacity for putting this on at such short notice. It gave us time, however, to build up the partnership, and to meet and address the many issues associated with such a big undertaking. Many of the principles and values that later characterized Community-in-Harmony began to be formulated, *e.g.* it was to be a community rather than just an ethnic event and all sections of the community were to be invited. We agreed to a suggestion by a Muslim member to hold the event on a Sunday afternoon to attract Jewish yet allow for Christian attendance. While not showing favour to any religious, political or other ideology, we were keen to involve all the faith groups as well as voluntary and statutory organizations that served the community. We wanted the event to be free and attractive, focusing on friendship and fun, hoping that those who would attend gain a greater acceptance and understanding of the wider community.

Two people, in particular, played a major part in putting on the event and continued to do so for long afterward: Ahmad Khwaja and Sandra Wilkes. Ahmad was actively involved with a number of community undertakings. He was chair of the local multi-cultural association, which understandably had an interest in what was being proposed, given its concern to promote better understanding among the different ethnic groups (and the non-ethnic host community). Ahmad was also a member of the local mosque. He became chair of the organizing committee, which was later to become a registered charity: Southend Community-in-Harmony Partnership (SCHP). Sandra was at that time chair of Trust Links but later stepped down. She continues to be actively involved in SCHP. Her legal expertise, pedantic approach and attention for detail, helpful when formulating policies and applying to become a charity, and her abilities as a fund raiser and being able to handle and account for money transparently (she later became treasurer), made her an excellent foil to my more spontaneous and maverick tendencies. Others who were involved in the early days, who later became trustees of SCHP and have continued to be active since then, were Steve Dewberry, Chris Sternshine, Trish Carpenter, Brenda Smith and Chand Sood, each representing different areas of the community. Included among our stalwart, enthusiastic, older supporters during this period were Iris Balson and Daphne Jopson (representing pensioners) and Majzoub Ali.

The Big Event – early years

I played a support role in organizing the event, which I was able to do alongside my other activities with Trust Links. I was fully occupied helping throughout the day of the event and this set a pattern for the later events. One of the local agencies, tackling drug abuse, seconded one of its workers to coordinate the project and take practical responsibility for many organizational aspects. Amrit Sandhu did this role well for this and for the event held the following year. We chose Gainsborough Park, adjoining the Growing Together gardens, as the event venue, as well as the gardens themselves, which people could also visit should they choose to do so.

The idea of the event was to bring together different sections of the community, such that each would learn from and support the other, and this worked well. We operated a main stage programme, where performances representing a wide genre of music and dance took place, and facing it were two lines of market stalls hosting different organizations that had agreed to take part, who could display information

about what they did and provide activities for people to do. An important element was providing ethnic food and refreshments. We also had a more traditional tea and burger stall, that year provided by a charity representing taxi drivers helping children, and bouncy castles. Logistics like providing power from generators and toilets needed to be taken into consideration and were. The mayor of Southend opened the event (that year it was the deputy, Roger Weaver, who was already supporting Growing Together) and it became a tradition for the subsequent events, when the mayor was also joined by the youth mayor, MPs and other dignitaries. The event went well. We had an enthusiastic set of volunteers, although with some consternation one did put petrol in a diesel generator! The weather was kind. Over a thousand people attended. One tradition, carried on for all the subsequent events, was the opening ceremony, led and accompanied by the Chinese Lion dancers.

One of the pleasant aspects of the event was working with a wide variety of folk who had the welfare of their community at heart. A number continued to do so in the events that followed. One person I particularly appreciated working with was Ray Davy, a local councillor, community officer for Southend United football club and involved already with a number of charities in the town. His knowledge of the local community was excellent, and he was able to pass this on, as well as provide useful contacts when approached. Ray became involved in every subsequent event, helping especially in the areas of stewarding, car parking and site management. One interesting contact was Dave Kovar, the Health Promotion Manager of the local Primary Care Trust. We had already got to know Dave, who had been helpful in the setting up of Trust Links and the Growing Together project. Dave was also helpful in ensuring we had a successful event. Besides encouraging and advising us, he was our Master of Ceremonies on the day. He also managed to find some of the funding from the PCT, needed to put on the Event (a feat that was never to be repeated). We appreciated Dave and his contribution but I felt that may not have been the case with his bosses. As with many a “good guy”, working “outside the box” for the good of the community, he did not seem to get the recognition he deserved. Dave, not long after that, moved back to his native land, Canada.

As a result of the success of the event, it was decided to hold a similar event the following year. With the many contacts having been made and SCHP on its way to becoming a registered charity, and offers of funding being made, we were well placed to put this on as a regular event. We again chose to use Gainsborough Park

and the Growing Together gardens as the venue, and there was a similar pattern to that of the previous year, except the event had become bigger, with more organizations taking part. Many continued to be associated with the event in the years that followed. This time, over two thousand members of the public attended.

The Big Event – later years

For the third SCHP Big Event, I became the paid Event Coordinator, having earlier resigned my job with Trust Links. I was to retain that position for every event that followed. It was felt that Gainsborough Park was too small for what we wanted to do and there were little by way of facilities available. We were able to negotiate use of the Football Centre in Eastwoodbury Lane and the event was held there. Some of the things that we were to refine over the years began here. I sent out application packs to those who might be interested, using the opportunity to get to know those wanting to take part, discussing their requirements and how this fitted in with the bigger picture. I booked what needed to be booked. I visited the site and drew up plans for the day. I arranged for the publicity. I recruited volunteers. I liaised with SCHP members, gave updates and received instructions at our monthly meetings. Fund raising also became an issue. In the early days especially, Southend Council through its voluntary sector grants, Essex Police, Essex Fire Service and Rosca Trust (an independent, local grant-making body) were generous and we were always mindful of other funding opportunities. The event was successful and was bigger than before. We had the same number as before, although we had hoped for more. We considered feedback and noted those things we could do better next time.

The network of those interested and involved again grew. We signed up John Watson and his team to provide the power, PA and stage and thus helped to crack a problem that had been somewhat of a challenge in the previous two events. John also acted as our MC. This proved one of the excellent partnerships we were able to foster over the years. John did the same job for us at all the events that followed. Another new partner we were able to draw in was Extreme Bounce, who provided the bouncy castles, always appreciated by those with young children. They also fitted in well with our event and worked with us on subsequent events.

While we appreciated the support of the people at the centre and being able to use the facilities that were available (including a bar!), it was generally felt this was not

the ideal location for our event. For one thing it was a bit far out for some of our supporters. An opportunity soon arose for us to use Southend High School for Boys as the venue for our event the following year. After discussions internally and with the school, this was agreed. The school had a number of advantages. It was ideally located. It offered a good site and provided facilities: power, water, toilets, rubbish collection, some indoor provision, on-site parking. And it was offered to us free; all we paid for was caretaker overtime. It proved to be a good relationship and we were to use the school for the next five events. There was also a sense of personal nostalgia as it had been my school and was later to become my son's school also.

Having said that, it later appeared that we might have blown our chances! Refining the process began the previous year; we were looking forward to a bigger, better event than that previous. We were always on the lookout for adding new features and that year this included a boys five-a-side football competition (girls were added later). The only damper (literally) was the weather. Up to then we had been spoilt by having sunny days. That year it rained – the whole day! We were faced with the prospect of either calling the event off or coming up with a radical alternative, although this was part of a fairly crude contingency plan. We made the decision to move the event to inside the school, except for bouncy castles (used between the showers) and the football. While it seemed pretty chaotic (and was), it worked after a fashion and we did our best to run a good event, although I am pretty sure it caused more than a few headaches for the superb caretaking staff, and the person in charge of the kitchen was not impressed either after inspecting it the following day.

One memorable incident was a visit by the leader of the Council, Howard Briggs, at the same time that we had made our momentous decision to move operations to inside the school. Howard had got wind of the fact that we had invited the environmental protest group, Camp Bling, to participate at our event. Camp Bling had been a thorn in the Council's side for some time, having occupied an ancient burial site the Council wanted to use for its road widening scheme. Their participation had been discussed at length by the committee and we had decided (although there were dissenting voices) that we would invite Camp Bling because they were members of our community; they offered an interesting environmental perspective, they were not strictly breaking the law and we wanted to maintain our independence. Howard let me know in no uncertain terms his displeasure. I told

him that if he hadn't come to help he may as well leave. He did, but the relationship was not irrevocably broken. Some months later we enjoyed a pint together!

The next four events held at the school are a bit of a blur since a common pattern was established, the main differences being some changes in programmes and participants, and the event kept getting larger each year. Each year we would critically appraise what we did well and what we could do better and we tried to put this into practice for the following year, only to discover new lessons. We adopted a similar site plan, using the main school playing field as the site arena, with the various stalls and activities scattered around the perimeter. One major change is that we decided to dispense with market stalls and have marquees instead. This could also be used if it were to rain. While weather was always an issue, we never had a repeat of the washout we had the first year we were at the school. While, understandably, attendance took a dip that year, it kept picking up thereafter, with over three thousand attending the last two events. The school continued to be an ideal venue and we enjoyed good relationships with the caretaking staff. We were also able to liaise with the school fete committee and share contacts. We were happy to let them use our marquees for the fete that took place the day before.

Because of the free ethos of the event, we needed to raise money to pay for everything. The budget for the later events was in excess of £10,000. Invariably, the money came in, often rather late in the day. Some of the sources mentioned earlier continued to give but we were always on the look out for additional funding, and this came from a variety of sources, usually grant-making bodies. For the last event, we got government originated "Active at 60" funding to support its agenda for getting older people involved with their community. We happily adapted what we did to accommodate the fund's aims and it helped to pay for the event. In later years we encouraged participating organizations to contribute and this helped also.

Besides spending time on a regular basis, between January and June, preparing for the event, on the day I was well occupied from early morning to late at night. Taking care of the logistics for the event, signing up participants for the day, and ensuring the event was suitably publicized (recently a website and social media were used), were some of the many activities that had to be attended to. While my dream was to delegate, there was always so much happening on the day that I felt I needed to attend to and never enough suitable volunteers. Things have improved

and we did have lots of help from SChP trustees and members, and a number who joined us just for the day. For the last couple of events, I was grateful to Peter Marett, my old school chum, for deputizing for me. One of the regular volunteers was Brian Efde, someone who had become quite well known in the town because of his relentless campaigning for better flood defences. He was a great practical help and fun to be with. Ron Alexander and his family were great with some of the practical matters. Often, groups came to help out with volunteering, *e.g.* Lions and Rotary Clubs, and also groups of young people, including Love Southend youth, Army cadets, Southend YMCA and Southend High School for Boys sixth-formers.

Usually at the end of each event I breathe a sigh of relief that it is all over bar the tying up of a few loose ends. I can invariably look back with gratitude for all the goodwill that has been generated and that the day has gone well and people have enjoyed themselves. Given the assortment of people from all sections of the community, this is some achievement. While I get to meet many folk, I am usually too occupied to enjoy what is happening. In the months following, I often receive anecdotal feedback regarding the good accomplished and practical outcomes as a result of the day. As I write, it has been decided not to hold a Big Event in summer 2012 but likely a smaller indoor event will be held later in the year, possibly linking with Black History Month. The long awaited London Olympics and Queen's Jubilee celebrations will have a marked impact on the town's events calendar and, along with funding concerns, this influenced SChP's decision.

Missing Communities – the early project

The Southend Community-in-Harmony Partnership (SChP), with the help of a grant from "Awards for All", has carried out an investigation into some of the missing communities in our town and took part in a number of activities to serve them. We coined the term "missing communities" because these were the people who were largely missing from our annual big (summer) events. The project took place over a fourteen month period, between March 2008 and April 2009. The aim of the project, of which research was a major element, was to profile the missing communities, build relationships, assess needs and facilitate service delivery. Many people contributed to that research from the statutory and voluntary sector and the missing communities themselves.

"Missing Communities" comprises those experiencing various forms of social disadvantage, and our new black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, in particular from Eastern Europe and Black (non-white) Africa. While we wanted to consider all the

many new BME groups, we chose to concentrate on three: Polish, Zimbabwean and Malayalee. Polish and Zimbabwean communities have between 1000 and 2000 people living in Southend and are among the fastest growing groups. The Malayalees comprise less than 300 people but is one example from among the many other new communities in Southend. The 2001 Census indicated that Southend had a BME population of approximately 8%. Currently the figure may be as high as 17%. Many among our “missing communities” do not engage with the wider community or with services that can and want to help. Non-engagement in services by those who could benefit most is a pattern widely seen.

During the project, as well as carrying out extensive research, we did several things to benefit our missing communities: built relationships, co-operated with existing services and linked up with other interested parties, enhanced our Big (summer) Event, put on an event aimed at the Polish community and started a group that now meets weekly, serving the needs of vulnerable single men, mainly of ethnic background. The Final Report details the activities that took place, the research, the methodology, our findings and the conclusions we drew in respect of the needs and recommendations for future activities. It also relates to the “bigger picture” and other work being undertaken. Our conclusions indicated that there are needs in many areas, although it is wise not to generalise and it is possible with the right approach to address many of these needs.

Some resulting issues arising with respect to our missing communities include:

- 1. Mapping ways various statutory and voluntary agencies work and identifying the key players.*
- 2. Viewing the bigger picture, both nationally and locally, and understanding its relevance.*
- 3. Exploring the vital role that is played by the various faith communities.*
- 4. Reflecting on the part played and could be played by the various BME organisations.*
- 5. Trying to identify issues across all the BME groups, not just the three we focused on.*
- 6. Identification of existing data and information and where the gaps are.*
- 7. Considering issues around race hate and domestic violence - are these real or apparent?*
- 8. Understanding asylum seeker issues, including how the system works and the unmet needs.*

9. *Issues concerning English language communication and how understanding could improve.*
10. *Issues about housing and homelessness and how everyone might have decent housing.*
11. *Issues around providing advice and information and how this might be disseminated to all.*
12. *Issues regarding children's education provision and what improvements could be made.*
13. *Issues relating to addressing health inequalities and how these might be addressed.*
14. *Issues of engaging in enterprise and employment and thus improve people's prospects.*
15. *Acknowledging and identifying where there are gaps in our research and what might be done.*
16. *Beginning to explore the possibilities of where we might go from here regarding our findings.*

SCHP remain committed to supporting our missing communities, and will seek opportunities for further funding of this project. We hope that our findings and recommendations will be adopted by other agencies and this will in turn inform the development and enhancement of services locally.

Missing Communities Final Report (June 2009) - Executive Summary

Firstly, I should explain the lengthy quote, which is an extract from the report that was the culmination of the Missing Communities project, and which was a new venture for SCHP. This quote encapsulates the main points around this particular area of my community activism. Following the early successful events, discussion took place within SCHP as to whether there were other ways it could realize its aims. Encouraged by the trustees, in particular Ahmed, we were able to successfully bid for money to fund the Missing Communities project.

This piece of work was very much up my street and addressed an area I was particularly interested in: the poor, disadvantaged, marginalized, disempowered (take your pick) who resided in Southend, as well as those who recently came to live in Southend, the new ethnic minority communities: who they are, what are

their needs, what is being done to help and what could and should be done to help. While, understandably, some streamlining of activities was needed, because of the enormity of the task, it was an activity I set about with relish. It was an intense time for a period of a little over a year, and a great many people were contacted along the way. I felt this was a tremendous opportunity to find out more about my town and meet its “missing communities”. What resulted gave me much satisfaction.

The report was well received. On several occasions, subsequent to its publication, I could speak to others, including those in positions of influence, about the issues. While some recommendations have still to be acted on, some have been and, while many needs remain, and new ones, I would like to think that this piece of work had acted as a catalyst for bringing about necessary change. Not everyone shared this enthusiasm for the report and, while few said so to my face (possibly an English trait), I was to learn there were some who were disgruntled. The main criticism, it seemed, was a perceived subjectivity, although I had tried hard to be accurate and balanced. I suspect too that the report’s direct style may have put the backs up of some, who were more used to something more neutral and accepting the *status quo*.

Other events

One activity identified in the bid that led to the Missing Communities project, was to organize event(s) where we engaged with our missing communities. Early on, we were able to contact the Library, who expressed an interest in working with us toward this end. We identified Southend’s newish Polish community as our target and drew in partners, including a Polish speaker who worked for Turning Tides, and members of the Polish Community, including Jadziah Haughton, a lady who ran the Polish Saturday School and did translation work for the Council. The event was held at the library. It included demonstrating services the library had to offer, Polish song and dance, Polish food, a cultural display and a language class.

A few hundred Polish people attended the event, plus a good number of non-Poles. It was pleasing too that there was a good representation from the Polish Roma community, which not only suffers disadvantage in the host community but is sometimes ostracized by other Poles. One of my hopes is to see the Roma community in Southend more empowered and better integrated into the wider

community. The event was successful, both from a networking perspective and as a means for Polish people to engage with those from the host community.

