

Revd Captain Steve Dixon

In His Own Words – Part One: Becoming

John Pearce writes:

What follows is the [slightly edited] transcript of an after-lunch conversation which took place at my house on Monday September 17th last. I had sent my list of questions to Steve the previous week, the conversation was recorded live on my laptop and transcribed the next day. I have kept amendments – which were mainly applied to clarify the transition from speech to the page - to a minimum and, as a matter of courtesy, the final transcript has been seen by Steve. The complete interview lasted nearly forty-five minutes and runs to 3,400 words, which is why it was published in three roughly equal sections in the Parish News issues for October, November and December. This version consists of the of the entire interview without the three subtitles used for print publication. .

JCP: Were you born into the Christian faith?

SD: My father was a priest, and he was studying to be a priest in Bristol when I was born, so the church has always been an integral part of my life, really, and I knew about church life from the inside.

JCP: So when it was time to decide on a career, was this a difficult decision?

SD: I can remember a teacher at school asking me if I was going to follow in my father's footsteps, and I answered yes, that I would become a civil engineer - which is what he had been before he became a priest.

JCP: And you qualified as a broadcast engineer; what was the attraction of that?

SD: It was a combination of the artistic flair of broadcasting and its technical aspects – it was the marrying of the two that appealed to me. But my first experience of working in the job rather turned me off it. You have a fanciful idea of what a job may be like, but the reality is very different. Broadcasting then was changing rapidly and to make your way in it meant being in a dog-eat-dog world and not one I really wanted to work in.

JCP: Was that feeling something that played a part in your becoming a priest?

SD: Not at all, no. I was in my early thirties when a friend's father asked me a rather cheeky question. By this time my father had died, I was independent, married, had children, and was heavily involved with the church. I went out for drink with a friend after music group practice, and he had invited his father, who was also a priest, to join us. And he asked me what I did in the church, so I reeled it all off – PCC, music group, drama group, youth group, various other things – and when I'd done that he said "Well, why are you not a vicar then?"

JCP: How did that make you feel?

SD: To his face I said, no way, I know what vicaring is like, but I couldn't shake the question off – God was in the question. And when I was trying to get to sleep that night I remember thinking that I couldn't possibly write a sermon every week, and then I couldn't sleep for thinking up sermon ideas.....God has a wonderful sense of humour, taking us out of our comfort zone, challenging us, but in such a lovely way. Now I wish I'd written some of those sermon ideas down.

JCP: So that was the initial spark – how did it go from there?

SD: I made various enquiries – this was in the Wakefield diocese – and then I went on a Church Pastoral Aid Society weekend in Scarborough, and that was quite a turning point. Serving priests came along and described the role, and one of them said it was rather like running a small business, and that chilled me, because I was working in a small business at that time, and I knew that I didn't want to be under the kind of stress involved in running one. But it set me thinking: I still felt called to ministry, but I wasn't sure what God was calling me to. Looking at the job I was in then, I realised that what I liked best, and was good at, was project management; so if there was some kind of ministry that was project-based I could work in that field. And when I shared all this with my mother, she mentioned the Church Army, something I'd been only vaguely aware of at that time. But eventually I went on a Church Army weekend course. And as soon as I walked through the door

of the Church Army Training College, I felt completely at home, as though I could put on my slippers, sit in an armchair and relax.

JCP: So what was it about the Church Army that made you feel that this is where you belonged?

SD: I couldn't have put my finger on it, really; but in my previous church work I had also been strongly about mission. When we had baptism services we always tried to make them as "seeker-friendly" as possible in terms of music, where they didn't have to join in but could listen; and the drama at a baptism service was aimed at putting across our message in an approachable way, and this would link into a simple sermon. And the Church Army is essentially about mission.

JCP: When you talk about drama and music in church, this is really about parables, isn't it? And working in that style fits with the way you believe?

SD: Yes, absolutely. And so there I was, an officer in the Church Army, and then the opportunity arose to move to Newcastle, where I worked for five years in Byker with what is now the Mission Initiative Newcastle East. Then when the Byker funding came to an end there was an opening at St Paul's Willington Quay, where the congregation had disbanded. It was during my seven years there, re-building a worshipping community, that the call to ordination came.

JCP: So all this time you were still working as a layman?

SD: Yes, a layman, but working full time for the church. I think perhaps I would describe myself as a reluctant clergyman.....

JCP: They are possibly the best kind, when you consider what the alternative might be.

SD: Several things happened, all in a short time, to move the process forward. I was on holiday in Derbyshire and went by myself to the local village church where I expected a tiny congregation, with the vicar dashing in and rushing off afterwards. And I was right: but what I hadn't expected was that when the vicar walked in, I would recognise him – he was the curate in the parish and I'd trained with him in the Church Army. It was a shock, but a wonderful one. And then when I went to receive communion from him an even more peculiar thing happened, like an out-of-body experience. I felt that I was where he was, and that he was where I was, and so I was administering communion to him. Peculiar!

