

Autobiography chapter: Religious Development

Eric Whittaker

I was brought up a Methodist. My father had always been one, whereas my mother was Church of England – her mother had only agreed to marry her father on condition that he changed from being a Baptist to being Church of England. It was not until after several years of marriage that Mum became a Methodist, and she always retained an affection for the Church of England – but only as she had known it in a very low-church traditional form. I was baptised as a baby at Chilwell Road Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, Beeston. At what age I started to be taken to services there I have no idea, but I was certainly used to going to the morning service when we got to Alderley Edge when I was just three. There was a family story that when I was quite little we went away on holiday and my parents thought of skipping going to a service on the first morning, but when I woke up on the Sunday morning I said “Is there a chapel here?” – so they decided they were rebuked out of the mouth of babes and sucklings and we went! I can hardly think that this could have been before I was two (at Bangor) so it was probably before I was three (at Colwyn Bay) or just possibly at 3½ at Bournemouth.

My early religious ideas were much influenced by the chapel at Alderley which was very unusual and somewhat Anglican in tone. Though it had the traditional Methodist arrangement of two aisles with a block of pews in the middle between them (and no access across this block), there was a reading desk at the right hand side (ecclesiastical south) and a pulpit at the left hand side. The choir and organ were in a transept at the left (there was another at the right containing little-used pews) and beyond the pulpit and reading desk was a short chancel with a totally draped altar / communion table backed by curtains with an “east” window above it. Contrary to normal Methodist experience I felt that this was a very holy of holies and that no-one should ever go behind the altar because that was where God was. I knew that really the Sunday School hall was behind that wall and those curtains, but I didn’t like to admit it to myself, and when in the hall I never felt that I was actually behind the altar. In fact I was quite shocked when I first visited a cathedral (Exeter in 1928) and found that one could walk round behind the high altar, actually within the building.

I started going to Sunday School when I was about five. A new Primary Sunday School was just being started for the ages of 4-8, run by Miss Bilborough, with a young lady teacher for each year / class. My teacher, for five-year-olds, was Miss Gladys Wood, and

her sister Miss Rosie Wood taught the seven-year-olds (I thought she was very beautiful, but she left to get married) and their cousin Miss Dolly Wood played the harmonium. I don't remember the other two teachers. Of course it was very old-fashioned, and I don't remember what we learnt, but I remember we used to draw pictures of the Bible stories and I drew one in which I included Jesus. The other children said "Oh Miss, Eric's drawn Jesus, you mustn't draw Jesus must you?" or words to that effect, and I was told firmly that one must not draw Jesus, and we would have to say that what I had drawn was one of the disciples. Amongst protestants there was then a complete taboo on representations of Jesus, and I remember in 1938 when "The Man Born to be King" was first presented as a play on the radio my mother was very worried by the fact that this involved someone taking the part of Jesus – even though only by voice.

From the ages of eight to fifteen I went to the "proper" Sunday School from 9.45 to 10.35, followed by morning service at 10.45 to 12.00, and then back to Sunday School from 2.15 to 3.15. As I got bigger I would sometimes go to the evening service as well from 6.30 to 7.30 or thereabouts, but never regularly. After we moved to Littleover when I was fifteen I regularly went to both morning and evening services at Rose Hill Methodist Church (now, 1991, pulled down and largely surrounded by Muslim population). When I was about 16 a young man called George Morse started an afternoon class for 16 to early 20 year olds at Littleover Methodist Chapel and I went to that. Twice at the age of about ten to twelve I sat for some kind of national scripture exams. So at the end of all this I was very well versed in the Bible (which was read to or by me every day) and the Methodist Hymn Book. I remember beginning to have doubts when I was about thirteen and reading a lot of astronomy etc, but I suppose I was saved from getting too worried by the fact that my parents were quite prepared to laugh about Adam and Eve, and Jonah, etc without it affecting the meaning of worship for them.