Subsequent to this event, and spurred on by the Polish event, we agreed to meet to discuss putting on a future event, along similar lines, aimed either at the African community or the Zimbabweans that formed a major part of the African community residing in Southend. While a number of meetings took place, drawing in interested parties, it was decided not to proceed because there was insufficient support for this to happen. Later, an event was put on with an African focus, as part of Black History Month. This was Council led and I had some involvement in the organization. Also, later on, with the formation of the Southend Zimbabwean Network, they were able to arrange events with a cultural and issues emphasis.

The SOS men's group

One of the aims of the Missing Communities project was to deliver learning activities to at least one of the harder to reach groups. Discussions took place with Southend Adult Community College (SACC) to explore ways that together we could deliver on this activity. While there were good ideas that emerged, it was felt that we were not in a position to implement these in the timescale of the project.

At this time, I had met with members of the Reason project, run by Southend Mind. They had been successful in engaging with men of BME origin that were suffering one or other forms of disadvantage. Some had literally been picked up in the nearby Warrior Square (an open green space just off Southend High Street). A number of these men were Muslim, but felt unable to attend the mosque because of their difficult circumstances. Among their number, there were present issues around mental health, substance misuse, immigration, housing, benefits, employment and training. We decided to meet regularly, arranging a two hour session every Thursday afternoon at the Balmoral Community Centre. The purpose was to provide a safe space, an opportunity to socialize in a friendly setting with tea and cake, a chance to meet professionals working in the community who could help address some of the issues, an opportunity to engage in issues in a confidential setting, as well as being a setting for undertaking meaningful activities.

I attended the early meetings and was for a period, when the Missing Communities project ended, the session coordinator. Around twenty men came onto the books

but numbers attending a typical meeting were five to ten. I continue to be involved with the group and call in from time to time to see how the men are getting on. SACC did get involved delivering learning, *e.g.* around IT. One memorable piece of learning was an Arabic class, which involved one of the men, an Arabic speaker, helping the tutor. We still greet each other in Arabic (and with one it is in French). Among activities were chess, draughts and dominoes, often played to a good standard! While some improvements were seen in the lives of individuals, especially as Mind were able to address some of the issues outside this meeting (I also helped on a few occasions), sadly, progress often seems to be slow and is similar to what I had sometimes observed when I was managing the Growing Together project. While it irks to see some revert back to their former destructive lifestyle or lacking in confidence to move forward, it is also good to see progress *e.g.* getting immigration status, finding a home, getting work *etc.* I genuinely enjoy being with and speaking to the men and I am always sad when I see issues not being resolved, even when it is easier, as an onlooker, to see a way forward.

Missing Communities – the later project

SCHP were later able to bid for further funding to continue the Missing Communities project, this time from “Faiths in Action”, and again I was involved in writing the bid, which was successful. While there was a delay in receiving the money, when it did come it fitted in nicely with the ending of my time with Turning Tides and I was available to continue the work. While I did not get the same free hand I did have earlier, and was disappointed that I could not be paid for attending meetings and engaging with others around issues that I felt were intrinsic to the Missing Communities concept, we did agree a number of work packages: support the SOS group, investigate and report on the possibilities of working with the local international prison (Bullwood Hall); *e.g.* how we might help prisoners, especially when released, explore further the contribution faith communities make to serving our missing communities and investigate the issues around the non-Zimbabwean black Africans known to be residing in Southend. Something I was not much involved in, although I had an interest, was supporting a project undertaken by Mara Christie, one of the SCHP members, to investigate the massive contribution of Zimbabweans to Southend’s thriving care industry.

Producing reports represented the culmination of the last three pieces of work. Once again I could undertake with relish the research elements and enjoyed opportunities to engage with folk around each of the areas, hoping also, in some small part, to be able to stimulate further beneficial activities. The reports were generally well received, although some of what I wrote was objected to strongly by one trustee. I was disappointed the impact was less than with the report from the earlier missing communities work and that the trustees chose not to release this into the public domain. Later, I produced a further “Faiths and Africa” report, of my own volition, incorporating some additional material, and this was subsequently released into the public domain. While there was positive feedback, the impact was less than before. It made me realize that we can research and report as much as we like, and people do, but what matters is for people, with a heart to do the work, to do so and make a difference in areas of need that research can only help quantify.

Looking back

Unlike with my time with Trust Links, it is harder to look back on my time with SCHP as I continue to be involved with its activities. I would like to think that SCHP brings something special and unique to the town, since it continues to successfully bring together a wide cross section of the Southend community in a purposeful way and this is being increasingly widely recognized, *e.g.* by it being asked to take part in consultations that somehow relate to SCHP’s aims and objectives. The idea of bringing together disparate groups (sharing information and resources and establishing partnerships), with a common purpose (in one way or another to serve the common good), is one that I find particularly appealing.

A lot of good has been accomplished through the SCHP Big Event and Missing Communities work although, regarding the latter, there is much that still could be done but I do not believe that SCHP has the vision, at least at present, to take many of these outstanding issues forward the way I feel they ought to be. It is quite evident though that the work of SCHP strikes a chord with many and the work it does is highly regarded in the town. I think that the diversity represented by the partnership, while in many ways is its strength, may also be its weakness, especially when trying to work in radically different ways, which I feel is the approach needed to serve the needs of our disadvantaged communities. It is a privilege to have played a big part in these activities though, which I enjoyed

immensely, especially meeting the people and being able to make a difference. Quite often as I go about my business in the town, I meet and engage further with people originally contacted through my work with SCHP.

One particularly personal reflection concerns how I relate my involvement with SCHP with my Christian convictions. I recall being called by an angry individual who attended a church similar to my own. As is often the case, the timing wasn't good. It came at the end of a long day, following a successful event, and I was exhausted. He told me in no uncertain terms how inappropriate it was that I should be doing this work in the first place, particularly citing my involvement with "gays and Muslims"; and, to make it worse, it was on a Sunday. My response was fairly gentle, although I was sorely tempted to give him a piece of my mind. While not expressing themselves in such forthright terms, I am mindful that some of my Christian friends do also have reservations. While not always able to convince such folk, my response tends to be along the lines: I can be an influence for good (and God's kingdom), I can meet and work with non-Christians in ways not otherwise possible, I can encourage Christians (and have done so) to network and serve more widely in the community (I was delighted a Crisis Pregnancy service and Healing on the Streets could make use of such an outlet), I have not had to sacrifice my convictions or integrity (my dealings with all groups have been even-handed), and by thus engaging we can have dialogue and address issues of common concern. I can't help feeling this might have been the approach Jesus would have adopted.

Summing up, bringing the wider community together for the common good is important and SCHP have demonstrated their ability to do so in the past. Rightly, there continues to be questions asked within the organization as to what ought to be its future direction. There are concerns around future funding, widening the membership and network, not wanting to duplicate activities being undertaken elsewhere, forging stronger links and even merging with similar organizations, and doing other activities that relate to SCHP aims. Besides the regular monthly meetings, which are not usually well attended these days, and occasional smaller events, the main focus has been on the Big Event, although often there is a chance to meet with representatives from the wider community who come to these regular meetings and to have profitable dialogue. The question, though, in which direction SCHP ought to continue, will likely be a well aired one in the months to come.



Me and some of the folk of the SOS men's group; Aline is the group's founder



Left – Chinese Lion Dancer, Right – one of our visitors at the Big Event

5. More Community Activities

Southend Homeless Action Network (SHAN)

I am not sure what particularly got me interested especially in homelessness. There are many factors that have to do with social disadvantage and one of them, health, particularly mental health, and the effect this has on issues such as employment and socialization, had been the thing that occupied me in the early part of my community activist career. A couple of incidents were to have a profound effect on my thinking. I came across homeless folk and, to my surprise, meaningful help was not forthcoming because they were single or did not match the strict criteria needed to qualify for help from the Council. It seemed I had discovered another one of those unfilled gaps that had inspired me to do community work in the first place.

At the time, the Council had announced it was writing its homelessness prevention strategy and in the spirit of getting interested partners to contribute, they invited me and I decided to accept the invitation. I was quite vocal in my criticism of the Council, especially when it was made known that some of the hostels it owned that were used to temporarily house homeless folk might be closed and sold off. But I also realized the way forward was to work together to find common solutions. In order to do this, it was necessary to gather facts and involve individuals and organizations working with homeless folk. Encouraged by Paul Slennett, owner of the Southend Christian Bookshop, who had himself spent many hours trying to help people who were in the sorts of situations that I had encountered, SHAN was born.

There were several relevant contacts I had at that time, including those from a wide cross section of organizations having dealings with the “client group” we wanted to help. I invited them to a meeting to discuss the issues and many came. Southend Christian Fellowship, who themselves were working with homeless folk, kindly let us use their Plaza Centre premises and laid on lunch, free of charge, and have since continued to provide this service. When we met, we agreed that we wanted to be a network of interested parties that were there to help homeless people, identify difficulties and opportunities and provide mutual help and encouragement. I became its chair (and chief cook and bottle washer). We decided to meet bi-monthly and, except during the summer holiday period, have continued to do so.

As an organization, we do not have a formal status and do not run projects, which is both an advantage and disadvantage. There have been many informative presentations at our meetings from a wide range of people. The network has grown and the meetings are surprisingly well attended by a wide range of parties. Members are regularly communicated with, generally via email. The biggest achievement, it seems, is that folk are now a lot more aware of what is going on and we can speak with one voice, with good effect, and obtain responses on those things that matter. There remains much work to do. While the numbers of rough sleepers in Southend may be low, the hidden homeless total (sofa surfers, *etc.*) is a lot higher and the number living in dire private sector housing is higher still. It seems to me that the big need is to find ways to support these vulnerable people, who are not only homeless or near homeless but often have huge lifestyle issues. The current economic situation suggests the problem is likely to get worse.

Some of the positive outcomes from working together in the way we do is how two unrelated agencies find they have a common interest and concern and find ways to work together to resolve issues. One of the many small things achieved is getting the Benefits department at the Council to work with those in our network, involved with housing vulnerable clients, to get better access to the benefits system. The work continues as changes being proposed in the system, imposed by government, suggest a reversal to some of these advances might happen, and have a detrimental effect on those whose needs are greatest. Of the recent happenings, the initiative by churches to provide emergency night shelter to otherwise rough sleepers, at different churches on different nights, is an exciting one as was the part SHAN played bringing the relevant agencies together. But there are disappointments. Some work was done considering setting up a project to access funding to support single people trying to access private sector accommodation. While the initial groundwork, including bringing together potential partners, was done, the project did not happen because no organization felt they could take responsibility.

During my Missing Communities work, the issue of asylum seeking and the gaps that seemed so evident were brought to my attention. I appreciated the support given by Derek Edwards, the CAB immigration advisor. I have no doubt that Derek does an excellent job but, I suspect, a frustrating one also. It is one thing to signpost people to where they might find help, but what if that help is not forthcoming? Derek gave me lots of helpful information, including directing me to out-of-the-

town resources. Early in 2010, I along with Ron Wright, a friend from my youth, who is a social landlord, specialising in helping vulnerable clients and who happens to be chair of Southend YMCA, attended a National Asylum Seeker conference in Birmingham. The wider picture that was beginning to emerge in Southend of the issues of a significant number of people with housing needs, but with no recourse to public funds and not being allowed to work because of their asylum status, was confirmed, but also some of the ingenious ways being adopted to provide help.

Thus inspired, I organized, under the auspices of SHAN, and with the support of a number interested in addressing the issues, including the relevant Council department, a full day asylum seeker conference to identify some of the local issues and propose remedies. The Rosca Trust gave us £500 to cover printing and catering costs but otherwise everything else was given freely. The conference was well supported by a wide range of people interested in the subject and many areas were covered including the stories of some of the asylum seekers. As positive as the feedback was, there is much that needs to be done and progress is slow. One initiative that looks promising is for people to offer accommodation to asylum seekers. This and other areas I still hope can be developed further.

Issues around asylum seeking are often not widely understood and there is a great deal of misinformation banded about. Because of the understandable concerns around immigration, in particular the UK has too many immigrants and too little control, politicians from all parties tend to focus on their “robust and fair” immigration policies while ignoring the plight of genuine asylum seekers who have come to the UK to seek refuge. When they are disqualified from receiving benefits or working, it begs the question how they are to live. This is a national disgrace.

Cluny Residents Association (CRA)

I have lived in St. Lukes Road for a large part of my life, ever since my parents moved there in 1967. I was later able to buy my then widowed mother’s council house and later still, the house next door, where myself and my family currently reside. While most of my social links and involvement are with people outside of the neighbourhood, I have a fair bit to do with my neighbours and take an interest in what goes on in the local community. The nearby Cluny Square area had for some time achieved certain notoriety because of the anti-social behaviour that took

place. The three large council owned tenements: Cluny House, Temple Court and Sutton, have over the years attracted more than their fair share of problems.

One of the things that has interested me is seeing the number of initiatives taking place in my local community, although sometimes these are not as joined up as they could be and often only attract small numbers, often of like-minded folk, to the exclusion of the majority. Two professionals working in the area: Jackie Jones (a police support officer) and Chris Sollis (a youth worker) saw, as did I, the need for an effective residents association that involved the folk living in the Cluny Square area, including where I lived. Meetings took place and South Essex Homes, the organization used by the Council to manage their social housing stock, took a lead in trying to set up such an association. I found myself voted in as its first chair although I was aware of the conflicting agendas, and that needed to be addressed.

South Essex Homes had made it clear they wanted a big stake in what went on, in particular focusing on their many tenants living in the area, I felt at the expense of home owners who also had issues and needed to be involved on an equal basis. My particular concern was around the problems seen as a result of youth involved in anti-social behaviour in the open area between Cluny House and where I lived. I had long believed that a joined-up approach involving all the relevant agencies was what was needed to tackle problems. In the end, a compromise was reached, although personally I felt I had to make concessions I would rather not have made. The committee set about its task of trying to involve residents through resident meetings and other means, and beginning to identify and then addressing issues.

I served as chair for three years and, after a two year gap, was recently re-elected to serve, although that was as much down to fearing the association could fold and the good work being done might stop. It is difficult to be objective in ascertaining what good has been achieved, but I believe its achievements have been many. Two notable improvements are the reduction of anti-social behaviour in the Cluny Square area and in improved facilities, *e.g.* in Cluny Park and Cluny House. Some of the credit is down to CRA. CRA have also been successful in bringing agencies that serve the community, *e.g.* police, local schools and churches, health and youth services, other associations, council and councillors, together. I have much enjoyed working with these folk and seeing the benefits as a result. I continue to be aware of the other community initiatives taking place in the area and believe the way

forward is forging closer ties. Attendance at meetings has been mixed and always we would have liked more. It was disappointing we could not interest sufficiently the residents of Temple and Sutton Courts, where the needs seemed to be greatest.

While attendance at residents meetings have overall been lower than hoped, despite the efforts to publicize our activities and invite those, especially from the statutory agencies that are responsible for services in the area, who can help to address issues and concerns raised, some of the social events, *e.g.* fun day in the park, open air Christmas carol concert, have been well supported, with a separate committee having been formed to organize these. This was not my particular interest or *forte* but there were a number among us who were keen. It is difficult to predict what will happen next but it is hoped that the good work that has begun will continue, in order to build strong, healthy communities.

I would like to think that the CRA committee will have all vacancies filled and comprise people enthused and equipped to serve, especially in roles difficult to fill, like secretarial, and that there will be more resident involvement (our last meeting saw this happening). The practical support provided by South Essex Homes continues to be significant and necessary, since CRA is not yet sufficiently empowered to control its own destiny. As I write, I reflect on the recent open meeting where we addressed some of the issues around the two tower blocks, glad that some of its residents attended as a result of personal invitation. A number of issues need to be followed up, and the “right” professionals and community folk came. We intend to support a street party for the forthcoming Jubilee celebrations.

Turning Tides

My being employed by Turning Tides came at a good time. I had just completed my first Missing Communities report and was looking to find paid employment. My nine-month contract working for this project nicely helped to fill that gap. By the time I joined the project, it had been running over two years and had become well established and widely respected in the town. Looking back now on the project, I feel among its most significant achievements were being able to support the fledgling Storehouse project (see below) and its Junior Warden scheme that did provide a variety of activities and had particularly captured the imagination of disadvantaged youngsters in the area. It also helped to engender community spirit.

Turning Tides was based around a concept / agenda called Neighbourhood Management, whereby attention was given to the more socially deprived areas (in Southend this was deemed to be parts of the Kursaal, Milton and Victoria wards) with the view to empowering those communities and linking members to the appropriate statutory and other services. Key to the success of the project has been the work of its neighbourhood wardens. They were tasked with getting to know their community and working with residents and agencies in order to support them.