JCP: And that still baffles you, doesn't it?

SD: Oh, yes; but it seemed to refer back to that question from years before – why was I not a vicar? This had stuck with me. I didn't say anything to the family about it at the time, but a couple of weeks later I was putting my daughter to bed – she was six at the time – and she was talking about me being a vicar. I said, "You know, I'm not a vicar", but she said, "No, dad, but you should be". She has no recollection of that conversation at all, but it did hit me. You see, it's a strange thing working full time for the church as a layman, there's no precedent for it. And so there's quite a strong social and institutional push for such lay workers to be ordained, and I resisted this push for years.

JCP: So that was what the reluctance was about?

SD: Yes, but the reason I kept going forward was that nothing stopped me on the track, all the doors fell open, people were very encouraging, and I'm a firm believer in the process, the vocation process which will catch those who should be in ordained ministry.

JCP: It's an interesting mixture: a process which also was a series of moments that turned keys in locks you didn't know were there. And after all of that you are now the vicar of a liberal Anglo- Catholic parish, largely middle class. There's an obvious contrast with the work you've done before, but let's think about how it might resemble it?

SD: I came here from All Saints Gosforth, which is broadly similar to Holy Saviour's....

JCP: So was Gosforth something of a culture shock?

SD: Yes. In Byker and Willington Quay I was working very much among people who were on the margins, lots of social issues, multiple layers of deprivation that had been happening in families for generations. In Gosforth I found people with ideas and motivations that needed a different style of management, sometimes dealing with conflicting views. Whereas in Byker and Willington Quay, the ideas had to be generated by myself, or the church leaders.

JCP: And in those areas the priorities seemed to be clearer?

SD: Yes, where there is that kind of material need. But when you get to know people, they might have all the money in the world, but they may be isolated by distance or bereavement, and they are in as much need as anyone else. It sometimes took a long time for people to reveal their needs to me, whereas where I had worked before people had no qualms about sharing their needs. It's just a different process, finding out what makes people tick, what their needs are. And in deprived areas there tends to me more of a sense of community because people are all in the same boat, so there was a community of need which I didn't find in Gosforth. But scratch beneath the surface and the need is there – it's just not shared.

JCP: Let's think about more general issues. Many people see the Church of England as an organisation that needs to adapt if it is to survive. What adaptations would you make if you could?

SD: I think that for too long the Church of England has been too clericalised, and it has missed a real opportunity to use the gifts and the skills which God has given the laity of the church.....

JCP: I can't tell you how much it warms me to hear you say that, I really can't.....

SD:we talk about the church's being in dire need of ministry, but I think God has given us all we need already, and what we need is the eyes and ears to spot that and to work with it instead of rubbing our hands in dismay and saying "woe is us". The Church of England seems to have propagated a kind of passivity among lay people, and that hasn't done us any favours at all. If the laity are fully engaged with and committed to the mission of the Church then they will become strong advocates for it. Whereas if people are just going along because it's the sort of thing they like, and it becomes part of who they are just to be there and be quite passive about the way services are conducted, showing up on a Sunday and going away again, and it doesn't really affect the rest of your week – well that's not really a way to be a Christian. I think if we can work together and be more engaged in the whole life and mission of the church, then we will be a great advertisement for what we are about.

JCP: Moving to a broader perspective, what do you think the British public makes of the sweat the Church gets into over issues like women priests, bishops, sexuality, same-sex marriage?

SD: I think by and large that the public misunderstands. There has been rapid change in society, and the mood in society seems to be to accept that rapid change. The Church of England, as we know, is not an institution that moves all that rapidly, but then I would also say "why should it"? I think inertia can be a good thing sometimes. At the same time, there is always a real struggle for a Christian to work within society at the same time as standing aside from it in order to maintain a prophetic voice. And I think that the Church is struggling to say to everyone "God loves you and we welcome you" when these kinds of debate are going on, and I think that's where the crunch really comes. It doesn't seem congruous when the church is trying to say that at the same time as it's embroiled in debates which the world seems to have moved on from quite a while ago. That's where the rub is for me.

JCP: And I sense that it may be something you are still struggling with yourself, in a way?

SD: I think it is important to struggle with it, both as I am informed by experience and informed by theology.

JCP: For myself I feel it's not up to us to make God's love conditional. If we apply conditionality from our own perspective, that's where I stick.

SD: There are the wider debates going on within the Church, but to somebody face to face, that's where it's at for me, how I am as a Christian, in a loving way, with that person, that matters really.

