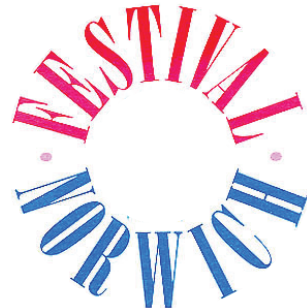


GOOD NEWS

FOR NORWICH

Christmas 2007

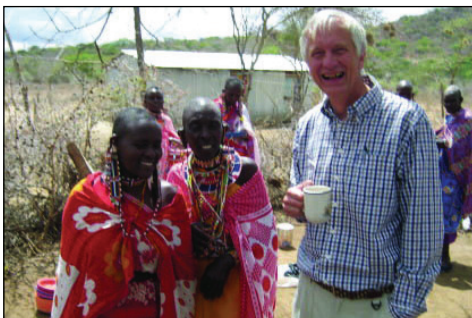


Ex Norwich Union chief's African mission

■ Early in September, former Norwich Union and Aviva boss Richard Harvey and his wife, Kay, flew out to Africa to begin an extraordinary gap year.

The couple, who used to live just south of Norwich in Yelverton, and attended St Mary's parish church, were following the lead of their daughter Jenny whose Christian faith inspired her to spend a gap-year in Uganda working with Aids victims. It was a visit to the village where she was working which started them thinking.

Since September, they have been in Kenya, Malawi and Mozambique with development charity Concern Universal, which supports initiatives that improve the daily lives of people living in some of the world's poorest



Richard Harvey in Kenya.

communities.

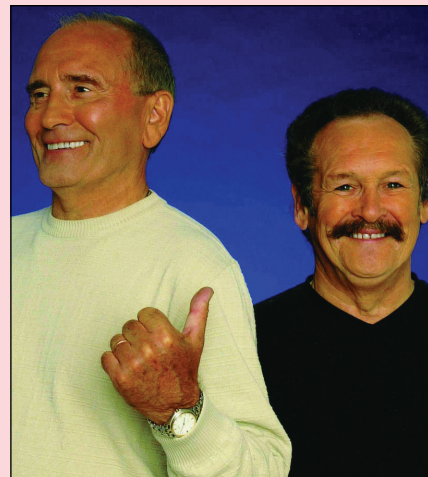
The couple have been working in rural communities on a range of projects including the

installation of sustainable clean water supplies, micro-finance programmes and education in schools on issues such as HIV/Aids, health and sanitation.

Richard said: "We've been in Kenya for a few weeks now and have visited far-flung schools and communities which are surviving by a thread on the School Feeding Programme. In most cases, the children get at best one meal a day, but there are lots of problems with the process and our job is to find out first hand what they are and see what we can do to bring about change.

"Schools are trying to help themselves but water is the key ingredient. It's just so scarce that planting a school 'garden' or keeping

■ *story continued on page two*



Tommy Cannon and Bobby Ball.

Tommy is still rocking on

■ Comedy duo Tommy Cannon and Bobby Ball – one of the UK's most successful and enduring double acts – will be talking about their Christian faith and how it changed their lives when they visit The Salvation Army in Norwich on Saturday April 5, at 7pm.

In a career spanning more than 40 years, they have achieved a string of honours which puts them amongst the all-time 'greats' of show business, topping the bill at almost every theatre in the country.

Their own television series (1979-1992) regularly attracted television audiences of 15-18 million. Tommy and Bobby have appeared at several Royal Variety command performances, and more recently in I'm a Celebrity, get Me Out of Here!

Bobby became a Christian after talking to theatre chaplain Max Wigley. He said: "I was walking on air. It was the biggest high I have ever had. Bigger than when we topped the bill at the Opera House, Blackpool for 10 weeks in front of 360,000 people, bigger than when we met the Queen. I knew God personally and everything pales into insignificance after that."

Tickets for the event will be sale from mid January at £6 and £4 (concessions) from The Salvation Army office, 34 St Giles Street, Norwich NR2 1LL (tel 01603 620747).

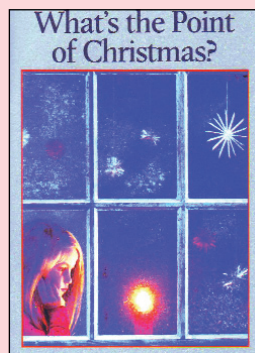
Free book for every reader

■ A free book, which explains the real meaning of Christmas, is being offered to every reader of Good News for Norwich.

What's the Point of Christmas? is written by popular author and speaker J John.

Why are people still celebrating the birth of a baby born over 2000 years ago in the Middle East?