Throughout this period I was totally non-conformist oriented. The first Anglican service I ever remember going to was on Low Sunday in about 1933 when Mum and I were staying with Grandad at Cotgrave. Some time around that period I went with Mum to a nativity play in the "Mission Church" (a corrugated iron place near our house) at Alderley and I was very disturbed by the fussy little altar – I wasn't sure we should stay there in its presence! In the 30s I was also very put off by the artificiality of the intoned prayers in radio services from cathedrals etc, and I used to argue about it with Ken who had got very attracted by Anglicanism (and Quakerism!) at Oxford. I suppose the first crack in my prejudices came with my occasionally going to Sunday evening services in the school chapel at Derby School. These occurred about twice a term and were taken by Rev A G Grime, the RI master who took us for essays and was my house-master and whom I liked very much. However I had no feeling whatever that I should change my allegiance – it was just that my opposition was slightly melted. In the late 30s of course the main moral problem for my generation was the question of pacifism. We grew up in the shadow of the horrors of the trench warfare of 1914-18 which seemed to have been entered upon for no real justification. From the earliest point at which i

started to take note of international affairs in 1931 the shadow of renewed war grew and grew – Manchuria 1931, Gran Chaco 1933, Abyssinia 1935, Spain 1936, China 1937, Munich 1938, and I can still remember a dream of falling bombs about 1936 or 1937. Like many others I was convinced that a Christian must be a pacifist, and doubted whether I could give my allegiance to any mainstream church because none of them officially adopted this view. In 1939, as I was 17, my parents thought it was time I became a full member of the church, especially as I was about to leave home for Oxford, but I had these reservations, so I had a longish talk with our minister, Rev C L Craig. He persuaded me that people had to agree to differ when they could not all come to the same conclusion, so that I would not be compromising my views by belonging to the same church as him, and in July I was “received into full membership” and took communion for the first time.

So I went up to Oxford a committed member of the Methodist Church, and there became more and more committed. I joined a Methodist fellowship group meeting every Saturday afternoon in term time with between eight and eleven members and we (especially the permanent core of eight members) did much to “help to build each other up” over my first four terms. I also joined the John Wesley Society, of which I was elected secretary from May 1941 to May 1942, and when the group split up at the end of 1940 to integrate new members into three new groups in order to pass on to others what we felt we had learnt together, I was the leader of one of them. Also on Sunday evenings after dinner my usual habit throughout my four years at Oxford was to go to the “open house” of the minister, Rev F Greaves, for a couple of hours of social chatter with my fellow Methodists. We really constituted a very cosy clique and erred very much in the direction of thinking ourselves God’s chosen people.

With the war a very close reality, the question of pacifism became much harder and more urgent. Some contemporaries registered as conscientious objectors. My closest pacifist friend Jack Gardner changed his mind in the summer of 1940 and joined the air squadron in his second year and went on to become a bomber pilot. For me the crunch came early in 1941 with the prospect of having to register in February. I talked it round and round for many hours with my friend Kofi Busia (who did not have to make up his own mind, not being a UK citizen). After our last talk I slept on it and decided not to object, on the basis of what he had said. When I told him this the next day he said he thought he would have made the opposite decision, if he had had to, on the basis of what I had said! It was as close as that! Of course for me the result of this choice was different from that made by Jack. I knew that I might well be reserved as a chemist and not have to fight or bomb or destroy, myself – just work in the background to promote such activities. Because of this I was very afraid that I had just chosen the easy way out, and had crises of conscience about it through the rest of the war. However in retrospect I believe that the pacifist choice was incorrect in the circumstances, although those who made it had a salutary effect in keeping alive a desirable revulsion from violence.

In one way I was slower than many of my Methodist contemporaries in my religious development. It was very much the done thing for any young man who was keen, and especially though not exclusively if he was in higher education, to become a local¹ preacher, though very rare for young women to do so. Ken had started at it before he went to Oxford; Jack Gardner had started before that, I suppose at 17. I did not start till I was 20½, when I had come back to Oxford in August 1942 (during the long vac) to start my research. The first stage was to be put “on note”. This meant that one went with an accredited local preacher: the first time to take the service but not to preach, and the second time to preach. My first sermon was on a text from Amos² – *what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God*. This was reported on favourably, and I was then put “on trial”. This meant taking services and preaching independently, but reports on one’s efforts would be made from time to time to the “quarterly meeting”. I can only remember going to three places round Oxford – Headington, Walton Street, and Wooton, but I think I must have done two or three more than that between October 1942 and June 1943. When I went to live at Chapel-en-le-Frith I continued in the same way, and can think of six chapels where I preached in the period October 1943 to August 1944, and I continued when we lived at High Lane and at New Mills up to Easter 1950.