Besides involvement with the work already being undertaken, I was given the remit of developing some of the areas identified in my Missing Communities report. I was grateful to Tony Payne, the manager, for encouraging and allowing me to do this. Besides being able to research, support and develop some of the homeless activities I had begun to be involved with under SHAN and a few other areas, such as attending community meetings as part of my job, I was able to help set up the Southend Zimbabwean Network (SZN). Turning Tides had already played an important role seeking to understand and engage with some of the newer Eastern European residents, especially Polish. There was an opportunity of doing something similar with Zimbabwean residents. My earlier research had shown there were approaching two thousand Zimbabweans living in Southend. While a number of organizations did exist to serve that community, especially those attending the Zimbabwean majority churches, many operated quite independently and had struggled to gain recognition. There was a degree of mistrust between the different groups, *e.g.* those who were faith motivated and those motivated by politics.

Getting Zimbabwean folk from various sections of the community to come together, along with members from the white majority community who had an interest, and setting up a properly constituted charity, which met to address some of the issues that had earlier been identified, was particularly satisfying. It was good too to see members of SZN engaging with and serving the wider community and involved in supporting members of that community, especially when they were in difficulties. While SZN continues to function, progress has been slow, often due to a lack of organizational acumen and dynamic leadership to move things along.

As I write, I feel SZN is losing some momentum and enthusiasm is waning, but still the needs are there. But there have been positive actions even though some of the dreams, such as having a resource centre as a base for addressing some of the

issues, remain to be realized. Like many among newer ethnic minority communities in Southend, there are issues of adapting to the host community, although some do so very well, and this is often accentuated because a significant number are asylum seekers, either still in the system or having had their claims earlier turned down.

One area I looked at developing was that of grassroots sporting provision, linking this with other programmes to help disadvantaged youth. This was an area I had done some work in, in my roles with SCHP. Our football competition at the Big Event not only attracted teams from various faith groups but also some from the more disadvantaged estates, including my own area, Cluny. It was great to later be able to organize a girls' competition, although the girls did come from more established clubs. When I joined Turning Tides, a program was underway, in partnership with Southend United Football Club Community Education Trust (SUFC CET), working with youth from the Kursaal estate, with some success.

I met with members of the Southend Hindu Association that put on regular sports activities (their boys' five-a-side football teams particularly impressed at the SCHP Big Event because of their sportsmanship). At the time, they had hired the sports hall at a local leisure centre. I was taken with the cross section of the community that was involved and it was great to see old and young, Hindus and Muslims, playing football together. Also being helped by Turning Tides was a Zimbabwean man, trying to get a handball league going. I was able to have discussions with another Zimbabwean man (an asylum seeker), who wanted to establish his own basketball team, attracting disadvantaged youth, as well as those already involved in basketball leagues. I spoke to SUFC CET and others about possible partnership working and accessing some of the funding that was known to be available. In the end, we did not pursue this further and I was soon to leave Turning Tides. I saw this, and still do, as an area of great potential, which I hope can still be developed.

When I joined Turning Tides, it was in a transitional phase, given its three-year funding was soon to come to an end, and the future sustainability of the project was under discussion. While I played a small part in looking at sustainability, it became clear to me there were conflicting views as to the direction the project was to take, particularly as SAVS the organization that hosted the project was looking to take more control and place its future firmly in the hands of the local strategic partnership. It seemed to me, my potential role regarding sustainability could never

be effective without an agreed plan and it was as well I could focus on community development. I sensed some of what went on behind the scenes involved difficult, even acrimonious, exchanges and was relieved not to be much involved.

I came to a view, as with many other community enterprises, opportunities had been missed, including, despite efforts being made, Turning Tides becoming more community led, having stronger leadership and being less beholden to public funding by finding alternative sources of funding and thus supporting a case for more independence. I felt I could have played a more significant part but it was not to be. While my contribution was minor, I felt disappointed at the half-hearted support given to a potentially significant business development project that funding had been obtained for. Turning Tides continues, taking new directions, and I am still able to work with those who are involved in my other community roles.

Storehouse project

I first come across the Storehouse project in my early community activist career. This project is run by the Southend Vineyard church and seemed then to be about giving out food parcels to the homeless and vulnerable. These days it is based at the community centre on the Queensway Estate, which had become vacant after the Council, as a result of cutbacks, decided not to continue with a number of its community centres. Storehouse currently serves some three thousand homeless and other vulnerable folk, including whole families, and their service goes far beyond giving out food parcels. The idea is to help people with their whole of life needs (education, employment, health, housing, *etc.*) and support the local community, although in reality it only touches the surface. Linking up with other agencies is an important part of what they do and this continues to develop. The project is heavily dependent on volunteer help. It operates on a shoe-string budget and relies heavily on gifts, *e.g.* from local supermarkets. It maintains an unashamedly Christian ethos but nevertheless attracts supporters, helpers and clients from all faiths and none.

There are a number of church related projects dealing with homeless issues, *e.g.* the Isaiah and Ark projects. I have had involvement with both, although the Storehouse stands out because of the scale of its operation. I have observed its development over the years and have championed its cause; *e.g.* when the opportunity arose, and I have been a critical friend. I enjoy good relations with some of its key people:

Andy Vincett, Simon Matthews and John Williams. I have helped from time to time in taking forward funding applications. While not always successful, I learnt recently of a successful consortia bid in which I played a part. I find I can use my networking acumen to link the project with those who can help, most recently regarding the Roma community. I make infrequent visits and invariably find clients who I know in my various community capacities, who I can talk to. I recognize the difficulties that can often arise when carrying out work of this ambitious nature but I am heartened that such a work continues to function and, indeed, flourish, and see it as an audacious example of good practice in terms of community activism.

Love Southend

I was first attracted to Love Southend because of its resolve to show the love of God in practical ways to people in the town and attempting to bring together local churches to achieve this. One of the forerunners to this was Praise in the Park, an annual summer event held in one of the large parks in Southend, involving many churches. This had also served as inspiration for the Community-in-Harmony events that followed. For a number of Love Southend's activities, I played a peripheral part although I welcomed the call for united prayer and some of the initiatives that brought together local churches in a common purpose, but it was in the area of urban regeneration and Street Pastors I had most involvement. Love Southend were valued and enthusiastic supporters of the Community-in-Harmony Big Event. While some of the initial enthusiasm for Love Southend has since waned and a number of the larger churches in the town have decided not to be involved, there is enough interest still to suggest there is more to come, and the prayer impetus and support for those working in the wider community to serve others and a feeling that this should involve inter-church initiatives, albeit mainly confined to those of a more Evangelical or Charismatic flavour, remains.

Urban regeneration was the fancy name given to churches, groups of churches or groups of young people belonging to churches in undertaking activities that can serve the local community. Typically, this could involve litter clearing in some area of open space or putting on a party for a needy section of the community, and could be fairly ambitious in what was intended. Later on my own role changed from helping in the co-ordination of activities to that of an informal consultant, helping to advise churches on what might be done in the community, how to go about it and

the appropriate contacts in the Council and other statutory bodies. It seems to me there remains all sorts of opportunities in which the churches could be helped, even though most churches tend to do their own thing when it comes to serving the wider community. Love Southend continues to engage strategically with various agencies, such as the Council and the Police. I am hopeful there is more to come and am happy to be involved in this particular sphere of Christian service.

Street Pastors is a national scheme that involves Christians from different churches in a locality, going out on town centre streets, backed by a prayer team, typically on a Friday and Saturday night, between 9 p.m. and 3 a.m., and engaging with folk on the streets around the High Street, in a practical and non-preachy way. People one meets range from night-club revellers and the night-time economy to the street homeless, and most seem appreciative of the work Street Pastors do. While some have expressed concern that such work might be dangerous, this has not proved to be the case. We try to take sensible precautions and act wisely, and there have been no incidents of violence toward us, although we do occasionally see anti-social behaviour and have sometimes served as peace-makers. Picking up glasses and bottles (sometimes broken) and giving out flip flops to girls walking in bare-feet are two small services we perform. Of particular concern have been unsavoury incidents, usually not in our presence, against rough sleepers and beggars.

I could not get involved in the beginning but later, after completing my training, I joined the team of Street Pastors, rationing myself to going out once a month, and is something I continue to do. I regard it as a privilege to do this work and to do so with Christian folk from many different churches and backgrounds, and particularly remember with special fondness some of the profound and wacky conversations that have taken place in the early hours of the morning. I also appreciate the emphasis on prayer, recognising it is “the Lord’s work”. I sometimes reflect that bringing together such a variety of people for such a practical purpose and in this intense way is one of the most significant ways of promoting Christian unity.

Every tour is different and it ranges from being quiet to very busy. Generally, something interesting, meaningful and unexpected occurs; we often meet with several people on each tour and most are pleased to see us and are grateful when we help. Surprisingly, numbers offering themselves for this work have sometimes been depleted and the opportunities for a team to go out generally exceed numbers

available. I wish Street Pastors were around thirty years previously when, as a single man and keen to serve the community, I would have grabbed the opportunity. I have no doubt that the work could be further developed and I would love to see it more integrated into the mission of the Church and the other activities going on in the town. The relationship with the SOS bus team, serving Southend's night-time economy, and police and some of the workers, like night-club staff, is good and important also. The work is appreciated by the Council and the Police.

Coleman Street Chapel

I started going to the Chapel when aged thirteen, having joined its Covenanter youth group. Except for the time I was studying and working away and for a few years upon my return to Southend, in 1983, I have been involved ever since. The discouraging factor is the numerical decline, from being full for its main Sunday services when I began to ten or less attending nowadays. Like many churches in a similar situation, it has a declining membership and an increasing age profile. Yet in a strange and compelling way, I am drawn to the place and, more importantly, its people, its heritage, and some of its ideas about how church should function, despite the attractions of nearby larger, livelier and more active congregations, a number of which I have good relations with. A lot of the credit goes to Geoff and Val Hayman, and Ron and Dorothy Coker, for keeping the work going and getting on, without fuss or recognition, doing all the practical things that are necessary.

I sometimes feel a tinge of guilt that my community activism has meant that most of what I do does not involve the Chapel and I might have been more instrumental in helping to reverse its fortunes, and I am apprehensive about its future. It seems to me that there could come a time soon when we will have to close the work because there may be no-one to carry it on. For us, as a family, we could join one of those nearby churches that are active in the community, like Southend Christian Fellowship, who share many of my values and hopes. The chapel building could be given over to one of the newer congregations in the town, possibly black majority, who would appreciate being able to use the facilities of the old but well maintained premises. But at the time of writing, we still feel it right to continue our involvement and let events unravel. An idea that is being planned is re-starting Open House, where we show hospitality to folk passing by and further carrying out the original vision of serving people, often the poor, in the neighbourhood.

Because of our limited resources, the number of activities offered is limited and, understandably, it is difficult to attract new blood. Sometimes I am apologetic when we have visitors who are looking for a church to join. Yet it never ceases to surprise me, pleasantly so, as to what does take place, and I feel privileged that I am able to play a part. Besides being involved in teaching and preaching and in the leadership of the church, there are opportunities to develop and support my community activist activities. My role, as missionary secretary, gives me exposure to what missions carry out and what is happening in many areas, home and abroad. While evangelism is the focus, many do also support social work and similar. As well as praying and giving money, we give support in practical ways and, while I cannot usually travel to the overseas mission field, I make it my business to find out what is happening and encourage those who are involved as much as I can.

Increasingly, we are able to use the building, which is strategically placed in the town centre, to host community meetings. One work that has long continued is the still popular parents and toddlers group. Recently, we have hosted two meetings for the Polish Roma community and there is potential to develop these links. Another recent meeting has involved the adjoining Queensway estate, beset as it has been with drug and other issues to do with crime and anti-social behaviour, with a further meeting, by way of a “community circle”, having just taken part so that residents and those with a professional interest can identify matters of concern and seek solutions. This is a relationship we have long wanted to develop and is partly possible because of my wider community involvement. There are many possibilities for community engagement, including supporting the Storehouse. In the context of her work as a Lung Cancer Support Nurse, my wife arranges monthly meetings at the Chapel for a patient support group, and I often help.

Inter-faith forum

I discovered early on that faith organizations have a significant bearing on community work and many harder to reach groups are attracted to faith centres. While I had long been aware of the part Christians do play in community activism, I was less aware of the part played by non-Christian groups. This is particularly pertinent given my involvement with ethnic minority groups, even though many are Christian, and the important part played by other faiths. Early on, when working with Growing Together, I found myself co-opted onto the social committee at the

local mosque. In the years that followed, I have had several involvements with and have got to know a number of the people associated with the mosque.

Perhaps the strangest was sending my son to a class that had been started to prepare children for the 11-plus exam. Two boys who also attended that class are now in my son's class at school. I was later able to link up with the two other mosques in the town, the Orthodox and Reform Jewish synagogues and representatives from the Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist communities. Just prior to starting writing this book, I found myself as an Any Questions panellist at an event held at the Reform synagogue and had been earlier involved in dialogue concerning the vexed questions around the Israel and Palestinian conflict. I reflect wryly, given my neo-fundamentalist background and objection to syncretism, how little I could have foreseen that I would be getting involved in such ways with those from other faiths.

It seemed a natural consequence therefore to become involved with the local inter-faith forum, the purpose of which is to bring together representatives of the main faiths, discuss issues of common concern and find ways to resolve issues, working as appropriate with the local Council and other agencies. The forum typically meets three times a year plus on special occasions as needed. While some progress has been made, it has been widely felt that it has underachieved in realizing these aims, mainly as a result of a lack of interest by the wider faith representation and a possible lack of focus. The forum continues and, particularly in light of a recent successful conference, when the Council and a wide faith representation were able to discuss areas of common interest, it is hoped some of these early aspirations might be realized. Getting a good cross-section of faith representatives involved remains a challenge. Before its demise, I was seconded onto the board of the Local Strategic Partnership to be a voice for the faith communities, but in reality this did not happen, although being able to engage at this level has proved to be helpful.

Equality and Diversity

I am conscious that, in recent years, notions around creating better equality and encouraging wider diversity have gathered momentum and have been a major preoccupation of all the political parties. It might seem that my aversion toward political correctness and my keenness not to be distracted from doing what is needed to uplift the poor and disadvantaged, and focus on doing the right thing

might dissuade me from getting too much involved in these areas. That has not proved so. My work in the community, especially with Community-in-Harmony, has made me realize how relevant some of the concerns are and the current pre-occupation with equality of opportunities helps me do what needs to be done. I have often found folk with interests in this area particularly supportive in what I do.

Early on, when carrying out my Missing Communities work, I realized how important it was to forge links with equality champions from the main organizations that serve the town. I would frequently seek out meetings with key members and attend meetings that seemed relevant. Amit Popat (Southend Hospital, and also Chair of the Equality Board), Stuart Long (South Essex Homes), Peter Hall (Southend Borough Council), Nicky Hart (Local Primary Care Trust) and Emma Makey (Essex Police) are names that readily spring to mind, where there has been a healthy two way exchange regarding issues of common concern. Two regular meetings were with the Data Observatory and Census working groups.

While carrying out my Missing Communities work, I found myself invited onto the Equalities Board. The aim, it seemed to me, was to ensure organizations in the town, starting with the Council, fulfil their obligations regarding equality, most recently encapsulated in the 2010 Equalities Act. While I am not convinced the impact made by the board has been dramatic or far reaching, I believe it has helped to make a positive difference, especially at the Council, and has helped to ensure that the needs of groups that might otherwise be at a disadvantage or discriminated against, are met. With the demise of the Local Strategic Partnership and less Council support, the work and remit of the board has had to be revisited and its future as an independent body with teeth is uncertain. My work with the Equalities Board has meant that regarding the six traditionally recognized equality strands, I believe I have made some headway with all of these:

Faith: This is well described elsewhere.

Race: Besides the work undertaken with individual ethnic minority groups, I have supported the work of organizations that champion the cause of ethnic minority folk generally, in particular combating racism. Sadly, of the three groups I have had some involvement with, Essex Racial Equality Council and the SAVS initiated BME forum no longer operate and the work of the Southend Ethnic Minority Forum does not appear to address these issues. The fledgling Southend Racial

Equality Network (SREN), which I support, shows promise, and has already been instrumental in helping combat racism directed against the Roma community.

Gender: My initial thought was this is the area I am least involved in, although on further reflection I have found myself drawn in through some unexpected ways. Some of my research into domestic violence has led me to link up with some of the women's organizations. The under-reporting of these matters is concerning. As I write this, a friend has pointed out to me a death as a result of domestic violence and the sad fact that the help that could have prevented this tragedy was not forthcoming or sought. I have found myself lending support and encouragement to the inspirational Betty Makoni's Girl Child Network, which empowers girls worldwide. Some of the well verified stories Betty tells, about abuse to girls and women, not just in her native Zimbabwe but other places too, are mind-blowing.