If you would like an answer to this and other questions about the Christian faith then, with no strings attached, send a small SAE (min 11cm x 16cm) to The Editor, Good News for Norwich, 4 Linden Road, New Costessey, Norwich, NR5 OBE.



Mafia gangster has encounter with God

Newcastle mafia gangster Davey Falcus was on the road to ruin with a cocaine and alcohol addiction and a string of violent convictions behind him, when his life was changed after an encounter with God, a Norwich audience heard recently.

From his early teens, Davey was involved in organised crime and lived the life of a gangster. Adopted at six weeks old after his mother died, death struck again at five when his adoptive mother also died.

By the age of seven, Davey was drinking, smoking and thieving. "At thirteen I was in care, I was angry and hated the world," he said. "I graduated from borstal to prison, working with the crime families of Newcastle's notorious West End. At 17, I was locked up after an armed siege with the police and at 18 jailed for dealing heroin."

By the age of 21, Davey was helping to run pubs, working as a bouncer and heavily involved in the drug scene, working with the Geordie Mafia.

"I was a very violent man, known and feared throughout clubland. I had been in gang warfare all my life, been shot at, stabbed, hit with glasses, bottles and iron bars, as well as being imprisoned and locked up for bank robberies.

"I blew fortunes on drink, drugs and high living. I travelled the world, met many famous people, but my life was a mess and I was desperately unhappy."

Davey's life was spiralling out of control because of his cocaine and alcohol addiction.

"By the age of 29 I'd had enough. I had become mentally ill, totally unstable and very dangerous. A breakdown was coming and I needed to change my life.

Davey moved houses three times to get away from his friends and associates and his desperate search for peace took him through Spiritism, Hinduism, Buddhism and other eastern religions, looking for the answer to his problems and addictions. "I was tormented by nightmares and voices that raged at me to kill myself. I was desperate for peace and came to the verge of suicide," he said.

On August 16, 1995, Davey picked up a Bible that had been left in his house by a friend. Reading where it said "He who seeks finds", totally desperate and on the edge of suicide, he



Former Newcastle mafia gangster Davey Falcus.

called out to Jesus Christ, asking for forgiveness.

"I shouted until I got a response," said Davey. "To my utter amazement a bright light filled the room, it was brighter than the sun. Wave after wave of pure bliss rolled over my body, I looked up and Jesus was standing over me shining in all His glory. He spoke to me and said: 'Son, your sins are forgiven, go now and sin no more'.

"At that moment, a 15-year drug habit was broken instantly, also my desire for alcohol left me. The voices in my head became silent for the first time in many years and a beautiful peace entered my body. I had become what's known as 'born again'. The anger, violence, fear and paranoia were gone. I felt brand new. It was the most beautiful and fearful experience in my life."

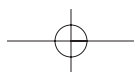
Davey is now minister of Ashington Family Church in Northumberland. Over the last ten

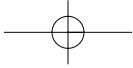
years he has travelled to some 30 or so countries preaching and teaching in schools, prisons, conferences and crusades, sometimes held in stadiums with many thousands of people.

"I've got to know Jesus on a personal level and He has totally transformed my life," said Davey. "He showed me He had a plan for my life. He has helped me to overcome many problems in my life and that has allowed me to help others. He has used me to heal many people including opening blind eyes, opening deaf ears, making the lame walk, as well as seeing every form of illness healed."

Davey told his gripping story to the Norwich Full Gospel Businessmen's dinner at Bowthorpe in early December. You can read more of Davey's story in his best-selling book *From Gangland to God*.

Spice boy – 3 : Miracle escape from hell – 4 : Blind faith – 6 : Guitar great – 7





NEWS

latest Norwich Christian news at www.networknorwich.co.uk

GOOD NEWS

FOR NORWICH

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Race to make a change in Brazil

■ Norfolk Christian charity Voice for Change is offering its supporters two ways to help make a difference to abandoned street children in the slums of Curitiba in Brazil.

The first is by taking part in the biggest marathon in Brazil in Curitiba, the second is to buy a tree to improve the environment in that part of Brazil.

Next November, Brazil's Voice for Change team is hoping to raise funds through British volunteers running in Brazil's Curitiba Marathon. VFC has its headquarters in Bawdeswell, Norfolk and director, Denise Colman said: "World marathon running is becoming a great tourist attraction. We're going to take a group of people to take part in the Curitiba Marathon for the first time in November 2008. It is the biggest marathon in the whole of Brazil.

"They will spend two weeks with us at Voice for Change seeing what we do and sharing the work and then on the middle Sunday they'll run the marathon and, hopefully, raise all the money we need for carrying on our work in Brazil for a year, in just one day!"