It was somewhat anomalous that I remained “on trial” for 7½ years. The next step, of going on to “full plan” involved taking an exam, and while one was a student one was not pressed to do this. For the first year or so after leaving Oxford I could not bear the thought of taking any further exam, so I kept excusing myself from taking any step in this direction. Then by 1945 I had started studying for my maths degree, so I had good grounds for my excuses from 1945 to 1949, and by then I was on the point of deciding to leave the Methodist church.

I never found the task of sermon preparation easy, and was always terribly afraid of being trite. For this reason I hated doing morning services at which one was expected to give a “children’s address” in the early part of the service. I always strongly resisted all attempts to persuade me to preach more than about once a month, which meant that with repeats I did not have to prepare more than about four sermons per year.

While we lived at High Lane (1944-7) I was officially a member of the Windlehurst chapel in the Marple circuit. When we moved to New Mills we tried one or two of the Methodist churches there, but I eventually joined the one at Furness Vale, which was about an equal distance from our house as they were.

The above summarises my time as a Methodist from 1939-50, but alongside this one must set another strand. When I went up to Magdalen I was keen to take a proper part in

¹The term “local” related in Methodist parlance to laymen preaching in the locality where they lived and worked in contrast to ministers who “travelled” to the places where they were appointed – a nomenclature dating back to the horse-back travelling of John Wesley.

²Actually this seems to be Micah 6:8 [RW]

the college chapel, and I took with me the surplice that Ken had had for his appearances as a scholar in college chapel – “members of the foundation” wore surplices on holy days and Sundays and evenings before them, and I duly went in it to Evensong on my first Saturday of “noughtth week”. The Dean of Divinity, Rev Adam Fox, was quite surprised to see a fresher already so equipped at such an early date. So I went on the rota of demies for reading lessons on surplice days, and throughout my time in college I used to go moderately often to Matins in Sundays and occasionally to Evensong on Saturday or Sunday. I also took to going once or twice a week to Dean’s Prayers at 8 am on weekdays. This was something pretty unusual – I don’t think any other undergraduate ever attended this service in my time: the only people present were usually Adam Fox and Benecke who was the oldest remaining fellow at that time. Also from time to time, perhaps once a term or so I would go to the Sunday evening service at 8 pm at the University Church to hear the special preachers laid on for the undergraduates. Also in my third term, when I was free of 4:45 lectures in the summer, I started going to SCM meetings on Wednesday afternoons, and sometimes around this period I belongs to an SCM study group for a term or two. In July 1940 I went for a week (Monday to Saturday) to an SCM conference held at LMH in Oxford. (Before the war there had always been big events of this kind at Swanwick, Derbyshire, to which Ken had gone, but these had to be split into smaller regional conferences during the war.) This was a very broadening experience opening my eyes to other traditions than mine, and I kept up SCM connections as much as I could thereafter, and Dorothy and I both went to SCM conferences in July 1941 and July 1942. In my fourth year, being free of lectures, I got still more involved with SCM.

When I got to know Dorothy she sometimes came with me to Wesley Mem, and I sometimes went with her to St Aldates. After we were married we usually went to the C of E in the morning and to the Methodists in the evening. At High Lane this meant Matins in the morning – the only service at Windlehurst Methodist being in the evening, and the same was true of Furness Vale after we moved to New Mills. The difference was that St George’s New Mills was much higher than High Lane, and alternated between Matins and sung Eucharist at 11:00, and within a year this had changed to Parish Communion at 9:30 every week. Throughout this period (1941-1950) I felt repelled by the C of E’s insistence that I could not take communion and Dorothy too felt for me in this and assured me that it would change in time (which it did eventually in the 1970s). She would never take communion in the C of E when I was present – she went by herself at 8.00 am for this purpose, and would also receive it with me in Methodist services.