Sexual orientation: While a subject that interests me (see The Gay Conundrum chapter), issues around this area have not featured much in my community work, although I have encouraged LBGT folk and organizations to our Community-in-Harmony event and this has gone down well. I did support an initiative to support the setting up of an LBGT network in the town, although this remains work in progress. I did offer to engage in dialogue from a faith perspective and hope this might take place. One missed opportunity I regret was not agreeing to referee a football game, when asked, between a team of gay men and one from the Council as part of a campaign to tackle homophobia in sport, but another chance may arise!

Disability: My work with mental health is relevant here because until some of the issues around mental health (a form of disability which despite being widespread is often overlooked), such as stigma and disempowerment, are properly addressed, discrimination, albeit in subtle ways, will continue, and folk experiencing mental health problems will continue to be sidelined and suffer. I recognize this is one of many disabilities and have in the course of my work dealt with organizations dealing with multi-disabilities, *e.g.* DIAL, as well as those dealing with specific disabilities. I was able to take part recently in a conference that looked at the wider issues around disability and am mindful of some of the issues affecting disabled folk that can and should be overcome, encouraged by recent changes in legislation.

Age: Ageism is a problem that is often overlooked and still widespread. While not much involved in tackling this issue, although my SCHP "Active at 60" roles did

help, I am aware of several organizations that support older people, and maintain ties with a number even though I am not yet actively involved with any of them.

Regarding other ways in which people are discriminated against or are not afforded equal opportunities, no doubt these can be identified, and I would like to mention two. Firstly, I am mindful that carers often miss out. Not only do they carry the burden of looking after loved ones, often with little support, recognition or reward, but they can lose out in other ways, *e.g.* career advancement, work limitations, stress and financial hardship. While not active in carer organizations, like Carers Forum and Alzheimer's Association, I recognize the excellent work they do. As a carer myself (for my mother) these are matters I can personally relate to.

My greatest concern, when it comes to groups where equality considerations could and should apply, is for the socially disadvantaged, covering groups as diverse as the long term unemployed, victims of domestic violence, asylum seekers, new immigrants, single parent families, people on low incomes, people living in poor housing, those with mental health issues and the child victims of the above. Their situation often puts them at a disadvantage and it is not easy to see how they are always afforded equal opportunities, despite the law insisting they should be and service providers wanting to comply and recognising some of the needs.

While only obliquely related to this issue, I wrote a book after my son sat his 11-plus exam, entitled "A Parent's Guide to the 11-plus". I felt Southend has excellent grammar schools and (mostly) not so good non-grammar schools, and it tends to be children of the socially advantaged that go to grammar schools and children of the socially disadvantaged that go to non-grammar schools. I wanted to redress the balance, although I realise there are many other instances of societal inequalities. I was disappointed that when I tried to interest the Council in my project, there was an air of defensive dismissiveness. While education is one of many areas of concern, I fear there is a growing gulf between the "haves" and "have nots" and is partly why I tend more to empathise with the latter group. While not favouring any political party on the issue, if this is not addressed there will be dire consequences.

Black and minority ethnic organizations

My associations with Southend's BME community go back to my early activist days. My early links were with South Asians (mainly originating from British

India) and to a lesser extent those of Chinese origin. There was a smattering of other ethnic groups, although surprisingly few West Indians. That profile has changed significantly as the BME population has increased and those from other ethnic groups have begun to arrive in the town, *e.g.* from Eastern Europe, especially Poland, Black Africa, especially Zimbabwe, and smaller groupings *e.g.* the Filipinos and the Malayalees (originating from Kerala, South India), often attracted to the town by the prospect of a nursing job at Southend Hospital and, later having become established, bringing over their families to join them. Sometimes the women were the initial bread winners, and this coming from patriarchal cultures, where women's rights are often less advanced compared with the U.K.

While my early days with SCHK gave me a good opportunity to work with the more established communities, I found the focus shifting as we embarked on our Missing Communities project, which has been described elsewhere. That is not to say there are not issues regarding the more established BME communities. I believe racism, for example, is more common than often realised. But many of the issues BME folk face surface when they first come to the UK, seeking to be established and integrated into the wider community. It can be more complex than that, for example as some come to join already established communities. One attitude that initially surprised me, and how widespread it is I can't say, is an element of snobbery among the more established BME folk. I found most of my support for helping the newer BME communities did not come from the more established ones.

I am conscious that while I have tried to maintain individual contacts, *e.g.* as a result of my Missing Communities and Turning Tides work, I have had to restrict my involvement with communities and organizations when this has fallen outside of my paid remit, and have regrettably had to pass by opportunities to get more involved for this reason. It seems to me that some communities organize themselves well with modest outside support. Some need more support and there are often opportunities for people to help who have the right skills and attitude. Even though I don't get involved as much as I could, I continue to maintain an interest in what goes on. Where appropriate, I have lent my support, *e.g.* through my networking and other expertise, when it seems appropriate.

One particular interest I have is with some of the members of Southend's Zimbabwean community and with the Southend Zimbabwean Association (SZN). I

chose not to be too involved though, but I am glad to have continued as an individual member, attending meetings that are convened and, if I can, supporting its activities. Sometimes I can do this on an individual basis (some documented elsewhere). One intervention that I was able to help facilitate was linking two Zimbabwean pastors with Medical Missionary News, a charity my church supports that sends containers with supplies to various countries where there are needs. One container was sent to help hospitals in the needy Bulawayo district of Zimbabwe. I have a little involvement with other individuals and feel I have helped a little.

I find it interesting that various opportunities arise from time to time, often coming out of the blue. I think of a meeting I had, after a chance conversation, in MacDonalds with some of the committee that represented Southend's Lingala speaking community (originating from the two Congos and Angola) as to how they should go about setting up as a charity to help their community. Often I find the best approach is to share what I do know, suggest things that need to be done which can be done, and people with relevant skills and expertise that can be approached. I have mentioned elsewhere my involvement with the Roma community. I suspect I have not heard the last of this, as there remains significant unfinished business.

The BME organization that I have had most involvement with, besides SZN, is the Southend Malayalee Association (SMA), partly because my wife is Malayalee and we know some of its members. As an interested friend, I recognize the value of having such an association. The Malayalee community in Southend has grown from just a few ten years ago to maybe two to three hundred now. The desire to get together as friends and maintain language and cultural identity, especially for the children, is strong as is that of wanting to support the host community, although there is scope for more of this to happen and stepping outside of the cultural comfort zone. Besides giving advice in the early days, helping publicize activities and inviting dignitaries, such as the mayor, my involvement has been quite limited, but the enthusiasm and organizational acumen that exists has meant the group has grown and prospered with fairly minimal external help. I do attend some of its cultural events and was quite wowed recently by its latest musical extravaganza. The Malayalees are, in the main, a good example of people coming from another country / culture who have fitted in and adapted to the life of the host community. There are other small, recently established, new BME groups. One, the Filipinos, I have had positive dealings with, *e.g.* when organizing the SCHP Big Event.

Non-problematic white ethnic British people

Much of my community activism has concentrated on helping the poor and the disadvantaged and those of black minority ethnicity (BME) origins, especially the newer immigrants. The question has sometimes been asked: why do I concentrate my efforts on these groups and not on the white ethnic British majority, who are hard working, pay their taxes, take care of their families and sort out their own problems? A well known councillor asked me that question at a residents' meeting I was addressing and he was later criticized when this was reported in the local newspaper. I remember discussing this with my manager, Tony Payne, while I was working with Turning Tides. Tony told me to go and find out how we might redress the balance and report back. I don't recall coming back with much that was profound and, while most of the efforts of the project were focused on the minority, rather than the majority of the community, there were good reasons for this. One practical one is that most funding is directed at helping harder to reach groups.

A healthy society needs to look after its poorer and more vulnerable members and show hospitality to foreigners in its midst. Equally, it must not neglect the majority and should provide support when needed and opportunities for them to thrive and to contribute to that society (which many in my experience do). While many of the people I work with are in the minority camp, there are many who aren't and without their support I would not be able to carry out my work. I take the view that being active in the community requires me to work on behalf of all its members, whichever category they might be placed in. There is also the vexed question of national identity and how this can be maintained, especially in the light of the more recent influx of foreigners. I believe that immigration needs to be controlled, and also in social justice for asylum seekers (discussed elsewhere), yet I believe we need a national identity, based on traditional values linked to our Judaeo-Christian heritage. However, I don't often get the opportunity to articulate this too often, but would be happy to contribute to the debate, which is one that needs to happen.

Counselling

I am not a counsellor, and besides experience and research, what I know is as a result of attending some courses, besides which I have no desire to be a counsellor. The issue of counselling was a recurring theme during my time with Trust Links

and, to a lesser extent, since then. It has become apparent that many of the people I help in the community could benefit from some form of counselling, but which one and how to go about it? If I were to elaborate further, I would soon find myself out of my depth. While I did some work researching the whole business of counselling provision, I am not sure if and when I would pick this up. I have felt personally drawn to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) because of my interest in OCD and that this might be most personally beneficial. As for counselling people, while I have not done this in the formal sense, I often speak with people with needs, often psychological ones, and try, as best I can, to listen, empathize and empower and, if asked for and it is appropriate, offer advice. Sometimes, I have felt like a priest hearing confession but, like the priest, what I hear remains in the confession booth.

The following are some of my not entirely orthodox thoughts on the matter:

1. Many people could benefit from counselling, although many don't.
2. Most people who go into the counselling field do so with good intentions and usually they are not money motivated.
3. There is a need for trained counsellors and services available at a low cost.
4. Good practice involves comprehensive training, supervision and abiding by appropriate, and often stringent, codes of conduct and setting of boundaries.
5. Counselling should take place in a confidential and non-threatening setting.
6. To counsel is by definition about offering advice and guidance, although there is sometimes a reluctance to do so, I think because of the prevalence of notions of relativism and a fear of breaching a person's human rights.
7. Inappropriate counselling can be harmful, yet many more people suffer as a result of not receiving appropriate counsel.
8. While most of us will likely not end up as trained counsellors, most of us can and should listen, empathize and empower when the opportunity arises.
9. While there is a need to counsel, the bigger need is for the person that has issues to take responsibility and work through these, and helping to make this happen is perhaps one of the biggest challenges of community work.
10. My underlying principles continue to be truth and righteousness.

Campaigning

Some would want to equate community activism with campaigning. For me, campaigning was but a small part of what I did when being active in the

community. If I were to be an active campaigner, the issue I might choose is one of social justice although there are many issues I feel strongly about. I considered that in the main I should concentrate on things needing to be done in the community and trying to get others involved. I felt if I were to become too involved in campaigning, it could be a possible hindrance to what was needed at the time and could even alienate the very people I needed to engage with, although I also felt I needed to challenge the powers that be when this was called for, *e.g.* failures in tackling homeless and asylum issues and around the area of mental health. I don't believe this has proved detrimental to partnership working and I don't regret my actions. I have resisted staying comfortably silent when things needed to be said, but it is important to choose the time and the place, engage in a seemly way and be attentive to the issues rather than personalities. I continue to follow the fortunes of others campaigning on these issues and, if I can, give support, albeit limited, as it usually seems the right action is to provide appropriate practical help when I could.

I realized early on that a fine balance was needed and if campaigning was undertaken it needed to be done in a winsome way and based on intelligence rather than emotion. Often the campaigning that was done was to support what had been initiated elsewhere rather than being the initiator, and always, if representing an organization, it was important to differentiate one's own views from that of the organization, although on a number of occasions I was able to make representation on behalf of some or other organization. It seemed to me perfectly proper, within these constraints, to engage in the democratic process and to approach those who might be able to help, and I have done so on several occasions. Sometimes campaigning takes place without it being realized. Often I find I am telling statutory partners what is going on in the voluntary sector and about organizations and the very recognition that results serve to benefit those voluntary organizations.

Not related to any particular job I did in the community, although at the time I was the project coordinator of the Growing Together project, I found, when the Conservative-led Southend Borough Council announced its aspiration to become a super casino town, I was thrust into the forefront of those opposing this move and this even made front page headlines in the local newspaper. The Council saw expanding its casino provision as a means of revitalizing the town's economy and was in line with the then Labour government's policy of linking super casinos with regeneration. Not only did I object on moral grounds, for example it might increase

mental illness and social deprivation, the very issues my project sought to address, I also believed there were strong economic arguments why this would have been wrong for the town. Soon after making headline news, I met with the then mayor, Roger Weaver, who informed me that some of the local casino interests were supporting his mayoral charity, where half of the proceeds raised would be donated to our Training Centre project. To Roger's credit, and that of the casino bosses, they continued to support the project, but it was a salutary lesson to me about the need to be mindful of the possible consequences of sticking one's neck out.

Further activities

I hope I have described the main activities I have been and am involved with in my community activism, but I am conscious there are more and many of these have been initiated by other people. There are many organizations and initiatives not mentioned, mostly based in Southend, where I played some small part, often by lending support and sharing my networking acumen when this is appropriate. For example, I have often found myself working with organizations like the YMCA, HARP, CAB, SREN, plus a string of other community initiatives, *e.g.* volunteering on the Route One bus in providing Christian education resources to local schools, and have valued their contribution to my own work. In my discussions with people in these organizations, it became evident that there were opportunities to develop partnerships and programmes to benefit the community, and these were often talked about. I hope that one day some of these ideas may get to be implemented.

One organization, SAVS, already mentioned, has cropped up several times during my community activist career. The resources it offers and information it provides are particularly useful. Not mentioned so far is the role played by Barry Millar, its funding officer, in not only helping identify and tap into funding opportunities but in supporting new initiatives, in particular advising new organizations how to set up. I enjoyed Barry's dry wit and his insistence that in order to benefit from his advice people needed to come to him with a plan. One concern I did have is that, during my community activist career, it seemed SAVS were often conveniently perceived by statutory agencies as being the gatekeepers of and gateways to the rest of the voluntary sector. This has not been the case although it might have helped if SAVS had done more to empower and be a voice for voluntary groups. Like any organization, its effectiveness depends on those who belong to it and influence its

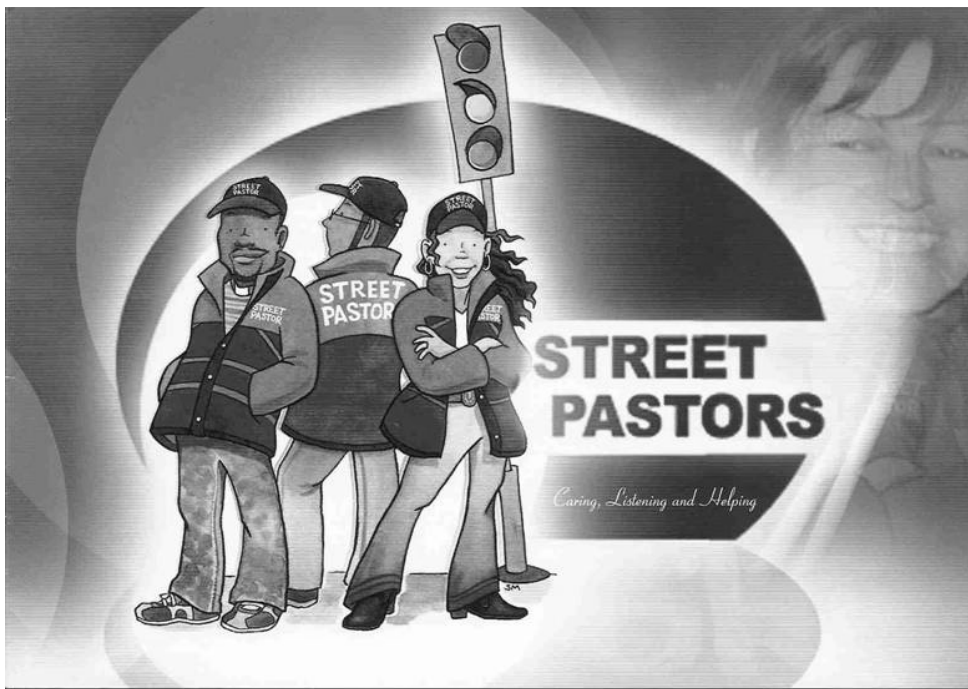
decisions, and SAVS has to accommodate a wide range of disparate interests. I felt that wrong perceptions held by those holding the purse strings may have been detrimental to the cause of voluntary agencies, including faith groups, which ought to be building capacity and working more effectively with the statutory sector.

More recently, initiatives have sprung out of government ideas to do with community cohesion and the Big Society, and I have taken part in some of the training, conferences and consultations. Perhaps the most significant outcomes from such activities are seeing members of the community being empowered and becoming community champions and, as a result, partnership working taking place. With some optimism, I see the work of community champions progressing, and my hope is that we will see things happening that will have a lasting impact. An activity I will probably be involved with, as much because of the networking opportunities it provides, is a cohesion conference soon to be put on in Southend. If the Big Society, the latest in a long line of government fads, is to be on the conference's agenda, no doubt attractive because of the prospect of getting things done cheaply, it should be realized this is not a new idea and the concept of getting the whole community working together in partnership, in the interest of those who are part of it, is in essence what community activism should be all about.