For less energetic supporters, there is the Vila Tree Project whose aim is to plant hundreds of trees and bushes to create a better environment for children and families to live and play in and enjoy.

"Working with the City Government, we want to improve the environment for these people," explained Keith Colman of VFC. "So we would like people to donate a tree this Christmas so that we can improve their quality of life."

VFC looks after abandoned children, living in family units in the homes they have set up since 2002 where they come back into family life, go to school again, and have fun. For more information ring 0845 1303 832, or go to www.voiceforchange.org



Denise and Keith Colman taking a group of Brazilian children to the circus.

The world-changing story of a baby

■ A baby's first cry rang out in the cool night air of a stable. The mother and her partner had travelled a long way to get there, only to find the town packed out with no accommodation available.

They were there because the Roman Emperor had decreed a census under which every person must return to the hometown of their family, creating hardship and difficulty for many including this couple.

Millions of babies have been born since and none has received such intensive attention. The media will give this birth a great deal of coverage once again this year. The story will be retold in countless school nativity plays through to major productions and a multitude of church services in every



By John Betts, chairman of Transforming Norwich

known language.

Who were this couple and why has their story become such an international and globally known one?

On the one hand, they were a very ordinary young Jewish couple caught up in national events, on the other hand, they were

totally unique people whose story would change the world. Their child, born out of wedlock was, they were told, the Son of God, born to be the Saviour of the world!

They had struggled to understand what the angel had told them, but came to a place of peace and faith. Now, as their child lay in the cattle stall, some very excited shepherds came to visit. They told of having been visited by an angel and sung to by a heavenly choir and they had come to worship the child.

What do you make of this world-changing story? Billions of people since then have looked, listened and stayed to worship Christ the King. The Christ who was born on the first Christmas day transformed my life, my story. He is there for you too.

Sharing love in face of fear

By MIKE WILTSHIRE

A Norwich audience listened in amazement as a 29-year-old woman told of modern-day miracles in war-torn Sudan.

Michele Perry, who is under 4ft 9ins tall and who was born with only one leg, is today a much loved 'mama' to 70 orphaned or abandoned children in one of the toughest areas of a country that has struggled with tribal wars for the last 50 years.

Amid all the challenges, Michele says "we laugh a lot. God takes care of us – I'd be in trouble if He didn't."

Michele's cheerful attitude – despite having faced 23 operations before the age of 13 – helps her cope with a life on crutches, bringing radical "mercy ministries" to a region littered with mines and unexploded bombs.

"I believe I'm one of the most blessed women on the planet – and a most unlikely candidate for the task: a little white girl with one leg!" she says with a smile.

As a Christian, she tells of amazing answers to prayer in Sudan, such as "total physical healings" plus food provision and even "miraculous multiplication" of scarce resources. For example, when supplies of rice, beans and seldom-seen vegetables were exhausted, a vehicle and two tourists arrived through the desert with fresh supplies – even though no tourists visit that troubled area where life expectancy is between 30 and 35 years and few people have ever met a westerner.

Another time, after the children said they longed to play football, along the pot-holed roads came an aid truck with, surprisingly, 20 footballs – plus 20 sports shirts. "Can you use them?" asked the driver.

"The children love soccer," says Michele, "and even I can kick a ball OK, so don't let the crutches fool you."

Village chiefs had prayed for more than 20 years that "someone would come and bring the light of Jesus" to their devastated areas. Now Michele and her team have been offered 100 acres of land for the "mercy ministry" to one day expand a centre for 1,500 children, whose ages range from seven weeks to 20 years.

"We learn to love in the face of fear," says



Michele Perry in war-torn Sudan

Michele. "Out of the place of intimate connection with Jesus, blessing flows."

Last Christmas in Sudan, they were able to feed nearly 1,000 people who came to the centre.

Michele's parents were often baffled by their daughter's faith during her teenage years. Having a sharp mind, she qualified at university in the US in business studies and communications.

Michele admits to being "something of a Christian mystic" and was inspired during a recent visit to the Norwich church that was residence of Lady Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), the religious writer who is considered to be one of the greatest English mystics.

The Sudan work is part of Iris Ministries which serves in 25 countries. Among Norwich churches supporting the work is St Mary Magdalen, Mulbarton, where Michele shared her story.

Michele worked in India for two years, before she felt the call of God to Africa, despite contrary advice from doctors. Her favourite "life verse" from the Bible, is found in 1 John 4:16 which, in the New Life Bible, reads: "God is love. If you live in love, you live by the help of God and God lives in you."