At High Lane (1944-7) I got very accustomed to C of E services, but they were rather uninspired and I felt no attraction towards changing my allegiance. At New Mills however it was very different – the lively approach of Fr Perry was very attractive and I had a chat with him about the possibility, but then within a few months he left. However Fr Weatherhead’s approach turned out to be even more attractive. By the end of 1949 I

was very attracted towards a change, especially as we were by then expecting Anthony and I did not want our family to be brought up in an ecclesiastically split background – and it was by then clear that Dorothy’s spiritual needs could never be met by Methodism. What kept me away was the rigid exclusivity of the Anglican communion and the feeling that I would be denying the reality of my churchmanship as a Methodist if I was to accept confirmation in order to cross the barrier. I was also afraid that I would be ducking out of my responsibility to preach, which I could do as a Methodist but supposed that I could not do as an Anglican. However, about January 1950 I went to discuss all this with Fr Weatherhead and arranged to join his adult confirmation class without committing myself to being confirmed. He satisfied me on the second point, that there were plenty of things I could do, even perhaps become a Lay Reader and continue to preach. He was not the right person to allay my fears on the first problem, but Br Kenneth SSF came round and we had a long talk and he presented a sufficiently flexible attitude to allay my fears – even though Fr Weatherhead did not really approve of his flexibility! Anyway I went to see the Methodist minister and explained my position. He did not really try to dissuade me (though he suggested that some of the “high” things that went on at St George’s were actually illegal – which strictly speaking they probably were, but I did not think this important). He was quite willing that I should continue to preach in the Methodist churches, but I decided that to go on while changing my allegiances would be too much a splitting of my mind, so my last sermon as a Methodist was on Easter Day 1950 at one of the New Mills churches. I was confirmed by the Bishop of Derby at Hayfield on the afternoon of May 7th, when Dorothy was already in hospital awaiting the birth of Anthony. As I was on my own I was invited to lunch at the vicarage. During the confirmation classes I had rather surprised Fr Weatherhead by insisting on borrowing from him large theological tomes such as *Liturgy and Worship* by Dom Gregory Dix and he made a point of introducing me to the Bishop after the service.

Fr Weatherhead was not one to let possibly useful material slip through his fingers, so from September 1950 I was drafted into helping run the AYPAs – the church youth organisation. In the spring of 1951 to mark the Festival of Britain he wanted to have some sort of youth orientated service and wanted me to preach at it, but he had to get the Bishop’s permission for this and it was refused. However, he said the Bishop remembered meeting me and suggested I should become a Lay Reader. I accepted this idea and from June 1951 started reading up the necessary books for the exam, which consisted of three papers: Old Testament, New Testament, and Prayer Book and Doctrine. These (written) papers I sat in the vicar’s study. then I had to go for an oral in Derby. Although I had been entered by the vicar for licensing as a “parochial reader” the examiners were so pleased with my papers that they insisted that I should be licensed as a “diocesan reader” – the higher grade. This greatly displeased Fr Weatherhead as he feared that he would lose my services while I was sent here there and everywhere! However I managed to allay his fears and protect myself by explaining to the powers that were that I was very busy preparing for my PhD and could not undertake much

work outside the parish. I should have been admitted as a reader on May 10th 1952 at Derby Cathedral, but I had one of my frequent attacks of tonsillitis and was unable to go, and instead was admitted at St George's, New Mills, on June 29th, when the Bishop came to take a confirmation. I was quite unprepared for the fact that this involved, in the vestry beforehand, taking an oath before a bewigged legal personage (brought along specially for the purpose) and accepting the 39 Articles. I have ever since been very unhappy that this was done with grave reservations on my part. Had I known it was to happen I don't think I could have gone through with it, but having it jumped on me I hadn't got the strength of will to say no, and frustrate the whole exercise!

Anyway, after this inauspicious beginning, I was officially a diocesan reader, but for the next six years (of Fr Weatherhead's incumbency) worked effectively as a parochial reader, joining John Wright who had been admitted to this position in 1949 or 1950. He aspired very much to be a priest, but was rejected several times until he finally made it in the 1960s. In the meantime I felt that he tried to act the part as much as he could. He never appeared in the church in the congregation but was always robed, and on Sunday morning kept his cassock on (and had a cope on it) for ages after the service. Fr Weatherhead grinned occasionally at his foibles but let him enjoy them, and even permitted him to preach at Parish Communion, which was then strictly illegal. However with me he stuck to the rules, and I set myself not to prejudice my "amateur status" by always appearing in the congregation in mufti unless I had a job to do. In those days administering the chalice was restricted to readers with special permission from the Bishop, and John Wright did this (from the moment that he was licensed, as this was really vital with about 150 communicants at the Parish Communion), but I did not; and neither of us had the special permission then required for a reader to read the epistle!