JCP: If I had to define myself as a Christian, I would say that I am essentially a Quaker who also finds that the music and theatre of liturgy an unfailing source of spirituality. What's your one-sentence definition of yourself as a Christian? I did send you all these questions a week ago.....

SD: I think for me that being a Christian means doing my utmost to be in tune with God and the Holy Spirit in a way which reaches out to people with his love, generosity and grace.

JCP: I don't think I could possibly improve on that. Outside your Christian beliefs, what or who do you think has been the greatest influence on the sort of person you are?

SD: Interesting question. I want to say "family", but my family does not exist outside the Christian faith – all my family are very strong Christians.....I think probably other influences come from the people I worked alongside in industry, really.

JCP: Because?

SD: They helped me to the realisation that God exists beyond the church. I think also the determination I saw in various bosses along the road influence me, their drive to stay ahead of the game and to push things forward all of the time. They were the ones who had the greatest influence – driving, determined people who were very good at defining their goals. There are a lot of people like that in the church, as well.

JCP: Drive, determination, defining goals – I can see how that fits in with your beliefs as well.

SD: Yes: and I had the fortune to meet one of my spiritual heroes, Desmond Tutu; and, when he was President of the Church Army, I had the great honour of being prayed for by him once a month.

JCP: I don't think there's going to be a higher note in this interview than that. Thinking more specifically about your current role, what do you find is the most rewarding part of being a priest?

SD: To me it's seeing the light bulb go on for somebody when they suddenly discover that God was somewhere they didn't think He was....that incredible moment when someone moves on a step in their journey of faith, at whatever point they might have been on it. They might have been a Christian for years and years, but suddenly something is unlocked for them, and they find this wonderful place inside themselves where God exists that they hadn't seen before.

JCP: And what's the most difficult part, would you say?

SD: I think that the most difficult thing is working with churches that are closed in on themselves, inward looking, when people profess that they are an open, inviting and welcoming church but they turn out not to be.

JCP: This next question is a bit of a bouncer, so don't answer it if you don't want to. If you could change one thing about your character, what would it be?

SD: I'm pretty good at finding my way around, so I'm all right with geography. If I could swap that with being able to remember people's names.....[laughter]

JCP: That's quite all right, Peter....nothing to worry about. [laughter] Now, to finish with a few general questions, if that's all right? What do you do for recreation, outside your wife and family?

SD: I'm an anorak. I usually spend my day off at the North East Aircraft Museum. My main project there is restoring one of their helicopters, a vintage one. It keeps me in touch with engineering. It will never be airworthy but it will look good when it's finished.

JCP: Is music important to you?

SD: I generally have the radio on when I'm driving....Radio Two, mostly. It's a long time since I went to concert, but I went to a Nile Rogers concert at the beginning of the summer. He's mainly a record producer, Sister Sledge, 1970s funk, that kind of thing. We enjoy it as a family. I'm not a fan of classical music, I like some of it, but I don't like opera....

JCP: To me there is only one opera, *The Magic Flute*. You can keep the rest. That said, music of all kinds is a huge source of spirituality....

SD: Oh yes, apart from secular music, I love church music of all kinds; ancient hymns, modern music, all of it.

JCP: Do you get time for reading?

SD: Not a lot, really, no; in fact I don't read very well, I've never mastered reading. It might sound like a strange thing for a priest to say; I read the essentials, but I don't read for fun because I don't find it fun. On the occasions when I do read, I am always deeply stirred by the writings of Henri Nouwen and his particular insights into servant leadership.

JCP: Radio, television, theatre, sport?

SD: As I said, Radio Two, and on television it's mostly nerdy stuff, you know, "how it's made", a lot of programmes on *Quest*, that kind of thing.

JCP: Sport?

SD: I'm not a great fan of sports at all from being a kid. I was never that co-ordinated really, so sport used to frustrate me, and I used to frustrate everyone one when I tried to play sports, and that put me off. But I do spend a couple of hours watching the Formula One on tv some afternoons so, yes, motor racing, I suppose because it has a mechanical side to it.

JCP: Last question: if you weren't a priest, and you could choose your ideal job, what would it be?

SD: I thoroughly enjoyed being in engineering, but I'm not sure I would want to go back to it even though I like tinkering around with it still. From the point of view that at some point the Church of England could no longer afford me in my current role, I have thought, should I become non-stipendiary, what I might do alongside it to earn a living. I think I would quite like to be an odd-job man; I like fixing things. I think I could make a reasonable stab at being a primary school teacher, because I enjoy being in primary schools. Someone once said that they could see me as being a policeman, and I think that certain aspects of that job would appeal, but I'm too old now.

JCP: Too old to run, you mean? Steve, thank you for your time and for your honesty, and for your giving such careful thought to my questions.

This edition of the interview was made on St Andrew's Day 2018.