When Michele returned to the Sudan, the children leapt around shouting joyfully, "Mama ja!" (meaning "mama's come") - "I was so, so happy to be home," she said.

web link: www.iris-sudan.org

Ex NU chief's African mission

■ story continued from page one

livestock is often impossible. There's been a drought since last January as global warming makes the rains less predictable," said Richard. "All the schools we have been to cook over an open fire in one or two big pans, but wood is so scarce that the children have to bring a piece each to school in the morning.

"Despite all the hardship the children are fantastic. So bright. I tried the 11 year old maths test paper and it seemed more like GCSE."

Kay is also teaching two days a week in a remote village school which gives her a first-hand insight into how things really work.

Richard and Kay's own strong Christian faith was a key factor in the decision they made to spend a year in Africa.

"All of our lives we have had an active faith," said Kay. "I have been working with the School of Urban Mission so I am able to teach English as a second language... and Africa is on our hearts."

Since moving to London a few years ago, the couple have mainly been involved at Holy Trinity, Brompton. "There has been a lot of prayer support and I am sure they will be continuing praying for us," said Kay.

Follow their progress at: www.concern-universal.org

By Kevin Gotts



Richard and Kay Harvey help teach children in Kenya.

SEASONS

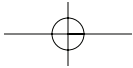
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NEWS

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Man who met God on the 8.30 London train



Martin Kentish.

■ As Martin Kentish, a Norwich-based retail marketing analyst, got onto the 8.30am train bound for a business meeting in London, little did he realize that he was to have an encounter which would change his life forever.

On the train, Martin bumped into John Wright, a director of Colmans and a Christian. They struck up a conversation. 'This is weird, said Martin, "my girlfriend's sister, Rebecca, is a Christian. She said she was praying for me.'

John gave Martin a magazine to read. Despite his initial scepticism, Martin leafed through the booklet and found something that struck a chord.

That's when Martin said an intense feeling of peace and calm came over him which kept happening throughout the day.

"I had this absolutely wonderful experience. It was like being washed with emotion and love and warmth. It was just so deep," said Martin.

The following day he popped out from his Norwich office into the King's Church Centre, in King Street, to buy a coffee.

A friend who works there said to him he knew what he was feeling, even though Martin hadn't said a word to him. He added that it was God's spirit.

Martin said he thought he would be the last person to find God but is pleased he has –

and it's been a life-changing experience.

"It has given me a real sense of peace and joy. It is a wonderful adventure and I am excited about what lies ahead," said Martin. "I want to help other people to discover what I have found out."

His ex-wife thought he was slightly mad but Martin says most people are pleased for him.

Now Martin is a regular at King's Church. He says it's a charismatic church and is bound by a sense of community.

Martin is keen to spread 'the word' about his Christian faith but will not try to foist his religion on others.

Man who found the Spice Girls

By KEVIN GOTTS

Nick Battle's high-flying career within the music industry saw him introduce the Spice Girls to their music publishers, co-write songs with Gary Barlow and work with Simon Cowell. But family tragedy led to Nick giving up his dream job and its six-figure salary.

His heart-warming story is one of the ultimate triumph of faith, hope and love which he shared with members and guests at a Full Gospel Business dinner in Norwich earlier this year.

At the age of 16, his parents divorced. He became a Christian in the midst of family problems. Three years later, feeling unsettled and broken, Nick moved to Sheffield. Drugs became a substitute for lack of love. "I had lost the plot and became a postman then a steel worker, a strange environment as my heart was in the music business," he explains.

He decided to give music a go and moved to London. Starting out as a bass player with the Christian rock band After The Fire they had a fine time playing the clubs on lemonade.

Progression in his career saw him meeting such legends as Bruce Dickinson from Iron Maiden, Steve Jones from The Sex Pistols, Sir Cliff Richard and Sting.

1988 was a momentous year, working with the Police and REM and meeting a special lady briefly at the Greenbelt Christian music festival. After four days he tracked down Lynn and they married within a year.

"Things were good, with the birth of our daughter Micha after a couple of years, and moving out of London to Chorleywood for a better life."

Tragedy struck when Nick's pregnant wife, Lynn, was diagnosed with breast cancer. Nick movingly described her illness and tells how he fell back on his faith: "It is my belief that my heavenly Father God never once let go of my hand, but walked through the fire with me, so I was never completely alone."

A demo tape arrived at work, which prompted Nick and his boss Simon



Nick Battle: the man who unearthed pop sensation The Spice Girls.