There are two areas where many focus their community related efforts. Firstly, there are often unheralded good works, carried out individually or as part of a group, to help an individual or groups. The opportunities are immense and the accumulative value of such actions cannot be under-estimated. Everyone has an opportunity to engage in this way, according to their opportunities and circumstances. The other is giving to charity. Like many, I watch with interest TV shows such as Comic Relief and Children in Need and I am often amazed and impressed at people's generosity. Frequently I find someone I know who is undertaking some tortuous activity so they can be sponsored for raising money for some or other good cause and, like many, I am happy to help. My frustration is, when it comes to giving, I am limited in what I can do, given that the number of good causes needing money is large, and I need to be selective. Personally, when I do give, I try to be involved in other ways as well. While I am sceptical of those who preach "charity begins at home" and ignore the needs around them, it is true that doing good to those who are closest to us is where we should begin. However we approach it, these are some of the many ways we can support our community.



Coleman Street Chapel – many of my spiritual roots lie here



Street pastors – what I get up to for one night in each month

6. The Bigger Picture

Faith and no faith

As stated in the introduction, faith has been an important motivating factor behind much of what I have done and continue to do in the community. During the course of my work, I have become aware of a wide range of views and emotions engendered that relate, at least in part, to the question of faith. While these are often suppressed, they have an important bearing on what happens. Some are staunch secularists who see religion in terms of belief in imaginary fairies (Dawkins) or the cause of the worst conflicts and atrocities in the world (Hitchins). In contrast, others are fired up by their religion and it is their rationale for doing good, and this is seen as something that helps them to make sense of the world. I identify more with the latter group. I suspect much, maybe most, of what I have described earlier people without faith could identify with and can happily commend. I also recognize that good and bad, as far as benefitting the community goes, exist in both groups. One of my interests is to work with others in the community and to look for common ground whenever possible, and more often than not it is there to be found.

It seems to me that those I work with could be placed into one of four categories:

1. Those without a religious faith.
2. Those with a religious faith, but it is not Christian.
3. Christians who do not share my theological outlook (at least in those areas I regard as being particularly important).
4. Christians who do share my theological outlook.

Before becoming fully embroiled in community activism, I tended to mostly associate with those who were to be found among the fourth of these categories. Since then I have been associated, it seems on an equal basis, with those in each of the four categories. I have no regrets and have found this to be, in the main, a positive experience. Whichever way one reaches a view of how best we can serve our community, what matters is that such a view can be reached and, as a consequence of coming to a shared view of what needs to happen, there is considerable scope for doing certain things together that might also benefit others, although some things, for example those that relate to faith, may not be possible.

I feel I need to explain my motives, if only to allay fears that I may have a hidden agenda. I am also aware that some who share many of my Christian views would look upon my forays into the community disapprovingly, feeling that my focus, when it comes to unpaid work, should be on more “spiritual” activities and that I am in danger of compromising my testimony. My response is that it remains my top priority to aspire to live as God intends, including telling folk about God’s wonderful gift of salvation (His Son, Jesus) and the need to prepare for the life to come. I see no contradiction between this and the more earthly preoccupations that form much of my community activism. I quite like the William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, idea of giving out tracts wrapped around sandwiches. Are we (Christians) not required to show compassion to the poor, to espouse the cause of social justice and seek the coming of God’s kingdom? I see these all going hand in hand. Sometimes, Christians are slow in availing themselves of the opportunities to work with others for the common good. While I would never be underhanded about my actions, I see giving spiritual sustenance and material support as being complementary and recognize the limitations on dealing with outward (material) needs while neglecting inward (spiritual) needs and also, the other way round.

Some would see faith as merely a private matter. I beg to differ. While Christians, or any other religious group come to that, do not have the right to impose their beliefs on or expect preferential treatment from those that do not share them, they do have a duty to seek the good of their community. While a tremendous amount of good is done by those who have the best interests of their community at heart, including many who do not share my beliefs, there is an underlying malaise in our society as a result of it not having a sound ethical basis, which is in part a result of turning its back on its Judaeo-Christian heritage and replacing it with aggressive atheism, militant secularism and woolly notions of multi-culturalism. The consequences are, in my view, potentially catastrophic for our nation. This should not go unchallenged. But neither should those that disagree with those motivated by faith be ostracized or ignored by people of faith, but rather common ground be sought, and this frequently epitomizes my own approach to community work. The pluralism now existing in our society gives rise to both threats and opportunities.

When two years back the Westminster Declaration was announced, I was pleased to add my signature. I agreed the areas of being able to exercise Christian conscience, the right to life (anti-abortion, euthanasia, embryo research, *etc.*) and

traditional (one man and one woman) marriage to be important values, and still do, especially in a day when such notions are increasingly being challenged. It is not a matter of those from the Christian right (conservative) imposing its priorities over those from the Christian left (liberal). While this can be a murky area, social justice and how we can and must uplift the marginalized and socially disadvantaged in our society (sometimes seen as the domain of the Christian left) are also matters of great importance. I hope I can continue to champion both agendas.

The voluntary sector

When it comes to the different types of groups that I have worked with in my community activism, there are three that spring to mind: the statutory sector, private and public companies, and the voluntary sector, usually charities (including faith communities). All might involve volunteers (those who are not paid for what they do) although volunteering tends to happen mostly in the voluntary sector. Increasingly, constituent organizations work together for specific activities and voluntary agencies are being commissioned by statutory agencies to provide a service. Most of my work has had links with voluntary organizations.

It never ceases to amaze me how many voluntary groups do exist in Southend. It must be several hundred and I discover new ones all the time. Most do a good job serving the needs of the community and, on top of this, there are numerous individuals that work, without expectation of financial gain, on behalf of others. There is no doubt in my mind this represents many billions of pounds in community capital that is not provided by government or profit making sources. Indeed, if this enormous potential is wisely put to use, it could turn our national fortunes. Strengths and weaknesses of and opportunities and threats (SWOT) to the voluntary sector are things that particularly intrigue me. I would like to think that in a small way my own experience and insights as a community activist can help voluntary sector organizations to do what they set out to do and enhance their capacity to deliver. Many voluntary organizations, especially the smaller ones, are run by amateurs (not meant as a derogatory comment) and operate on a shoestring, depending on the goodwill of volunteers and well wishers. Increasingly, paid staff carry out the work that might not otherwise get done because of the limitations of volunteers. Sometimes, when professionalism takes over, the heart of what an organization offers is affected. The challenge is invariably to have a good balance.

Often a lack of capacity precludes them from doing more or finding more innovative ways to fulfil their vision. They are often under-represented at strategic planning level. When I attend meetings, I sometimes, mischievously, reflect on the remuneration senior council officials receive, compared with voluntary sector representatives. Funding is often a precarious business, especially when the demands on the funding cake of grant making bodies increase when the size of that cake decreases. Often there is significant reliance on charitable giving and this adds to the uncertainty. Many an excellent organization has had to close through lack of funding. Often their work goes unrecognized by statutory services, even when it is in the common interest for the work to continue and even increase because of the potential contribution to be made to the community. Often voluntary organizations lose out when statutory organizations tender for services, although there has been improvements in the process and I have played a part in this. Human nature, being what it is, does not want to pay for services already provided and, how ever much we may want to change the system, many voluntary organizations carry out services that are not paid for out of taxpayer money, even when the possibility to do so exists, because of why they are driven. Often services are duplicated elsewhere and opportunities for partnership working go missing. Often there is an astounding ignorance by those in the various sectors regarding these matters.

While I have observed changes during my time, in the early days I was often under the impression that voluntary organizations were being ignored, humoured and looked down upon by the much better resourced and more savvy statutory organizations, and too often they were taken for granted. The current economic crisis, leading to statutory organizations cutting back on and streamlining services, creates opportunities, as does the current ideology of partnership working and Big Society, and legislative trends, as seen in the 2011 Localism Act. The opportunities for creating social enterprises (typically in the past this has been confined to charity shops), or tendering to Council, health and other commissioning bodies for contracts to provide value added services to achieve targets and address need, is a significant one. This creates challenges but opportunities also, especially for those who are intent on addressing unmet needs, of which there are many.

Clearly, every organization is different, and some are content to simply do on a small scale those things members want to do that particularly interest them, that are within their powers and the resources available. Many fit in voluntary with other

full time commitments and I wish there were more who did this. Invariably, there is scope for doing more and this requires taking stock of the situation and exploring the possibilities. If I were to offer generic advice, based on over ten, fairly intense, years working with and observing several voluntary organizations, often at first hand, and seeing what has worked and what hasn't, I would suggest the following:

1. Be clear on the aims and objectives of your organization and your capacity to achieve these. (Time spent, even agonizing, over this, is time well spent.)
2. Seek help and advice from critical friends - there are plenty out there. (If you are based in Southend, join SAVS.)
3. Plan for what you want to do in order to achieve your goals. (It helps to write it down, and treat what you write as a living, breathing document.)
4. In particular, consider what it is that is needed in order to achieve your goals. (Sometimes it may mean becoming a registered charity – not as foreboding as it sounds, in order to access funding.)
5. Be open to the funding possibilities. (While fund-raising can seem a tedious business, it is a necessary one too. Be creative and think how to control your own destiny, *e.g.* social enterprise, providing services that can be paid for.)
6. Be transparent and accountable, especially in matters of money. (Personally, I have been good at getting money and knowing how to spend it, but I am reluctant, when expected to handle it, to do so – I value having good help!)
7. Be prepared to network and be on the look out for opportunities to do so. (My own experience has been that this is a vital means of making people aware of what you are doing and getting people to join you that can help.)
8. Be open to partnership possibilities. (While this might restrict what you do, more often than not the possibilities this creates more than compensate.)
9. Remember your volunteers. (They are the lifeblood of your organization and all that it does – treat them well and this will reap dividends!)
10. Remember your clients. (They are the reason for you doing what you do.)

The statutory sector

Although I have not worked for the Council (or other statutory body), unless you count my stint as an eighteen year old working as a council dustman, I have had opportunity to observe at close hand what takes place and have on many occasions partnered with Southend Council and used their services. The statutory sector plays

a major role serving the community and potentially a major role partnering with the voluntary sector in order for the community to be served and, if done prudently, can result in enormous savings. While it is easy to be critical, and I have often been so (often justifiably), I have become increasingly aware of the constraints the statutory sector work under and the pressure to be seen to be serving the whole community without favouring any. While statutory agencies are democratically accountable, the process in order to bring about change can be slow and torturous and, invariably, one has to contend with conflicting priorities and bureaucratic hoops. It is also evident that the consequence of our being part of a global village means we are beholden to factors we have little control over, especially in times of recession. Being part of the European Union is also a limiting factor.

The first priority of any statutory organization (we are told) is to fulfil its statutory obligations and this usually takes up a large chunk of its resources. Only then can it do the desirable things that, while not mandatory, often make a huge difference to people. When there are cuts in budget, these vital services are often affected, often with devastating results. If I have a hobby horse, it is to realize the potential of statutory and voluntary bodies working more together for the common good. Statutory organizations can provide enormous resources and expertise and they often commission services. Voluntary organizations can deliver services and, given how it uses volunteers and the relationships they often enjoy with the community it serves, may do so more cost effectively than if a statutory agency were to solely take on the responsibility. I have found that when my dealings with statutory organizations have been particularly fruitful, it has come down to the qualities of individual officers and having already established good relationships. Sometimes there have been barriers to productive working and there remains scope for identifying and addressing these. While I need to be careful in what I say, the following are a few of my thoughts on the different statutory organizations that serve Southend, based on my dealings with them as a community activist.

Southend Borough Council

Of all the statutory agencies, this is the most significant and also the one whose “tentacles” are most far reaching, given its ability to be gateways to those agencies that might address a particular issue affecting the community. During the course of my work in the community, I have had cause to work with many Council

departments, at many different levels, and the results have been described in other places. It is clear to me that it is possible, and indeed desirable, to do business with the Council when working in and on behalf of the community, even though it can sometimes be frustrating when solutions that seem obvious (at least to me) are not seen to be so by one's Council counterparts. I believe the paradigm we are presently in, in which I have played a part, linked to the wider picture, allows for the possibilities to do more things that benefit the community and increasingly allow for involvement by and direction from those who sit outside the Council.

The work carried out by councillors is interesting. While I have sometimes had the impression that Council officers do what they decide is best, hiding behind rules and regulations and humouring councillors when challenged, as in the television sitcom, *Yes Minister*, it is also true that councillors do wield influence, and rightly so, because they have the democratic mandate to do so from the people who elected them and whom the Council are meant to serve. One thing that has become apparent is that councillors have the same mixture of human strengths and weaknesses as anyone else. While most serve with good intentions, some are more effective and diligent than others. Many have their preferred causes to champion and their blind spots too. My policy has been to work with councillors from all shades of the political spectrum if as a result the wider community is benefited.

One aspect I quite like about councillor practice is each year one of their numbers is elected as mayor. The role of mayor is largely a ceremonial one and where political neutrality is expected. Their main job is to be involved in community functions as the town's first citizen. During my time as a community activist, I got to meet all the mayors and was involved in a good number of the functions they attended. It often struck me that their exposure to grassroots activities was an important element in our civic life, and one that has significant ramifications. Another observation, and I am not sure how relevant this is, is that the body of councillors do not as a whole represent the diversity that exists in Southend and there is a clear lack of representatives from the younger generation. The work done by the Youth Council, though, is encouraging and ought to bode well for the future.

When in recent years the Council took a lead role in setting up the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP – Southend Together), whose remit was to bring together the various statutory and voluntary agencies that operated in the town, and explore

ways to work together to create a better Southend, it seemed a step in the right direction, and one I could play a part in and did. Its demise could be put down to cutbacks in funding and change in government priorities but also might put into question the Council's willingness for working this way. I felt in my short involvement there was too little devolvement of power and it seemed to me that the LSP was Council-dominated along with other statutory bodies and some who should have been involved, who could have contributed more, were not. But the LSP did help increase the appetite and raise possibilities for partnership working.

There are two sections of the Council which I have had considerable dealings and, often, it is not widely recognized these are Council led. They are Southend Adult Community College (SACC) and Southend Library. SACC's remit is to deliver adult learning in the community and it is their interest in helping harder to reach groups that has particularly drawn me. Instances of working together have already been described and the relationships have invariably been positive, although I feel there is a lot of unrealized potential to serve the more vulnerable members of our community. Southend Library has come as a pleasant surprise in terms of relevance. Given my particular community interests, it seems incredible how often the Library did get involved. Simon Wallace, its community officer, is an example of a Council official whose contribution toward getting things done and passing on helpful information and contacts has been monumental. Given the service the Library provides, especially to more vulnerable members of Southend's community, any cutbacks in what they do could have a devastating impact.

Essex Police

The police that serve Southend do a wonderful job, at least from where I sit. Most of my interactions with police officers at all levels have been positive, especially when it comes to community work. Not previously mentioned is my being part of its Independent Advisory Group (IAG) that seeks to provide a platform for the police and members of various sections of the community to share information and insights. In the main, this has not been particularly successful, mostly due to the low level of community participation. If I have a criticism, it is when the police engage with the community, *e.g.* community meetings such as Neighbourhood Action Panels, it is on their terms and where they take the lead. I sometimes felt that being part of a partnership paradigm, *e.g.* to tackle drug abuse and anti-social

behaviour on the Queensway estate, was not on the police radar unless they were in the driving seat. Having said that, the contribution made by the police, in community initiatives I have been involved with, have usually been helpful.

Essex Fire and Rescue Service

When I started community work, I hadn't realized the potential for the Fire Service to play the part they did. They have, and they have made valuable contributions, especially when I was organizing the Community-in-Harmony Big Event.

South East Essex Primary Care Trust (PCT)

While PCTs are currently under threat, their role still needs to be fulfilled. They have been a relevant factor throughout my time as a community activist because of their powers to commission services related to health (although my success rate is low), their initiatives and remit regarding health promotion and the expertise they can sometimes offer. Most of these have been important factors in my community activities. While some of my projects have received PCT funding, given the impact these projects have on health in the wider community this has often seemed to me to be derisory, even though individual officers have been helpful as well as helping provide and responding appreciatively to information I have been able to provide. Part of the problem has been that when the funding cake is sliced and money is given to primary care services such as GP surgeries and secondary mental health services provided by South Essex Partnership Trust (SEPT) and other health services provided by Southend Hospital, we are left with the crumbs. Of the services the PCT do commission, I have had little to do with GP surgeries other than as a patient and carer, at least not in my professional capacity.

Secondary health providers

While I would not have expected to be involved with Southend Hospital, I have been, dealing on a regular and positive basis with its equality officer, Amit Popat regarding diversity issues, and its membership manager, David Fairweather, in its attempt to widen hospital membership. As for SEPT, that involvement has mainly been when I was with Trust Links but they have also been supportive of the SCHP Big Event. SEPT was helpful providing supervision for the Growing Together Clinical Support Worker and referring clients. They were coy (although later that changed) about funding its services, claiming it was not their remit to do so.