One thing Fr Weatherhead required was that he should see my sermons before I preached them. Whether he really had any right to do this I do not know, and initially I was a bit worried by it (my parents thought it was monstrous!) But in fact I quickly came to view it as a great confidence builder. Knowing that a preacher of this calibre thought my sermons were OK (and often highly commended) gave me an enormous amount of confidence in delivering them, and so made them all the better. And in fact he never asked me to cut anything out and only once suggested that I should insert an additional point. After he went to Staveley in 1959 he twice invited me over to preach in his parish church in his presence, and on once of these occasions I arrived to find myself billed as the special attraction at the harvest festival.

During the 13 years I was a reader from 1952-65 I preached on average about fifteen times per year, of which about eight were in New Mills (St Luke's, St George's and St James'). By virtue of repeats I actually had to write about five sermons per year.

Another feature that I valued in Fr Weatherhead's time was that he included the two readers with the curate (when there was one) in the parish staff meetings. These were

mainly to sort out preaching arrangements, but he also took us into his confidence about many things.

There were a number of other church functions I undertook at this time. I was soon elected to the PCC and to the Ruri-Decanal Conference (the predecessor of Deanery Synods), and quite soon became secretary of that – until we came to Oxford in 1965. I also became a server. Most of the servers were young boys about 14-19, but I thought it worthwhile to demonstrate by my presence that they did not need to think it was something they would grow out of at that age, and I did it from 1951-58.

In September 1951 Fr Weatherhead decided to re-organise the Sunday School and got me and some others of about my age to become teachers. I took the eleven-year-old boys, the youngest in the upper Sunday School which met in the church at 11:15 to about 12:10 (the younger ones were in the Church School). From September to Advent I had three boys: Edward White (who became a chemist), Godfrey Higgins (who became a priest) and one other I cannot identify. Then for a year I had five boys including Graham Hudson from the house next to us (he became a pharmacist and we still hear from him at Christmas). I continued for one more term after this (with four boys I think) until Spring 1953 when I gave it up. I found it increasingly difficult and worried a lot about saying what could be considered trite because over-simplified. To my surprise Fr Weatherhead took my resignation quite calmly and made no attempt to get me to continue.

When we moved to Chinley in August 1958 I supposed that my work as effectively a Parochial Reader in New Mills would be over, though that as a Diocesan Reader would continue. However within a few months Fr Weatherhead left for Stavely leaving a new curate John Statham in sole charge without any Reader's help – John Wright having also left New Mills at about the same time as me. So before he left he asked me if I would take on the job of administering the chalice. I agreed, with some misgiving, and he obtained the necessary episcopal permission. So from February 1959 till the following September we went back to New Mills every Sunday morning, and I administered the chalice. In September 1959 Fr Gunn was appointed vicar, and I went to his induction, but on his first Sunday I assumed that my job was over and we went back to church in Chinley. However before dinner on that day, Fr Gunn was on the phone asking me to go back – John Statham having moved on, he was operating on his own. I was reluctant to take it on for an indefinite period, but I agreed until he should get a curate. When I turned up the next Sunday, he said “Dr Whittaker? Oh, I imagined a much older man!”. However, we got on very well, and in the end I became very happy to do the administration, and eventually went on doing so even when he did get a curate – we did it together. I felt it a great privilege to be able to pray for each communicant “... preserve your body and soul unto everlasting life”. So from February 1959 to June 1965 we continued to attend the Parish Communion in New Mills, and Anthony learnt to be a server there. In fact from about 1961 or so Fr Gunn moved towards a more modern distinction between the different parts of the service and had me reading the epistle

too. Strictly he should have obtained episcopal permission for this, but I don't think he did. In fact I don't think he ever got the permission for me to administer the chalice extended after the interregnum.

This caused me some problems when a very officious man, the Rev Mr Harris, was put in charge of the Diocesan Readers. he used to notify me of where I was to take services – usually Evensong, but when it was Matins I demurred on the grounds of my duties at New Mills. He was quite short with me on the phone and said I had no right to be doing it. He was really very odd – on one occasion he said “I don't like the readers having direct contact with the clergy” (he considered we were totally under his command). However the Bishop obviously had no objection, as about 1963 or so I rose to my greatest ecclesiastical height. The Bishop of Derby came for a confirmation in the context of Parish Communion. Several parishes were involved and to deal with the numbers Fr Gunn arranged for communion to be administered at three altars – by the bishop and me at the high altar, at the Lady Chapel by the vicar of a neighbouring parish and by himself at the St Francis altar in the gallery. When the Bishop arrived he had not brought a chaplain, and eh immediately said to me “You will be my chaplain”. This involved generally looking after him, relieving him of his crook, handing him his mitre etc. So for one brief hour I was a bishop's chaplain! I have on occasion been able to surprise people by saying “I was once a bishop's chaplain”.