Fuller to invite an all-girl band along. They saw "something special" as the girls danced around the table. Realizing that bigger record labels were interested too, they prayed and later were successful in signing the legendary Spice Girls.

Nick's wife died after a long struggle leaving him with two daughters aged 9 and 10. Sustained by friends who anonymously supported them financially, he went from times of raging at God to eventually coming to a conclusion that everything on earth is a gift temporarily.

Nick also tells about the God of second chances and how he put back together the pieces of his life after the loss of his wife, restarting his career and finding happiness again with his new wife Nicky.

Nick is a music consultant who in the last couple of years has worked with Russell Watson, Engelbert Humperdinck, and Michael Ball. He is

currently recording a brand new album with Michael ready for Christmas, as well as putting the finishing touches to his own record and instrumental brand of music, Soaking In The Spirit, available from Authentic.

Although Nick enjoyed something of the rock and roll lifestyle – a penchant for parrot collecting being one of his more benign excesses – he remains

grounded by the Christian faith he had held since a boy in Sheffield. A faith that was to see him through some of the darkest days of his life.

You can read more of Nick's story in his book, *Big Boys Don't Cry*, £7.99

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Miracle escape

Raped by a college friend of her husband's, saved from a would-be killer thanks to a pistol's empty chamber, and left in the baking sun next to a pit full of dead victims, because the soldiers tasked with her murder could not be bothered to do their 'work', Illuminée staggered through the madness of Kigali. She even joined the Hutu exodus to Zaire, and probable death from cholera in the refugee camps, only to be turned back by the victorious Rwandan Patriotic Front.

Now, 13 years on from the Genocide of 1994, and living in Norwich with her teenage son Roger, Illuminée (38) has finally felt strong enough to tell her astonishing tale in her book *Miracle in Kigali*. She is believed to be the first Rwandan Genocide survivor resident in Britain to publish her personal story.

Illuminée married John Nsengiyumva on April 4, 1994, two days before the death of President Juvenal Habyarimana, the spark that lit the Rwandan Genocide. Her son Roger was born on May 1 and husband John was murdered on May 10 at the height of the Genocide.

She existed for 100 days in the living hell of Kigali, Rwanda's capital, after watching her husband being dragged away to be killed by Hutu friends who had celebrated their wedding with them a month earlier.

Illuminée embarked on a horrific journey through the Genocide with her newborn son strapped to her back. At any moment a wrong move could have seen them join the 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus who were slaughtered in just three months.

She has spent the last decade living in Norwich dealing with the trauma of her 100-day nightmare and struggling to find permanent employment. She and Roger were granted British citizenship in 2004. "It is important that people know what happened to ordinary Rwandans during the Genocide," said Illuminée. "I hope that my book plays its part in helping the next generation ensure that the savagery of 1994 never happens again."

Brought up a devout Christian, Illuminee lost her faith during the genocide. "I couldn't understand how God could let it happen," she said.

For 100 days, **Illuminée Nganemariya**, a Rwandan Genocide survivor, who now lives in Norwich, woke up every morning to face the prospect that she and her newborn baby were likely to be brutally murdered.

"Thousands of people had sought sanctuary in the churches and been hunted down and hacked to death as they cowered beneath pews."

For two years she struggled to rebuild a life for herself and Roger, until a surviving cousin, who worked for Oxfam, was given the chance to study at the University of East Anglia. Illuminee travelled to Norwich with cousin Esther - whose husband was also murdered - to help look after her three children.

Soon after she arrived in Norwich it took tremendous courage for Illuminee simply to steel herself to walk into a church. In Rwanda, desperate people had sought sanctuary in the churches – and thousands were cornered and massacred among the pews and prayer books.

"Even here, I was still scared," she said. However, eventually she re-found her faith and gained a lot of support and friendship from local church-goers first at Bowthorpe Church and then at Holy Trinity in Norwich.

This Christmas, Illuminee will complete her journey when she recounts her gripping story, with the help of local author Paul Dickson at Bowthorpe Church, where she took her first steps back to faith in Norwich. You can hear Illuminee at 10.30am on Sunday December 23.

Miracle in Kigali, The Rwandan Genocide – a survivor's journey, by Illuminée Nganemariya with Paul Dickson, price £10.99, is published by The Tagman Press, www.tagmanpress.co.uk tel 0845 644 4186.



Spiritual guru heads for city

■ Richard Rohr, one of the world's leading spiritual teachers, is coming to Norwich to give a public talk at Norwich's Anglican Cathedral on Thursday January 10 at 7.30pm.

'Becoming Stillness' will look at what it takes to maintain our balance in life when everything around us seems to be getting busier and busier.