Other agencies

Other agencies that have been relevant during my time as a community activist include JobCentrePlus, especially relevant in my time with Trust Links, and sections of the criminal justice system, Benefits Agency and Environment Agency.

Churches

Churches are one of the many components that make up the voluntary sector and are significant given the contribution they make to serving their communities, way in excess of what could be expected given their numbers. Historically, before the advent of the welfare state, it was the church (at least the section supported by and in collusion with the rulers of the day) that dealt out most of the welfare provision going and did things to benefit the wider community, often taken for granted nowadays, such as providing education. While motives may have been mixed, genuine compassion would still have been a major one. Even the section of the church that was not supported by government has generally played a massive role and, looking at other parts of the world, that still appears to be the case. While the church in the UK no longer occupies a privileged position it once did and is often dismissed as being irrelevant or worse, it still carries on the time honoured tradition of caring for the poor and disadvantaged, even amidst all the statutory provisions. Despite losing its favoured status, churches can still play a crucial future role.

Individual church members, as well as those from other faith communities, often make significant contributions in one or more of the voluntary organizations that exist, even when they do so in their own right. But it is the part played by individual churches and churches working together for the good of the wider community that I wish to turn to. Not only is this a matter of considerable personal interest and an ongoing concern and theme throughout my community activism, I see this as significant, not only in terms of what has taken place in the past, but what might (could and should) take place in the future. Projects like the Storehouse (serving over three thousand homeless and other vulnerable persons) give me hope.

It should also be realized that not only do voluntary organizations involve church goers in what they do but that a number, including some who are major service providers in the town, were founded by Christians and have been largely influenced by a Christian ethos and have relied on church contributions to carry on the work.

In Southend, these include: CAB and YMCA (now part of national networks) and (still locally based) Havens Hospices, HARP and Trust Links. All, to varying extents, have gone away from the strict Christian principles that once governed their activities, mainly in order to widen their appeal and, some would say, they may have lost some of their original heart and soul by doing so.

At the recent faith consultation I was involved in, it became clear when looking at the varying activities that could be undertaken by faith groups, that many / most were being carried out by individual churches, often several doing the same activity for their locality, *e.g.* running parent and toddler groups and youth clubs. Usually, these activities can be seen as part of the mission of the church that is running them but they are usually open to those who are not members or otherwise associated with the church. There is some working with other churches and agencies but there is usually scope for a lot more. While some of these activities can be seen as part of a bigger programme to evangelize or (for the more sceptical) an opportunity to recruit and retain church members, my perception is that in most cases these are provided with no strings attached and are for those of all faiths and none.

During the course of my dealings with churches of all doctrinal shades and operational flavours, while I have been impressed with the extent and quality of the work that is carried out, I do recognise there is scope to do so much more.

Some hopes and concerns for what might (could or should) be are:

1. Churches need to be passionate for God's glory above all other considerations, including doing things for the good of the community.
2. Too often, it seems that a dedicated minority has to bear the brunt of the burden for doing most of the work that needs doing.
3. Even among churches that see the value of working with other churches and non church agencies, there is a reluctance to do things together and look further afield, and too often opportunities are missed as a result.
4. There is scope for churches to do better in studying the signs of the times, knowing its own community and understanding the wider world context.
5. There is always a need to be *wise as serpents* and *harmless as doves*.
6. Statutory agencies often do not recognize or understand or make use of what churches can and do offer and the same may be true the other way round.

7. Some churches do not receive funding that could be made available because of barriers around faith, a lack of capacity to go down this route and a preoccupation of funders for the beneficiaries to meet unrealistic targets.
8. Huge unmet needs exist in communities around drug misuse, homelessness, asylum seeking, young and older people provision, those with mental health needs, *etc.* and, while a lot is being done, a lot more could still be done.
9. Those who undertake such work are in danger of burning out. It is beholden on churches to affirm and take care of those in the front line.
10. Sometimes worthwhile activities stop when no plans exist for continuation.
11. There is always a need to learn from others and opportunities to partner with other organizations (including non-believers) if this is appropriate.
12. Churches should not neglect their traditional roles, such as preaching the gospel, practicing truth and righteousness, prayer and worshipping God.

While it is one thing to lament what is not being done, and state what ought to be done, I see my own role as one of encouraging churches to do what they are already doing or could, should or would like to do. Working with disparate partners creates challenges and there are pitfalls, including elements that would want to restrict activities and place conditions because of an antipathy toward Christian belief, and this is one of the many challenges faced. Notwithstanding, I would encourage churches to strengthen the spiritual life that should undergird all they do, while at the same time venturing *outside the camp* and outside their comfort zones.

As I reflect on churches engaging in wider society, I think of one of my passions, which is to study church history, in particular inspirational figures from the past. In one period of more intense study, I considered a number from the nineteenth century, representing the whole ecclesiological spectrum, all with faults and foibles, but each having something to say for then and now. Studying figures from the past has proved a great personal motivator, and is a constant reminder that *there is nothing new under the sun*. One of these was Thomas Chalmers (1780 - 1847), a Scottish mathematician, political economist, and a leader of the Free Church of Scotland. What particularly attracted me to Dr. Chalmers was that not only did he make significant contributions in all these areas, but he had a view of the church that it could be the main agency in dealing with welfare issues, particularly with respect to the poor, and that he achieved, because of his influence and drive, a degree of success in so doing. How this can be applied in today's diverse multi-

cultural and secular society with its complex needs and relationships, it is difficult to say. But if Dr. Chalmers is right, there is a part churches can play, more significant than is commonly realised, if only to address the enormous gaps in services all around us and, more radically, be more cost effective in meeting needs.

The global community

The word “community” is one that is frequently used and, as is often the case, when words are used that have more than one definition, different people will have different ideas as to what is meant. I loosely use the term in relation to a group of people that have something in common, such as living or working in a given locality, which can range from a small office to a large company or part of a street to a whole town, for example, or belonging to the same special interest group for a whole range of purposes. The effectiveness of what a community does or the extent to which people in a community interact may be immaterial to our being part of it, as is our sense of belonging. Our own contribution to the communities to which we each belong can be anything from major to zilch. The fact I call myself a community activist is that being active in the community (sometimes many, all at the same time), working in and on behalf of each, is a major part of what I do for a living. All of us can be active but how active is a matter of individual choice.

If we were to analyze the communities we belong to, it could be something along the lines of a circle of friends, neighbours in our street, people we work with, supporters of our local football team, those we drink with at the local pub, people that attend our church, people we interact with on Facebook or Twitter (or, in my case, those I play chess online), and so on. We could see each of these groups as a circle, sometimes overlapping and, when we superimpose the circles of those included in our own circles, the picture rapidly becomes extremely complex. The fact of the matter is what we do (or do not do) affects others and the choices we make may well depend on things like our values, preferences and circumstances. As a community activist, I find myself recognizing that I need to work with what is available and what I have to do out of necessity, and trying to discern what matters most and what might have the greatest impact. While I hope people reading this might be enthused to be community activists, I realize each will have his/her own values and interests, which could be a lot different from my own.

When I reflect that most of my community activism takes place in Southend, I wonder how much of it could be transported elsewhere. Certainly there are lessons that apply universally and a lot more so for similar situations elsewhere. Also there are lessons we can learn from elsewhere and another key to successful community activism is to learn from others and apply what one learns to one's own situation. An interesting question is how we apply this to countries that are different, *e.g.* oppressive government, institutional corruption, no welfare state, greater poverty, different belief systems. Communities exist everywhere and, even if circumstances are not conducive, they, or importantly the people in them, can be served by those resolved to do so. I refer to the notion of service intentionally as community activism should be about serving others. As I write on a borrowed laptop, in a small village in India, I find it is the case here that there is a positive sense of community.

What has become more apparent in recent years is the notion of a global community. What is done in one place can affect what happens in another, even if it is on the other side of the world. Inequality, social injustices, differing life styles and economic profiles and conflicting ideologies, are all confounding factors but do not deflect from our interdependence and responsibilities. While people reading this will have their own ideas, it seems that our actions in our own tiny corner of the planet ought to take into account, at least a little, the impact these have further afield and to form part of the legacy we leave to generations that come after us.

For many, being good husbands / wives, children / parents, neighbours / friends / colleagues, employers / employees / students, *etc.* could be the extent of their community activism yet this could still be significant and remains important. We need to decide what we should / ought to do and how, why, when and where we do it. I have no doubt the opportunity for doing those things that matter is enormous.

What next?

The main brainstorming, framework and writing a substantial chunk of the contents of this book has taken place during a one month (December 2011) visit to India. For much of that time, we stayed in our family house near Trivandrum. Besides spending time receiving a steady trickle of visitors: family members, old friends and new acquaintances, I have been able to spend leisurely days reading, teaching English to my nieces and playing badminton with my son. My reading material has

included the Bible, the Koran, *Operation World* (an account of what is happening in every country in the world along with prayer points), *Gathering in His Name* (a history of the Brethren – the church movement I am most acquainted with and belong to), a book written by an Anglican vicar relating to his experiences with his local Romany community, the Charles Dickens classic *The Tale of Two Cities*, Shakespeare’s play *As You Like it*, a book of Indian short stories and daily Indian newspapers, including my beloved *Sportstar*. I have been able to reflect on my subject while away from the hurly burly experienced when at home.

Just prior to my trip, I had organized an event for SCHP that was aimed at people aged around sixty. This was linked to the present government’s Big Society agenda, including getting older people to be more active in their communities. It involved linking up the older people and organizations they could be involved in, e.g. as volunteers. The day after the “Active at 60” event, I was involved in helping with another event, one facilitated by the equalities officer at the Council but where myself and others were able to help in the organization. We held a consultation, involving the Council and members (mostly movers and shakers) from the various faith communities, in order to find out what the faith communities do and how best to work together in the interests of the wider community. While the events were not related, they each represented areas of my professional interest, were in their own way successful and were the latest episodes in a continuing stream of community activities I have undertaken, invariably building on things that occurred previously.

When I returned to the UK, I did do so uncertain about what my future will be, in particular my community involvement, but mindful that there is a lot still that needs to be done and burdened that the church will play its full part in meeting the needs and realising its potential. Looking at my diary, there were several meetings scheduled for the following few weeks with SCHP, SHAN, CRA, SBC and Love Southend, among others. These have since taken place and new meetings have been scheduled. Each will, no doubt, lead to further opportunities for community activism, although sometimes I will have to say “no”. Even so, it is satisfying to pass on what I know to others and support their community activism. Despite having items on my “to do” list, it is not clear how I am going to continue to be active in my communities, to make that all-important difference, but by the grace of God, and with the support of others, I look forward to responding to the challenge.

The daily business of living and chores, taking care of my family, and earning a living, will, no doubt, occupy a significant amount of my time. As for the rest of it, I hope to continue where I left off and where I need to be going, regarding my own career as a community activist. I am pretty sure that while, as writing this account has shown, my mistakes have been many and my character flaws have been many also, that I can continue to play a part in helping my communities. Thanks to my community involvement and the “mixed bag” I have dealt with, I have learnt a lot about myself and others, for example the need to recognize everyone has a perspective that needs to be understood and addressed if possible.

On the first day of a new year, 2012, the text I preached on in my church was: *“That I may know him (Christ), and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings”* (Philippians 3v10). While this might seem to have little to do with community activism, it does reflect my own priorities, including those which drive me as a community activist. While I recognize the futility of making new years resolutions, only to break them a few days later, upon reflection, I can say what my priorities are between now and when I die:

1. Honour God.
2. Organize my affairs.
3. Take care of my family.
4. Complete a book started fifteen years ago, based on the Song of Solomon.
5. Engage in the public square about what is right and what should happen.
6. Pass on what I know about community to those who might do most good.
7. Help my church and other churches respond to issues raised in this book.
8. Champion the causes of homeless folk and asylum seekers.
9. Take a wider (national / international) view regarding community activism.
10. Tie up loose ends regarding my activities in the community thus far.

Life is not straightforward and things change, often unexpectedly and swiftly, but I would like to carry on along the above lines, realizing that while there is much that I can't do, there is also much that I can do and must do. It has been a fascinating journey so far and one that still has many unexpected twists and turns. While I look forward to heaven, I would like to continue that journey for a little bit longer.

7. Politics, Education, Enterprise and Community

I have already stated in the earlier account some of the ways politics, education and enterprise have impacted on my community activist career. While all these could provide fruitful subjects for any would-be activist, these are not areas that I have dealt directly with to a significant extent, even though I recognize their importance.

Politics

I am not sure if this a compliment or a criticism but more than once I have been accused of being political in my dealings, not from the perspective of being allied to any political party but rather due to my having strong views on what needed to happen and using my influence and the prevailing circumstances to further that end. I am also aware that if you impose or force your ideas this can alienate the very people you need to work with. Sometimes a fine balance is needed and I have come to see that while I need to be honest and open in my dealings, it is also necessary to try and accommodate, if at all possible, those who have different views to my own.

When it comes to party politics, I can imagine that I might have taken forward my interest that began when I was a young teenager to beyond my youth and I would have become politically active, if I hadn't become a Christian. As it was, the Christians I associated with in those early days were antipathetic to the idea of being actively involved in politics, although I suspected the majority were closet Conservatives. While I have never felt a strong urge to be politically involved after that, I have taken a keen interest in the issues and have often held views, although some of these and the importance attached to different issues have changed over the years. I sometimes ruefully reflect that if I were to weigh the different parties and their correct stances on issues that matter then the one that weighs more is the one who gets my vote, although it is a lot more complex than that and things change. Besides, I tend to take the view that I vote for the person whose values I align most with and who will do most good, irrespective of his/her political views or party.

As a community activist, I am mindful of the preoccupations and policies of successive governments, as these effect the way I approach community work, for example regarding funding opportunities, although my overriding mantra is to do what needs to be done and where I can be of most use (not always an easy call).

The current government's Big Society and localism agendas compares interestingly with the regeneration and social cohesion agendas of the previous government and the equalities agenda that both seem keen on, and I find it is important to be aware of all of these and to differentiate rhetoric from action.

There are many issues affecting government, whatever party is in power. The huge debt crisis and how to revitalize the economy without spending money we don't have is one vitally important issue. As an activist, I am mindful of the power of the community to do good (or not) and solve its own problems (or not) and watch with interest how successive governments contribute (or not). While I do not want to diminish the importance of politicians, and the democratic process, I feel their ability to effect meaningful change is often less than that is claimed. The effects of the global economy and events, the tie in with Europe, and the moral and spiritual crisis, which I firmly believe is current now, are all reasons. While the British system is far from perfect, it is a lot better than in many other countries and if making a difference to our community is something we believe in then being active in politics is one way this can be achieved providing the pitfalls and limitations are rightly acknowledged. As a community activist, I have got to know and work with politicians from all parties, mainly at a local level where the considerations may be different, and this is something I do not regret and am happy to continue to do. One activity I have enjoyed is to organise and sometimes chair political hustings.

Education

“For over a decade, we have spent millions of hours building the largest encyclopedia in human history. Right now, the U.S. Congress is considering legislation that could fatally damage the free and open Internet Education”. This was the message given when accessing the Wikipedia website on 18/01/12. I turn to Wikipedia when there are gaps in my knowledge, recognising its limitations. The example is pertinent because if I were to extend my activist portfolio, making knowledge freely available on the internet, within sensible constraints, might be one thing I would take up, and I have. I mention this because in the ten minute conversation I had in the car that day, taking my thirteen year old son to school, the matter arose because my son could not earlier access parts of the internet from his laptop. Issues like accessing the internet, the democratic process, when a bill becomes an act (both US and UK), extradition treaties and the 2010 Arab Spring

also featured in our conversation. How much my knowledge will benefit my son, I can't say (being a better dad might do more good), but I feel a certain vindication in my attempts at self-education and that it may be contributing to a better world.

As earlier intimated, education has been my lifelong passion and, while not being able to continue as a teacher was a matter of mild regret, looking back I can see other opportunities, like being a community activist, which may not have otherwise happened. While what I learnt at school was significantly important, particularly bearing in mind how much more you take in when young, what I learnt after leaving school was even more so. I see learning as being a lifelong activity and, in my community activist roles, have sought at every opportunity to encourage others to learn. As I indicated earlier, my learning activities go far beyond what I did to obtain my three degrees after leaving school. I only wish I had learnt more and nowadays any qualification at the end is nigh irrelevant. The last course I attended was recently; it was a two-day one on mental health first aid, which did provide me with a qualification but, importantly, greater understanding of this vital area.