When we moved to Hampton Poyle we told the vicar, Ian Beacham, that I was a reader, but I did not want to become licensed in Oxford for some time. Over my first 18 months here I had some 37 hours of lectures to write, with a great deal of reading up involved to bring me up to date. The idea of preparing sermons was too much of a similar thing to contemplate doing at the same time. However he did from time to time get me to take services and preach at St John's, at St Mary's and at Hampton Poyle, for which I used old sermons. By 1969 he began to press me to be licensed, but U was becoming uncertain on other grounds. I told him about my misgivings about assenting to the 39 Articles (he was surprised that I had had to do this and did not think it would be necessary in Oxford) and about other worries. These were specifically concentrated on the traditional church language about life **after** death because I did not believe that non-physical life was within space-time, and therefore assigning it to a **time** (after death) was meaningless. Increasingly this problem seemed to spill over into a whole range of traditional usages. Ian Beacham said we would have to sort these things out, but in the autumn of 1969 he went to the USA for three months sabbatical leave and arranged for me and the existing parochial reader Stanley Meyer to share the Evensongs at Hampton Poyle – one each in each month. I think I did the first, but got so worried afterwards I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and Dorothy had to explain it to Stanley Meyer and get him to do my share as well as his own – I couldn't even face him. With these issues still unresolved Ian Beacham left in 1970 and was replaced by Mervyn Puleston, and I soon found that I could not discuss things with him and certainly could not have worked under him as a reader. I used to think that if Ian had

stayed I might well have resolved my problems, but I am not sure; from what he told me in 1990, since his retirement he had become increasingly loth to preach for fear that his reservations and interpretations would upset those with a simpler faith – very much my own problem.

I never allowed these theological problems to affect my adherence to the church. I knew that I could not cope with life without a Christian faith, and I was sure that the trouble with the standard presentation was not that it was basically untrue but that the language it used was based on inadequate concepts. My work on four or more dimensions (see “Scientific Work”) set me off on the idea that if a human life were viewed from outside the physical dimensions of space and time it would be seen to terminate in physical time (just as the body terminates in physical space) but that it could be eternal in other spiritual dimensions. About 1985 or 1986 I persuaded George Coppen to let me preach on the subject at St John’s. Before doing this I had taken the precaution of writing the sermon so that I knew I was not going to panic at the last minute and I felt that I had then exorcised the defeat that I had suffered in 1969. Also in the early 80s I tried to write a small book setting out my ideas, and got John Barton (now Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture, then chaplain of St Cross) to comment on it. He made quite a lot of useful comments, but I could not get round to incorporating them because I had run into the ground in another direction – the ideas seem to involve a totally static situation in the “hereafter” lacking in experience or development. More recently (about 1991) I think I have solved this problem, but whether I shall ever succeed in getting the write-up into an acceptable form remains to be seen³.

To return to practical matters: I had become churchwarden under Ian Beacham at Easter 1970 and felt happy working with him in this way, so was very shocked when he left within a few months. I found Mervyn Puleston far from a kindred spirit, and after 2½ years with him I stepped down. However I remained on the PCC at both Hampton Poyle (where I was secretary for about ten years) and at Kidlington (with one year off in each four). But Mervyn’s 17-year incumbency was rather a trial, and I was often tempted to say “how long O Lord, how long”!

Other more recent activities in connection with the church have been the following.

About 1979 or 1980 I heard the then new vicar at St John’s, Richard Seed, bemoaning that the reader who administered the chalice at St John’s was leaving, and he didn’t know what to do. So I told him I had done this at New Mills and was prepared to transfer from St Mary’s to St John’s to do it. So he got the (then necessary) episcopal permission and we started going to St John’s. We weren’t sure we would like it at first, but we soon settled happily there – and it had the advantage that we heard Mervyn less and the other clergy more. Richard Seed left within the year, but I got on very well with his successor Nicholas Martin (1980-84) and reasonably well with his successor George

³Completed in 1996 but it failed to find a publisher.

