

LONDON MISSION (VICTORIA AND CHELSEA)



'A Deacon's Tale'

In this story Deacon Richard Goldstraw shares some of his experiences and insights into life and ministry in London.

Tell us a bit about yourself...

I was born in Halifax West Yorkshire and I'm now 43 years old. I was educated at Grammar School, Technical College, Cliff College, Kingmead and Westhill Colleges in Birmingham and currently studying for an MA in Pastoral Theology (which is an absolute miracle!) at Heythrop College, University of London. I was trained in residential care and worked with Cheshire Homes, NHS on an acute psychiatric ward and the Shaftesbury Society.

On my maternal side I am the fourth generation to worship in the Methodist Church in Sowerby Bridge West Yorkshire, I learnt a lot from being part of a church community, and the roots deep! I became a Local Preacher at 22.

What is the distinctive role of a Deacon in the Methodist Church?

Oh this old chestnut! It's about time to be with people, to be free on the whole from the running of a church - the administrative side and pastoral charge. You don't have to be a preacher to be a Deacon. I am a preacher but I enjoy the freedom of not having to preach every week, and the opportunity of just being in and with the congregation. Being a Deacon can mean you focus on one particular area in the church or the community. There are some distinctive roles, like being 'a bridge' linking people together, like being a listening ear. Also for me, being a member of a Religious Order very important, I enjoy the fellowship of it, and it helped with the loneliness and isolation that were problems in the early days of ministry.

What has been your role at Chelsea and what have you enjoyed most in ministry?

My role has changed over 9 years and necessarily so. Managing the church coffee bar area and its volunteers (Narthex), making links with church and community especially with the work in Victoria and Bella Best House. I have enjoyed both prison and hospital chaplaincies and it has been important to link them with the worshipping community. Offering hospitality at my home and as a house group leader has been much enjoyed. Small group work is special for me, as is Bible Study and singing in our choir, and drama. I enjoy leading and participating in worship. I love visiting people in their home, workplace, hospital, and community centres. It's a great privilege to do baptism services and lead and create appropriate liturgies for funerals. Mentoring other Deacons has been an important part of my work, and so has serving on Connexional committees.

What have been the challenges you have faced?

Communication problems - have people really heard what you are saying? This is a church that speaks in many different 'languages'. People are very 'busy' and a lot of people work very hard to just 'survive'. We say we work collaboratively and inclusively, but there are occasions when this has been a real challenge. One has to work as a team and trust one another. Having realistic and sensitive expectations of our very busy congregations is very important. Loneliness - being far from home and family 'singing the Lord's song in a strange land' is a challenge for me. And of course the lack of understanding of what a Deacon is - I get asked 'when are you going to become a proper minister!' A crucial challenge is helping people to 'stand tall' and not to be too dependent.

What would you understand to be the mission of the church (both Circuit and District)?

To listen to one another, to love one another, to accept that the Spirit is ever urging us on and this can bring painful changes. To rejoice as we move forward. To respect peoples faith traditions be they Muslim or Sikh, etc., and a firm commitment to working both with other faiths and ecumenically. To reach out, to take risks. It is important to be proud of who we are as Methodists and our rich heritage. That means being proud of those who have gone before and educating our children and preparing them to be leaders, preachers, ministers and deacons – so the Circuits and the District have some work to do to provide appropriate courses, support and training. Being confident in our gender, sexuality, age, and knowing that we are all made in his image - 'fearfully and wonderfully made'.

What is distinctive for you about ministry in London?

The richness of diversity - colour, class, wealth, poverty, sexuality, housing - the opportunity for putting yourself in other people's shoes, making time and being available to them. The sheer size of London and travelling from A - B and its frustrations. Congregations that are scattered and working long hours; respecting peoples diaries; being aware that people may not just worship with you on Sunday and that Sunday may be their only day off. Starting worship with 3 and ending with 33. Being aware that a lot of our congregation are providing financially for their families and churches back home. Being creative and realistic about how and how often we meet.

Is there a Bible passage(s) that you find important for faith and work in London?

Rather than the Bible, which is very important, I have found that our hymn book has been a more unifying tool for faith and work in London - sounds like idolatry! People from all over the world can identify with particular tunes or words. I would take Hymns and Psalms if I were a castaway on a desert island; it is rich in poetry and theology. People love to sing - on the whole it can be a unifying and uplifting experience. One of the Bible passages I love is of Samuel and Eli with the theme of listening, especially to one's elders and discerning our call to serve. I felt the call at an early age and I am indebted to many people for their wisdom, discernment and encouragement.

QUESTIONS:

- 'That old chestnut...' How much do you know about what a Deacon does in the Methodist Church? What might the value of belonging to a religious order be for others in the church?
- In your experience what sorts of reasons might lead to communications problems? Which ones does Richard suggest in his answer to the question about challenges? Are there others that you can suggest? What can we do as churches to reduce the problems?
- 'Singing the Lord's song in a strange land...' What are some of the reasons in your experience that make it so hard? Is there anything the church can do?
- How best can we help people 'to stand tall'? What are the things that prevent it? Richard puts a strong emphasis on people being 'fearfully and wonderfully made' and on valuing ourselves as a result. From your experience, how much of a problem is low self-esteem? What can be done?
- 'What is distinctive about ... London?' – how would you answer that question? Richard listed some of the factors that should make a difference to our expectations of church life – are there others? How might we best cope? How do you think we need to change?
- How far do you agree with what Richard says about the hymn book?

Bible Study: I Samuel 3:1 – 18

- What is your experience of being called to serve? At first Samuel did not know that it was God calling. How would you help someone to recognise the call of God?
- What does this passage suggest about the importance of listening to the unexpected voice? Where might God's call take us by surprise today?
- The first part of the story is charming, the second part challenging and disturbing. In what ways might God's call be disturbing his church? Are there any clues in this passage?