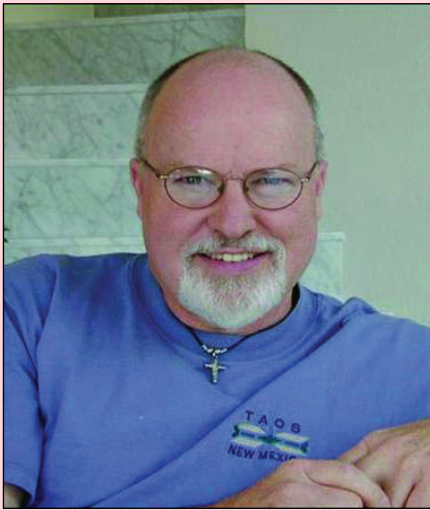
Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest and an internationally renowned speaker and conference leader. He is the bestselling author of many books on subjects such as community building, peace and justice. His published works include *Everything Belongs*, exploring meditation, and *Breathing Under Water*, a study of the spirituality of the 12-steps.

"In the talk he will be exploring how to create a stillness in our lives that gives us balance and stops us going into burnout or stress," says Nicholas Vesey from the Norwich Christian Meditation Centre. "There will be times of silence and a chance to ask questions."

The talk is completely free of charge and is open to anyone who is interested.

No need to book, just turn up.

"It is very exciting," says Nicholas Vesey. "Norwich has played a great part in England's spiritual tradition through Julian of Norwich and her book *The Revelations of Divine Love*", and Richard is interpreting that



Spiritual guru Richard Rohr.

tradition for us in our lives today. It should be a really exciting event."

'Becoming Stillness', 7.30pm Thursday January 10, at the Anglican Cathedral. Admission free.

For more information contact Nicholas Vesey on 01603 416973 or email nicholas.vesey@btopenworld.com

For more information about Richard Rohr see his website at www.cacradicalgrace.org

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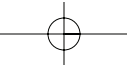
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ape from hell



Rwandan Genocide survivors, Illuminée Nganemariya and son Roger in Norwich.

Picture courtesy of Archant.

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GNFN

Caribbean call for Steve

By GAIL HALLEY

■ Norwich Street Pastor Steve Wigby found himself on a plane to the Caribbean after answering a plea for help to support the same Christian social action initiative out in Antigua.

Steve is one of the Street Pastors who, thanks to the backing of Norwich churches, have started appearing on the clubland streets of Norwich on Friday and Saturday nights to help people who need someone to give them support or a helping hand.

Steve ended up in Antigua in September after answering a plea for help from Street Pastors founder Les Isaacs.

On his first morning, he was woken with a phone call at 5.30am and whisked off, not to a prayer meeting as he'd expected, but onto Breakfast TV which helped ensure he got a warm welcome wherever he went.

One of Steve's jobs was to help the local administrator by setting up some systems, which proved to be a challenge. "Nothing gets done till a week on Wednesday at the earliest, so you can get extremely frustrated with them - but you can't get angry because they are such lovely people."



Steve Wigby.

Steve was pleasantly surprised by the strong government support that Street Pastors enjoy: they pay the office rent and the organiser's wages as well as providing computers and the use of a minibus.

A key part of the trip was meeting and going out with the Street Pastors. "They have 46 recruits and they go out every Friday in teams of 10 or 12. Their vision is to have 300 pastors so they can have a team of 10 out every night of the month," said Steve.

It's very different on the streets too - it's much warmer so everybody is outside and there are widescreen TVs and loud music everywhere. Half of Antigua's 75,000 people live in the capital, St John's, so it's very

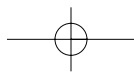
concentrated.

"There's a real problem with guns, drugs and knives," said Steve. "But I didn't feel intimidated by the gang culture, even though the gangs call their territories names like The Gulf, Bosnia and Afghanistan!"

One of the things Steve liked was the willingness of people to talk about Jesus; they're much less disparaging about faith than many people in England, and they're very open to hear the gospel.

When he wasn't working, Steve had some wonderful times with the people he met. One of the features of Antigua is the old English harbour where Nelson had protected the sugar plantations from French invaders. "My host family couldn't get over the fact that I came from the same county as Nelson," he said. When he had time off he went to the beach, drank milk from coconuts straight off the tree and had a close encounter with a shark.

"I learnt to have more pore patience and to totally rely on God," said Steve. "Even in difficult situations at home, I've felt a little bit in charge, but out there for the first three days I felt I was clinging onto the life raft, but then I was on the bridge - with God."