Coppen (1984-date)⁴. Nicholas broached the idea of setting up a “lay pastorate”, and I supported the idea. It was actually started after he left and I attended the preparation course, but found it was not really for me. I couldn’t cope with the visiting of aged men that I was set on to, and would have been even less capable of the visiting of the parents of children presented for baptism which turned out to be the main task of the other lay pastors.

After Graham Smith arrived after Mervyn’s departure he started a new system of running the parish affairs through “committees of the PCC”. I was put on the Finance Committee in 1987 and found the person in charge of the planned giving and covenants had effectively stopped dealing with it. So reluctantly I volunteered to take over and have been doing this for nearly 5 years – with some success at increasing income though at the cost of some unpopularity in some quarters for plain speaking about the abysmal level of many weekly contributions! This problem was worst when for a year I was made chairman of the committee, but for the past two years Graham has taken over the chairmanship so that anything of which I can persuade him redounds less upon my head!

The other thing that happened in 1987 was that I was asked to take over as the St John’s correspondent on the Kidlington Calendar (to write the monthly St John’s notes), and when I agreed to this I was also asked to take over (from someone else) as the St John’s representative on the Editorial Board. The writing of the notes is quite difficult in so far as it involves reporting activities with which I have not always been involved, but it also provides an opportunity to get into print on a variety of Christian concerns on which I feel I have something to say but would not otherwise have a position from which to say them. Within a year of my joining the board the editor (who was not from one of the churches) retired and we were unable to find a replacement. So six members of the board took over the editing as three pairs, doing it one month in three. Furthermore the other members asked me to be the chairman, so I finished up in overall charge of the whole publishing operation. I believe it is a very worthwhile job, getting a Christian-based magazine into upwards of 1000 homes in Kidlington, and it looks as though it will be my major ecclesiastical function for whatever active years are left to me.

⁴I continued to administer the chalice under these successors, but the need for this gradually changed from virtually every Sunday to more occasionally as the number of clergy in Kidlington increased and the regulations as to who else could do it became progressively more liberal.

RW's notes

It seems that EJWW wrote this in 1992. As a result it does not include anything about his later interest in the *Sea of Faith Network* and its style of theology, or the articles that he wrote for their journal *Sofia*. I think it is fair to say that his opinions towards the end of his life were different from those reflected here.

Also this was written before Rev Hilary Campbell (who took his funeral service) worked at St John's (born 1958, team vicar, Kidlington 2005-2013).

Information about some of the people mentioned above (information from Wikipedia and Crockford's Clerical Directory):

Paul Victor Mendelssohn Benecke (1868-1944), Fellow of Magdalen 1891-1944. See:

<http://www.magd.ox.ac.uk/libraries-and-archives/archives/online-catalogues/benecke-papers/>

The Revd Adam Fox (1883-1977) was Dean of Divinity at Magdalen College and later a Canon of Westminster Abbey and Warden of Radley College. He was at one time the Oxford Professor of Poetry and is buried in Westminster Abbey. He was one of the "Inklings" and a friend of C S Lewis and J R R Tolkien.

The Very Revd Thomas Leslie Weatherhead (1913-2011) was vicar of New Mills 1948-1959.

The Revd Eric James Gunn (1924-1991) was vicar of New Mills 1959-1969.

The Revd Ian William Henry Beacham (1917-1999) was vicar of Kidlington and rector of Hampton Poyle 1958-1970.

Prof John Barton (born 1948) was a fellow and chaplain of St Cross 1974-1991.

The Revd Robert George Coppen (born 1939) was team vicar, Kidlington 1984-2005. Now retired. When this chapter was written, EJWW had not become as close to George Coppen as he later became.

The Revd Mervyn Pedley Puleston (born 1935) was vicar of Kidlington 1970-1985. Now retired. When EJWW was confined to his home at the end of his life, Mervyn Puleston (having retired after his later jobs back to Kidlington) used to visit and bring Holy Communion to him.

The Ven Richard Murray Crosland Seed (born 1949) was team vicar, Kidlington 1977-1980.

Preb Nicholas Roger Martin (born 1953) was team vicar, Kidlington 1982-1984.

The Very Revd Graham Charles Morell Smith (born 1947) was team rector, Kidlington 1987-1997.