Learning has far wider ramifications than merely being the vocational matter we are often led to believe. I see it extending into the academic, social, physical, aesthetic and spiritual realms also. My views on education tend to be radical insofar I am not over-keen on qualifications, although these do help, and shun utilitarian notions. Education alone does not make us better people. During my community activist career, what a person knows, and especially the qualifications obtained, seem often to bear little relationship to a person's quality of life, and without making use of that learning, others will not derive benefit. I like what the ancients valued: wisdom, which includes a noble, moral, discerning quality. You can be wise and educationally unqualified, and foolish with all the education in the world!

Reflecting on my own school education, I can see much that was positive. I still look back on my last year at junior school as being the highlight because I had an inspirational teacher and a lot of what we did was creative by nature and furthered our learning horizons. Much of what followed was more mundane, although there were some highlights and, when it came to the latter part of my school journey, the focus was on passing 'O' and 'A' Levels. What schools should be doing or don't do can give rise to many arguments. These days, there appears to be a wide choice available to parents although, for many, the reality is that it has to be the local

catchment school or a less popular school if further afield. In terms of social cohesion, this can and does create resentment among some, although I am inclined to think many parents have been sadly conditioned to accept the *status quo*. While academic standards are one important concern, so are discipline and the teaching of good manners. Schools can also be an ideological battlefield, with those on the left seeing it as a vehicle to bring about social change and those on the right deferring to the parent's right to choose. I have a lot of sympathy with parents who opt out of the school system for those reasons and have, from time to time, found myself empathizing with and supporting parents who home-school their children.

When I look at the school curriculum, it seems the subject content being taught nowadays, *e.g. English, Maths, Science, French, History, Geography, etc.*, are similar to what it was in "my day". Some subjects have changed in nature and there appear more options children can choose from and resources that schools can use. One subject that particularly interests me is Religious Education (RE). RE these days is not as I once knew it. While I am sad and feel children miss out because the Bible seems hardly ever taught, the approach based around philosophy and ethics provides new opportunities. I like the fact Citizenship is taught and see this in a positive light when recruiting the next generation of community activists. I like too that careers are taught from an earlier age and, while I can't comment how effective this is, I see it as a good opportunity for children to consider their future sooner.

A new subject, which was hardly around when I was at school, is Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education which, again, I broadly welcome. My only reservation, and with other aspects of the curriculum come to that, is if the teaching imposes a particular slant or world-view that I feel conflicts with my own. It could be imposing ideas or inflicting images that might not be helpful; for example teaching sex education to children of junior school age or teaching the mechanics of sex but not ethical and moral matters. While I believe I can compensate for this by the way I teach my child at home, I am not sure others will cope so well. Schools can be the place where conflicting ideologies vie for acceptance. My view is that while I believe a school's ethos is important, and is why I broadly support faith schools, education should be about seeking after truth and that is what schools should encourage, including, within safeguards, exploring a wide range of views. My other thought is that the most important education a child receives should be that gained in his/her own family setting, and it is this that I would like to promote.

Enterprise

Before becoming a full time community activist, I ran a computer consultancy business for twelve years. Before that I was a software engineer and before that a teacher, having had a number of part-time jobs before then, while as a student. I count myself fortunate the jobs gave me a good living and, for much of that time, I was fairly happy doing what I did. While often happier and more useful doing what I do now, it hasn't been as financially lucrative. While many accept it is going to be like this, I would like to help address some of the inconsistencies so that future community activists are not deterred, for a "*labourer is worthy of his wages*".

My philosophy of work is simple; this is what the good Lord said we should do, right from the beginning, and the thought that people are idle (and often paid to be so) when they could be working seems perverse. Equally, anyone who works well, whatever their job or remuneration, is doing a good thing. While helping people into paid employment was only a small part of what I did as a community activist, it was just as important as getting people healthy, housed and educated. Often one of the biggest challenges of community work is supporting people who do not work for pay and encouraging them to be productive, sometimes with a view to finding paid work. It is one reason why I am an enthusiastic voluntary sector advocate.

One of the attractions of the voluntary sector is that much can be done with little money but usually somewhere along the line money is a factor and some of the implications of this are discussed elsewhere. Besides, the matter of how politicians use tax-payers money and how voluntary organizations (usually charities) are funded (also discussed elsewhere), there is the role enterprise and entrepreneurs might play. While supportive of the idea of people doing well in the world of work, I especially admire those who see their work as a way of serving the community. Besides obvious examples, like doctors and teachers, it seems to me that most who do their job well are supporting the community, and those who create businesses that employ others and plough back some of their profits into the community, especially so. Occasionally, during my community activism, I come across such people, and they have had my admiration and support. I regard myself as a social entrepreneur because of some of the things I do and have done and, whether the opportunity will arise where I can create a further business with these things in mind remains to be seen. But I will certainly want to support others who do so.

Faithworks Charter

We will provide an inclusive service to our community by:

- 1. Serving and respecting all people regardless of their gender, marital status, race, ethnic origin, religion, age, sexual orientation or physical and mental capability.*
- 2. Acknowledging the freedom of people of all faiths or none both to hold and to express their beliefs and convictions respectfully and freely, within the limits of the UK law.*
- 3. Never imposing our Christian faith or belief on others.*
- 4. Developing partnerships with other churches, voluntary groups, statutory agencies and local government wherever appropriate in order to create an effective, integrated service for our clients avoiding unnecessary duplication of resources.*
- 5. Providing and publicising regular consultation and reporting forums to client groups and the wider community regarding the effective development and delivery of our work and our responsiveness to their actual needs.*

We will value all individuals in a way consistent with our distinctive Christian ethos by:

- 1. Creating an environment where clients, volunteers and employees are encouraged and enabled to realise their potential.*
- 2. Assisting our clients, volunteers and employees to take responsibility for their own learning and development, both through formal and informal training opportunities and ongoing assessment.*
- 3. Developing an organisational culture in which individuals learn from any mistakes made and where excellence and innovation are encouraged and rewarded.*
- 4. Promoting the value of a balanced, holistic lifestyle as part of each individual's overall personal development.*
- 5. Abiding by the requirements of employment law in the UK and implementing best employment practices and procedures designed to maintain our distinctive ethos and values.*

We will develop a professional approach to management, practice and funding by:

- 1. Implementing a management structure, which fosters and encourages participation by staff at all levels in order to facilitate the fulfilment of the project's goals and visions.*

2. *Setting and reviewing measurable and timed outcomes annually, and regularly to evaluate and monitor our management structure and output, recognising the need for ongoing organisational flexibility, development and good stewardship of resources.*
3. *Doing all we can to ensure that we are not over-dependent on any one source of funding.*
4. *Implementing best practice procedures in terms of Health and Safety and Child Protection in order to protect our staff, volunteers and clients.*
5. *Handling our funding in a transparent and accountable way and to give relevant people from outside our organisation/project reasonable access to our accounts.*

(quoted from www.faithworks.info)

When Mark Churchward, a local pastor, pointed this out, I was encouraged other Christians see the importance of being active in the community, including working collaboratively. This charter provides a strong basis. I am mindful many churches are reticent and, while apathy and indifference are inexcusable, wanting to serve God in ways that honours him has to be the main priority. Personally, I would like to see more thought given to the Biblical basis and theological implications of such working. The Church is about serving God and the people, including telling others the good news of the gospel and encouraging them in their Christian walk, before other considerations, and this must not be neglected because of a desire to attract partners and to be more successful and expansive in community activism. I think too, that while in some quarters Christians and the churches they belong to will be reviled, it is important that as far as possible this should not be for valid reasons. Jesus taught that those outside the Church will know who are his true disciples by the love they have for each other and the world will believe when they see such love in action. The challenge for Christians is to be real and to live out the gospel.

I am currently involved in the follow up to the successful event (described elsewhere) that brought local council officials and faith leaders together, trying to better understand each other and discussing ways for the two groups to forge closer links in order to better serve the local community. I have no doubt there are significant differences in culture, ways of working, values and priorities that might stand in the way, but equally I see none of these as being insurmountable. If I were to challenge council and other statutory sector colleagues, it is that they go back to their original remit, which is to serve the public, and to think how best this can be

achieved. Part of my own role in the community is to explore and facilitate ways for getting disparate parties to work together, and I have no doubt that signing up to this charter, or something similar, can help provide the sort of reassurance local councils need in order for them to work with churches and other faith communities. I believe it is both desirable and doable, from both a Council and faith perspective, for there to be meaningful partnerships in order to serve the greater good.

The Big Society

As I earlier reflected, “the Big Society” is the latest in a series of ideas, for longer than I can remember, emanating from central government, for improving society. As it became clear in more than one consultation I attended, no one knew exactly what it was and, while sharing the belief in working together for the common good, most saw it in terms of what aligned with their own interests and views. I see it as bringing together all interests in the community: statutory, voluntary and private sectors and the members of the communities that are affected. Most of all, I see it being grassroots led, with people coming together and taking ownership of their communities, motivated for the most part by a desire to do good for the communities involved. Realistically, there will be conflicting agendas and priorities; and, speaking from experience, bringing together unrelated parties can be a challenge, but rewarding if it can be achieved. It is a laudable goal and, realistically, it is the only way forward given our current predicament as a society.

Often, as I work in the community, I see the presence of fear. It could be the fear of employees should they step out of line when carrying out their duties, the fear of citizens to engage with services or do the things needed to improve their lives, or the fear of organizations to do things differently, even if the result of doing so will be overall beneficial. Sometimes that fear is a result of too much pandering to political correctness. I would like to see individuals and organizations doing their best for their communities and being empowered to do so, if need be in unusual ways and with unusual partners, without fear, working together for the greater good. Whether or not the Big Society can be achieved is another question, as is identifying what it is precisely we want to be achieved. I am neither an optimistic nor a pessimist as to what extent the Big Society can be brought about, but I am a realist and an idealist, and will, whenever I can, work with the different parties, and encourage them to look for common ground, for the betterment of our society.

8. Spirituality and Mental Health

It was concerning his response to folk with mental health issues that first got the author fully involved as a community activist. This book is an update to something he wrote several years earlier. It attempts to look at the bigger picture and how these relate to community and faith matters.

Sections are:

- Background
- Community perspectives
- Personal perspectives
- A cricketing comparison
- Setting the scene
- Good and bad mental health
- Spirituality
- Biomedical and social models
- Psychotic and neurotic
- Depression
- Addictions
- Organic “mental” matters
- Other “mental” matters
- Case studies
- A personal
- A community response
- A workplace response
- A service provider response
- A church response
- Words of comfort

9. The Gay⁵ Conundrum

Homosexuality is a hotly debated subject. There have been several recent developments and significant shifts in opinion. This book looks at how Christians should deal with gay folk and the thorny matter of “gay issues”, yet still be able to operate winsomely and effectively in the public square.

Sections are:

- Providing the context
- Setting the scene
- A right gay theology
- Down to the nitty gritty
- A measured response
- Considering the story of Sodom
- Questions for discussion
- First time round reflections
- The “Lepers” conference
- Are same sex relationships sinful?
- Equal marriage and gay marriage?
- And so it continues - further thoughts
- A tribute to a friend
- The “gay texts”

⁵ In this account “gay” refers to any who are lesbian, bisexual, gay (homosexual) or transsexual (LBGT)

10. Odds and ends

The reason why

When I started the project (writing this book), the intention was to write both for those people who share my faith and those who don't, including some who are antagonistic. I took the view that what I had to say would interest a wide range of people, active and / or wanting to be active in their community or realizing the importance of having strong, cohesive communities and, in order to serve the community better, we need to try to understand each other and find common ground, wherever it might exist. I wanted to keep the moralizing and preaching to a minimum because I know from experience how this might irritate and alienate some of the very people I wanted to read my book. Besides, the book was about giving personal reflections and it was not intended to contain a sermon.

It did occur though that many who are not church-goers or Christian will be suspicious and sometimes opposed to the idea of working with Christians. Sometimes it is due to prejudice or antipathy toward Christians and Christianity. Sometimes there are justifiable reasons. Equally, those who are Christians may feel reluctant to work with non-Christians for similar reasons or, in some cases, a fear their Christian mission might somehow be compromised. I hope the account that precedes demonstrates that Christians and non-Christians can work together on a wide range of issues where there is agreement, and joining forces can sometimes be a profitable exercise that can widely benefit others. While I can say I have worked mostly well with many disparate partners in this positive way, few have come to share my faith (as far as I know) as a result. But I believe doing as I have done has created fantastic opportunities that might not otherwise have happened.

For those who don't share my faith, I cannot say why you should be active in your community. You no doubt have your reasons. We may disagree on several things or even find ourselves opposed but I wish to honour the contributions you do make to the community. If we do work together, there will be no hidden agenda on my part and I will be up-front when I do engage in spiritual activity. I realise this may mean some parting of the ways but I would like to think we will both put the interests of the people who need to be served above our own beliefs and ideologies. However, before I turn to those who share my faith, I would urge you, above all else, to

repent of your sins and trust in Christ and thus have your sins forgiven and receive the gift of eternal life, for “*now is the day of salvation*” (2Corinthians 6v2).

As for those who do share my faith, I would say there is much you and I do not understand, including how best to engage with our communities. That is something each one of us will have to work out for ourselves. I hope, though, that what I have described may serve as inspiration. When I came to faith, things like prayer, reading my Bible, having fellowship with Christians, living a holy life and telling others about Jesus were all stressed as being important. The need to practically *love your neighbour* was also recognized but it tended to be more about helping the folk that turn up on our doorsteps or as part of the ministry of the church, and usually that meant just the local assembly (congregation) to which I belonged.

Over the years, I have come to see loving our neighbour in a lot more radical terms than I had first thought. I have no doubt that prayer and preaching are two of the most important things a Christian and a church can do, and this extends worldwide. I also believe we are called to go *outside the camp*, so much so that it is the title of my book. We know from the context of the Bible verse quoted at the start, this can be a barren place and where we may have to suffer, but we are called to follow in our Master’s footsteps. But what do we do when outside the camp? This is a question that has exercised and both united and divided Christians down the ages. I can only share my understanding. In my mind, while there is enormous scope to how we go about it. Preaching the gospel of salvation and serving the community, especially the poor and the vulnerable, go hand in hand. There are several verses in the Bible that tell us that we need to do this. Obedience alone to the great commandment, “love your neighbour”, should cause us to want to do most good.

When Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan who happened to come across the man who was mugged and robbed, and helped him, there would have been many other opportunities to help needy people if he had gone looking for them. My view of community activism is since we know this to be true, we must try to work with our communities for maximum effect. The frustration is we still might only help a few, the world being as it is. When God’s Kingdom comes in its fullness, which is what Jesus tells us to pray for, we will be able to help the many, and God’s will will be entirely done. So here is my final thought on the matter. I quote John Stott later on in my book because he understood the issues around community activism.

Mission is about saving souls but it is also about serving others. More importantly, Dr. Stott understood the right motive behind it all, and one I commend to all Christians: “*that Christ should be given the honour that is due to His Name*”.

Community activism and eschatology

This final thought is aimed at those Christians who are in the minority because they are theologically minded and are interested in church history, although I hope others will find this of interest, even if only to satisfy their curiosity as to where I come from. Eschatology, according to one definition, is the “branch of theology concerned with the end of the world or of humankind”. There have been profound differences among theologians down the ages as to the sequence of “yet to happen” events that will mark the end of the world, although most will agree the world will come to an end and that this will be linked to the personal return of Jesus Christ.

What is meant by the Kingdom of God is another area of disagreement. Some will see it in terms of the here and now, whereby God’s rule is extended as a result of God’s will being done (believing the world will get better as a result), and others will see this as bound up in the future, with the return of the King (Jesus) – and up till then the world will get worse. In my own church tradition, people tended to favour the latter position. This had consequences; for example, Christians were often not encouraged (and sometimes specifically discouraged) to be involved in the affairs of this world, because they were expected to look forward to and focus on the kingdom that is to come. I suspect much of my community activism may not fit comfortably with those who think like this, and I know a number who do.

Part of my own spiritual journey has been to think through these issues. I realize they cannot be ignored, as living the Jesus way has to be the main priority. It is easy to go down the liberal route and dilute the clear-cut teachings of scripture in order to be socially active, particularly if being accepted by those who don’t hold orthodox Christian views is a priority. This is a dishonest position as is, without wanting to unduly upset folk in my neck of the (church) woods, looking forward and preparing for the life to come while neglecting the pressing needs that are all around us, and ignoring the clear-cut command to “*love thy neighbour*”.

Two Bible verses came particularly to mind, both from one of the lesser known books in the Old Testament – 1 Chronicles. The first is: “*And Jabez was more*

honourable than his brethren... And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested.” (I Chronicles 4v9-10). I am no fan of those who promote the prosperity gospel, because some of the best people I know are doing the Lord’s work and they are also poor. Moreover, Jesus warned his followers to expect trials and tribulation. Yet I see an important principle here, and it is that there is a God and He wants to bless us in all sorts of ways.