NEWS

Norwich Christian resources at www.networknorwich.co.uk



World cup wonder boy

■ World Cup winner Jason Robinson has tasted both victory and defeat in rugby's greatest showpiece final, winning against Australia four years ago while losing to South Africa earlier this year.

In 2000, Jason swapped from rugby league to rugby union and won a world cup because of it but, he says: "The best decision of my life was when I decided to follow Jesus Christ.

"I'm not saying I'm perfect, not for one minute. It's tough trying to follow the Bible and I'm not looking down on anyone. How could I after all the things I've done? I just know that this is the way I want to live my life and I feel I'm a much better person for it. I know I can give more than I ever did before because I'm happy inside."

An updated version of his autobiography, Finding My Feet, has just been released.

Blind minister who just loves adventure

By MIKE WILTSHIRE

A blind Christian minister in Norwich has a great love of ocean-going adventures – which have led him to climb 130 feet above deck to work on the yard-arm of the magnificent tall ship, Tenacious.

Not deterred by a total lack of sight, the Rev Simon Stokes of Bowthorpe has even sailed as a bosun's mate on a tall ship across the Atlantic during a sabbatical break from his church work.

A former accountant and tax specialist with a leading firm, Simon may have inherited his love of adventure from his racing driver dad. Simon too, "loves cars."

Although without sight, Simon says "there is something just staggering about being on a yard-arm, more than 100 feet above deck."

The famous tall ship, Tenacious, is the sister vessel to The Lord Nelson

After leaving the world of finance, Simon studied theology at Cambridge and has now been in the Christian ministry for 21 years. For the last 18 months he has led Bowthorpe Church, which serves the growing community as a pioneering partnership between four denominations: Anglican, Baptist, Methodist and the United Reformed Churches.

Simon, now 45, also loves the challenges of serving the community. "One issue I'm passionate about is to encourage people to find real fulfilment and excitement – to discover how the love of God can transform each of us."

Simon's sight deteriorated from his mid-teens, but



Rev Simon Stokes with companion Tigger.

as his vision faded, his faith gave him courage and determination to show that loss of sight would not be a major problem.

Today, he loves being a Christian minister: "It's the most fantastic job in the world, there is nothing better." He admits to struggles about his early calling to the church, while at university. He thought being ordained might "ruin his street cred" and he could serve God better "by getting a good job."

He even hoped he might fail the selection process for the ministry – though his bishop believed otherwise, and urged him to complete the application.

Simon's working guide dog, Tigger, is a three-year-old Labrador retriever, who is also supported by Jamie, an 11-year-old "retired" guide dog – both animals are "very much part of the family," says Simon, who with his wife, Christine, have three children. Both dogs are popular with Bowthorpe residents.

With Christmas coming, Simon is reminded that "so much of the Christmas story is 'Hey, don't be afraid' as he recalls the shepherd's first fearful reactions at the birth of Jesus. Nowadays, many people are uncomfortable about "being before God" or even visiting a church, he says – "but God loves us so much. He truly wants the best for each of us."

Simon uses computer technology to access the Bible with screen-reader software that "reads" Scripture to him. Simon also senses God's special help as a minister without eyesight. "His grace is sufficient and I know God loves me just as I am – and I'm His servant and I rejoice in that."

Simon loves working with people – "yes, I'm in God's personnel department," he says.

In a new challenge, he is also working towards a master's degree in pastoral theology in which he is studying the 'rhythm' of daily spiritual disciplines in following God and last year he met another blind minister, the Rev John Beecham, a vicar at Beccles.

Simon also "passionately believes" in healing prayer and that God could heal him one day. But he adds that the greatest compliment is when people say, "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot you were blind - so they see me as an individual, not me as a blind minister."

Christmas Services in your area

Heartsease

Sunday 16 December

4pm Carol Service at St Francis

5.30pm Family Carol Service at Heartsease Lane Methodist

Sunday 23 December

10.30am All-age Christmas Worship at Witard Road

4pm Carols by Candlelight at Witard Road

6.30pm Carols by Candlelight at Heartsease Lane Methodist

Christmas Eve

2pm Crib Service at Heartsease Lane Methodist

4pm Children's Christmas Service at St Francis

11.30pm Midnight Communion at Heartsease Lane Methodist

11.30pm Midnight Communion at St Francis

Christmas Day

10am Family Service at Heartsease Lane Methodist

10.30am Christmas Celebration at Witard Road

Participating Churches:

St Francis Anglican, Rider Haggard Road

Heartsease Lane Methodist

Witard Road Baptist

Thorpe Hamlet

Sunday 23 December

4.30pm Carol Service at St Matthews

Christmas Eve

4pm Crib Service at St Matthews

11.30pm Midnight Mass at St Matthews

Christmas Day

10am Family Communion at St Matthews

Participating Church:

St Matthews, Telegraph Lane

Thorpe St Andrew

Saturday 15 December

5.30pm Mass at Our Lady

Sunday 16 December

4.30pm Carols by Christmas Light at Vineyard

Saturday 22 December

4pm Christingle at Good Shepherd

5.30pm Mass at Our Lady

Sunday 23 December

8am Communion at St Andrew's

10am Communion at Good Shepherd

10.30am Christmas Reflections at Vineyard

6.30pm Carol Service at St Andrew's

Christmas Eve

4pm Crib Service at St Andrew's

8pm Communion at Good Shepherd

11.30pm Midnight Mass at St Andrew's

Christmas Day

10am Mass at Our Lady

10am Communion at St Andrew's

Participating Churches:

St Andrews, Yarmouth Road

Good Shepherd, Thunder Lane

Our Lady Mother of God, Churchfield Grove

Norwich Vineyard, Thorpe High School, Laundry Lane

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Thorpe End & Dussindale

Sunday 23 December

11am Carol Service at RCCG

Christmas Eve

11.30pm Midnight Communion at St David's

Christmas Day

10.30am Family Service at St David's

Participating Churches:

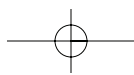
The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Dussindale Centre and

St David's Thorpe End

(not a member of THCF)

THCF

The Thorpe & Heartsease Christian Forum



NEWS

Norwich churches directory at www.norwichchurches.co.uk

Great guitarist felt hand of God

Esteban Antonio performing at a concert in Norwich.

A world-class musician, who was suddenly crippled in a spinal accident, told a Norwich audience how his agonising injury nevertheless led him to faith in God, a miraculous healing and full recovery.

Spanish-born Esteban Antonio, 45, who grew up in the UK, is described as the world's greatest living flamenco guitarist. He was first inspired to a music career as a very young child after watching a classical guitar performance at the London Palladium by the famous Spanish guitarist, the late Sabicas, who introduced audiences around the world to the 'magic' of flamenco music.

By the age of eight – having learned music by ear – Esteban was performing a complex concerto on BBC Radio. A year later he was the youngest guitarist to win a scholarship to the Royal College of Music.

But tragedy struck his home when he was 18 with the death of his mother, Yvonne, a devout Catholic. Esteban admits: "I was devastated – and walked away from the church."

However, while still in his teens, he was invited to Japan for a concert which launched him into the music industry worldwide, with lucrative contracts with TV and film compa-

By MIKE WILTSHIRE

nies. Soon he was working with celebrities such as George Michael and earning fees of up to £1,000 a minute.

Married at 24, his first marriage broke up in 1994 amid his hectic lifestyle: "I was a lost soul in the music industry," he says.

Struggling with pressures, he found himself "looking for God" among various religions and, later, spiritualism and tarot cards.

Then came a serious accident, when a large mirror fell on him, damaging his spine. Doctors at a London hospital said the injury was "irreparable."

The S1, S2 and S3 vertebrae, they said, were so damaged that "he would never have the proper use of his legs again".

Prior to the accident, Esteban had met Debbie Holmes, an opera singer, at a recording studio. Debbie, a Christian, was also the worship leader at a large London church.

"After the accident, she came to see me and said God wanted my music – and he would heal me."

Esteban, bed-ridden and living on pain killers, was not impressed – until his back pains became so intense that

he gave God a desperate ultimatum: "If you are real, heal me! And I'll give you my life."

He called Debbie and, with help, was taken to see her. Debbie asked him to read some words from the Bible.

Esteban says: "I cried out to the Lord to come into my heart . . . and this caused a deep eruption inside of me. I let out a great scream and all the demons from my past occult practices were driven out."

"I felt the hand of God reaching into my spine and straightening it out. The sound was audible as my vertebrae popped open."

The next day he called friends to say: "Jesus is real – come and see me run up and down the road where I live here in Kensington!"

He gave away everything from his old lifestyle – "I was cut loose from the past and went to Bible schools in the US and Spain."

In 2001, he met his second wife, Erika, who is a concert violinist and later that same year, Esteban performed in the film, *Chocolat*, with Johnny Depp, Lina Olin, Juliet Binoche and Judy Dench.

Esteban shared his story during a visit to Norwich with the FGBMFI.



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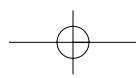
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Sunday 23rd December - 10.00am

A Gift from God

Tuesday 25th December - 11.00am

Christmas Day

Jesus - Light of the World

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