My second verse is: “*And of the children of Issachar, which were men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do*” (1 Chronicles 12v32a). I can’t help but think that we need such people around today and I want to be one of them, although I suspect, as then, such understanding will not always be appreciated. As I reflect on some of the momentous happenings in the past year alone: the Arab Spring, the crisis in the Eurozone, huge national debts, economic recession, problems around Iran and Syria, the Palestinian issue that won’t go away, numerous occurrences, often not reported, in all four corners of the globe, of the continuing advancement of militant Islam, along with that of secularization, the marginalization of Christianity, and social changes, e.g. the gathering momentum to redefine marriage to include same sex couples. No doubt, much more is to come.

I do not see a brave new world coming, except by direct divine intervention, but rather a worsening before it gets better, and then only with the return of the King. If I read my Bible correctly, there will be an apocalypse first, together with an unveiling of events that were foretold by the prophets. This is not scaremongering or sensationalism but it is how I see it and provides a context for my own community activism. Preaching the gospel and serving the Church has, for me, to go hand in hand with serving the poor and being active in the community. Such thoughts will no doubt influence my own practice in my remaining days.

Being a disciple of Jesus can be a perplexing business, and there is much we do not understand, but since peace was one of Jesus’ legacies to those who follow him, it is better to simply trust and obey and to look forward to the coming day when we will be able to make sense of all these matters. Summarizing, it is not “either” (prepare for the future) “or” (work in the present) but both. As for doing good and being good, showing compassion to the poor and preaching the gospel to them,

being involved in the world and being separate from it, it is all of these. Whether the world gets better or worse is immaterial, for we must love our neighbour. There are needs and opportunities; there will be trials and tribulations. One day we must all give an account of our actions before God. Yet I look forward to the Kingdom that is to come. Such are the challenges faced when we venture *outside the camp*.

What is truth?

This was the question that Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, although it is doubtful he was too anxious to find the answer, for shortly after he condemned this innocent man to death and released a notorious murderer in his stead, in order to placate the crowd. One of the key driving forces behind my community activism is the quest for truth. It is not an academic exercise, because dealing with the real world, and the messy situations I am confronted with all the time, means I don't always have the luxury to pontificate over philosophical niceties. However, in my calmer, more reflective, moments, I often agonise over the truth question, because that, for me, has to be the reason why writing this book, and doing the things I have written about matters, even if I don't always have the answers. Neither do I set myself up as a paragon of virtue, and often feel despondent for being such a hypocrite. But truth remains truth, irrespective who speaks it. Some of the most profound truths recorded in the Bible were spoken by Balaam, a man hired to curse Israel, and his donkey! Truth is not the domain of the irreligious people, with religious folk humoured and consigned to consort with imaginary fairies. Some of our great scientists were associated with the Cavendish Laboratories, Cambridge, yet were men of faith. I am intrigued by the sign inscribed over its entrance: "*the works of the Lord are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein*", Psalm 111v2, as that should be our aim. I love science and I believe the Bible. I am not a creationist because I don't believe scripture requires me to hold that position, and the science would suggest otherwise, but I do believe in the divine inspiration and authority of the Genesis account, as well as of the rest of the Bible. I don't believe Christians should impose their views on society, but I do believe they need to seek its good. They also need to speak truth into every situation of public and private life as it is truth that sets us free and declaring it is part of loving our neighbour. Truth is paramount; it is axiomatic; it is not relative; it is not negotiable. As far as I am concerned, truth coupled with love must inform and inspire community activism.

Becoming a community activist

When I thought about the title for my book, I decided I ought to check out definitions online to ensure I did what the title said. I came up with the following:

Community:

- A social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government, and often have a common cultural and historical heritage
- A social, religious, occupational, or other group sharing common characteristics or interests and perceived or perceiving itself as distinct in some respect from the larger society within which it exists

Activist:

- An especially active, vigorous advocate of a cause, *e.g.* a political cause
- Someone who is disposed to take action or effect change

On that basis, not only am I a community activist, but anyone else can be too. While it is tempting to explore reasons why people should become community activists, other than the general notion of serving others, I realise that it is something we all need to decide for ourselves, together with how to go about it. There should be no mystery or particular qualification for becoming a community activist, and there is no restriction on how, when and where we go about it and, within reasonable limits, what we do: it is all about seizing opportunities. The following are some parting words of wisdom for my fellow community activists.

1. Get as good an education as you can, and keep on learning in every way.
2. Develop your career as best you can.
3. Be prudent with money; and generous also.
4. Start being active at home (family, friends, neighbours, colleagues, *etc.*).
5. Don't make it escapism from doing what else needs to be done.
6. Work out what it is you would like to do and can do and then do it.
7. Work with and learn from others; be prepared to leave your comfort zone.
8. Don't forget the world is full of foolishness and villainy.
9. Keep your sight on the "end game"; don't get side tracked.

10. When you talk about others, first ask yourself the questions: is it true; is it kind; is it necessary? Go ahead if you can say yes to all three.
11. If people speak about you in a bad way, treat it like water off a duck's back.
12. Be realistic (matching needs, opportunities and resources), but also aim high.
13. Don't be discouraged when people or circumstances stand in your way.
14. Remember, there will be others who will be rooting for you, including me.
15. It is better to give than to receive.
16. Don't forget to relax, enjoy life and do something completely different.

Pure indulgence

I would like to say that what follows is an intrinsic part of this book, but it isn't. However, it might help readers understand more about the book's crazy author!

Favourite meal: traditional, full, English breakfast (with all the trimmings).

Favourite films: Casablanca, Shawshank Redemption, The Dead Poets Society, Chariots of Fire, The Passion of the Christ, Forrest Gump.

Favourite books: Lord of the Rings, the Tale of Two Cities, Pilgrim's Progress, the works of C.S. Lewis, Biggles books.

Favourite artists: the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

Favourite composers: Beethoven, Tchaikovsky.

Favourite radio: The Archers, Test Match Special, Desert Island Discs.

Favourite places to visit: the Lake District, the Scottish Highlands, Poole, Kerala.

Favourite TV: M.A.S.H., Strictly Come Dancing, Only Fools and Horses, Columbo, Highway to Heaven, North and South, the Fugitive, Star Trek, Grandstand.

Best memory: being there the day my son, Matthew, was born.

Worst memory: getting the news that my dad had been killed in a road accident.

Best decision: marrying my wife, Jolly.

Worst decision: not standing up to the bullies when I was younger.

People admired in history: Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa, many martyrs and missionaries, *etc.*

Interests: reading, sport (more watching these days), walking and exploring the great outdoors (at a much more leisurely pace than I once did).

Eight gramophone records to take with me if cast alone on a desert island: 1. Times they are a changing (Bob Dylan), 2. Lily Marlene (Marlene Dietrich), 3. Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, 4. How Great Thou Art (Elvis Presley), 5. You're Gorgeous (Ladybird), 6. What a Wonderful World (Louis Armstrong), 7. Elgar's Enigma Variations (Nimrod), 8. Handel's Messiah (Hallelujah Chorus).

Books to take on my desert island: the Bible and the Complete Works of Shakespeare (already allowed) plus the poems of Gerald Manley Hopkins.

Luxury to take on my desert island: A collage of photos, prepared by my wife.

Website resources

While not necessarily endorsing the following websites, these are some of the more relevant and helpful ones I have come across when it came to writing this book. These also pertain to the author's own interests. Some information that comes by other means, e.g. newsletters, is also available on the web. Often websites are useful for a time or become outdated, but what is given here is currently relevant. Readers might care to check some of these out and may want to add their own:

Trust Links: www.trustlinks.org

Community-in-Harmony: www.southend-community-in-harmony.org.uk

Love Southend: www.lovesouthend.org

Mental Health Foundation: www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Pink News: www.pinknews.co.uk

Southend Borough Council: www.southend.gov.uk

SAVS: www.savs-southend.org

Chess: www.chess.com

National News, sport, radio / TV: www.bbc.co.uk

Local News: www.echo-news.co.uk/

Focus on the Family: www.focusonthefamily.com

Wikipedia: www.wikipedia.org

Google: www.google.com

Bible and Bible aids: www.biblegateway.com

English dictionary: www.thefreedictionary.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com

Quotations: www.thinkexist.com

A hymn

*Through Thy precious body broken
Inside the veil;
O what words to sinners spoken
Inside the veil!
Precious as the blood that bought us,
Perfect as the love that sought us,
Holy as the Lamb that brought us
Inside the veil!*

*When we see Thy love unshaken
Outside the camp;
Scorned by man, by God forsaken,
Outside the camp;
Thy loved cross alone can charm us,
Shame need now no more alarm us,
Glad we follow, naught can harm us
Outside the camp.*

*Lamb of God, through Thee we enter
Inside the veil;
Cleansed by Thee, we boldly venture
Inside the veil;*

*Not a stain; a new creation;
Ours is such a full salvation;
Low we bow in adoration
Inside the veil.*

*Unto Thee, the homeless stranger
Outside the camp,
Forth we hasten, fear no danger
Outside the camp.
Thy reproach, far richer treasure
Than all Egypt's boasted pleasure;
Drawn by love that knows no measure,
Outside the camp.*

*Soon Thy saints shall all be gathered
Inside the veil;
All at home, no more be scattered,
Inside the veil.
Naught from Thee our hearts shall sever;
We shall see Thee, grieve Thee never;
Praise the Lamb! shall sound for ever
Inside the veil!*

This hymn, still sung in my church, reflects on some of the preoccupations of my spiritual forefathers (eschatology, typology, sacrifice), and influenced my choice of title for this book. While I resonate with sentiments expressed in the hymn, I regret the hymn writer did not reflect on or relish the possibilities for community activism while *outside the camp*! “Veil” is the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies (where Yahweh the Lord dwelt) from the Holy Place, in the Tabernacle (tent), which was the central place of worship for the Israelites prior to the Temple (built by Solomon). *Inside the veil* was where the High Priest went once a year, taking blood from animals that had been sacrificed, to meet Yahweh and atone for the sins of the people. When Jesus died, the curtain was torn (by Yahweh). Christians see this as indicating that the way into Yahweh’s presence had now been opened for all those who believe. “Camp” was something the Israelites did when they were not wandering in the desert for forty years. *Outside the camp* was barren wilderness. It was the place where the bodies of animals, that had been sacrificed, were burnt and, with reference to the cover of the book, where the Scapegoat was released.

Quotations

“When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, we are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.” **Luke 17 v 10**

“God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence... I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.” **1Corinthians 1 v 27-28, 9 v 22**

“He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done.” **Proverbs 19 v 17**

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter - when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?” **Isaiah 58 vv 6-7**

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound” **Isaiah 61v1**

“...but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word, saith the Lord.” **Isaiah 66 v 2**

“Here lies the supreme missionary motivation. It is neither obedience to the Great Commission, nor compassion for the lost, nor excitement over the gospel, but zeal (even “jealousy”) for the honour of Christ’s name ... no incentive is stronger than the longing that Christ should be given the honour that is due to his Name.”
John Stott (1921 - 2011) (Quoted in Operation World)

“A community is democratic only when the humblest and weakest person can enjoy the highest civil, economic, and social rights that the biggest and most powerful possess.” **Philip Randolph (1889 - 1979)**

“Community cannot for long feed on itself; it can only flourish with the coming of others from beyond, their unknown and undiscovered brothers.” **Howard Thurman (1900 - 1981)**

“A community needs a soul if it is to become a true home for human beings. You, the people, must give it this soul.” **Pope John Paul II (1920 - 2005)**

“The life history of the individual is first and foremost an accommodation to the patterns and standards traditionally handed down in his community.” **Ruth Benedict (1887 - 1948)**

“Without a sense of caring, there can be no sense of community.” **Anthony Burgess (1917 - 1993)**

“I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.” **George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)**

“There can be no vulnerability without risk; there can be no community without vulnerability; there can be no peace, and ultimately no life, without community.”
M. Scott Peck (1936 - 2005)

“We were born to unite with our fellow men, and to join in community with the human race.” **Cicero (106BC - 43BC)**

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” **Margaret Mead (1901 - 1978)**

“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.” **Anne Frank (1929 - 1945)**

“Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.” **Martin Luther King Junior (1929 - 1968)**

*“At the end of life we will be judged by ‘For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.’”*⁶ **Mother Teresa (1910 - 1997)**

“Truth is like the sun. You can shut it out for a time, but it ain't goin' away.” **Elvis Presley (1935-1977)**

“Knowledge is power.” **Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626)**

“God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, Courage to change the things which should be changed, and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.” **Reinhold Niebuhr (1892 - 1971)**

Glossary

BME	Black Minority Ethnic
CAB	Citizens Advice Bureau
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CRA	Cluny Residents Association
CRB	Criminal Records Bureau
HARP	Homeless Action Resource Project

⁶ Quotation is from Matthew 25v35-36

LBGT	Lesbian Bisexual Gay Transgender
LSP	Local Strategic Partnership
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
PCT	Primary Care Trust
PQASSO	Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organizations
SACC	Southend Adult Community College
SAVS	Southend Association of Voluntary Services
SBC	Southend Borough Council
SCHP	Southend Community-in-Harmony Partnership
SEPT	South Essex Partnership Trust
SHAN	Southend Homeless Action Network
SRB	Single Regeneration Budget
SREN	Southend Race Equality Network
SWOT	Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities Threats
SZN	Southend Zimbabwean Network
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector

Two more conferences

Just prior to this book going to press, I attended two conferences, one to do with poverty and the other to do with community cohesion. This was organised by our local council and involved a wide range of partners. As always, the best bits for me were the networking opportunities such occasions afford. While it is easy to be sceptical, I am heartened that there are people of good will in all sorts of areas, and I see by working together we can make a significant difference to our communities.

Finally

Writing this book has itself been a journey. I remember once watching the film, Forrest Gump, when one day the hero decided to go for a run ... and he kept on running – all round the USA in fact, and some time later, just as suddenly, he

decided to stop running. I feel a bit like that character as I write this book, and now is the time to wrap everything up. When I began, I knew I had a lot to say and felt compelled to tell my story for posterity, not knowing how it will turn out. Every time I revisited it I found there was more I wanted to say; but the time has come to quit adding to and tinkering with the text, and for me to move on. “Right now, I feel like singing the Frank Sinatra classic – *And now the end is near, and so I face the final curtain. My friend, I'll say it clear, I'll state my case, of which I'm certain. I've lived a life that's full, I travelled each and every highway, and more, much more than this, I did it my way*” – or I should say “I tried to do it God’s way”! ☺

If you have reached here after reading all the earlier sections then you are to be congratulated. The story is convoluted, despite my best attempts to join everything up, and it continues. While there are lighter moments, for how else do you maintain your sanity, it is also intense at times. I have tried to argue that the areas I covered are important, and are what I feel passionately about. It wasn’t just about me, my ideas or my experiences, but rather an encouragement to venture *outside the camp*. I have said it as I see it and apologize if anything I have said is untrue or unkind, for that was never my intention. It has more religious content than I had first anticipated, but that was inevitable because this has been a major factor behind me doing what I have done. What is written relates to what I have observed and thought, hoping it may inspire others to become community activists and tread a wise path in a world full of foolishness and villainy. Yet it is a world containing many wonderful people and amazing opportunities to make a significant difference.

In this final paragraph and deliberate second edition insertion, I wanted to point out that the book as it stands is an account of my community activism and many of the things that go with it from a wider community perspective, up to early 2012. I continue my community activism, albeit as a supposedly retired person, and on a mainly unpaid basis. While projects and to an extent direction has changed (I see my role increasingly to be that of passing the torch) the same principles remain. Further happenings and reflections, since 2012, especially with respect to the wider community and the whys and wherefores of what we do or can do, are contained in the four books mentioned in the Second Edition preface. Finally, I extend to the reader my best wishes and hope for a fruitful experience as a community activist, for undoubtedly the opportunities are endless, but it is all a matter of seizing them.

11. Onward and Upward

The author further reflects on many of the big issues that affect our communities and how these relate to his ongoing community activism. It also serves as a repository for some of his writings that he considers to be pertinent and of interest since writing his book: “Outside the Camp”.

Sections are:

- How we won the war
- Two years on
- Building community
- One foot in the grave
- Whistle while you work
- Education, education, education
- Asylum seeking revisited
- Helping the homeless
- Money makes the world go round
- God’s own country
- Passing the torch
- What next?
- A final indulgence

12. Theological Musings

The issue of religion and spirituality has never been far away from the author's own community activism. In this book, he reflects on the part this plays, personally and generally, from a conservative evangelical view point, yet respectful of the many other different perspectives that are held.

Sections are:

- Spirituality and community activism
- Inside the Veil
- The Good Samaritan revisited
- Evangelism and social action
- Where the Church fits in
- The end times
- The Jewish enigma
- Salaam Alaikum
- The opiate of the people
- Spirituality without religion
- Should women become priests?
- The end of an era
- Solomon's Song of Songs
- The chief end of man