



Couple's adventure of faith after losing all

One morning in January, **Noel and Rachel Alexander** stood in their Hellesdon living room and, over Skype, led a church service in Pakistan. It is one of many unusual things they've done in the nine years since losing everything to bankruptcy and becoming more dependent on God. **Jenny Seal reports.**

In 2010, Noel and his wife Rev Rachel were stripped of everything when Noel was forced into bankruptcy with his Mid Norfolk property consultancy. It was a devastating blow. They lost their home, car and savings. The couple were in their 50s, didn't have a job between them and had four grown-up children.

What Noel and Rachel did have was faith. And they would increasingly learn that if they were obedient to God, he would look after them.

Noel said: "It turns out, I think we've had the best nine years of our lives. And had I not been bankrupt, we'd never have had that."

Shortly after the bankruptcy, Rachel set up a website called 'Prophetic Lighthouse' offering Christian mentoring and prayer. The couple have since grown the ministry which now encourages people both in Norfolk and around the world.

"That was how we met up with the church in Pakistan," said Rachel. "The minister asked, 'can you preach on Skype and lead worship?' I thought 'this is going to be a bit nutty,' but we are open to whatever God wants us to do."

Rachel, an ordained Church of England minister, has always been drawn to prayer and listening to



Noel and Rachel Alexander in Hellesdon.

God. For a decade after her ordination in 1999, Rachel chose to live what she calls a 'contemplative lifestyle'.

She remembers: "People would come and join me and with gentle worship we would sit and listen to the Lord and share what we felt he was saying. It was really exciting."

This was put on hold in 2010 when Rachel took a job as an Assistant Minister with the Diocese of Loughborough. The job came with a house and the couple moved to the Midlands. Noel retrained in drug and alcohol rehabilitation and found a new career working in the voluntary sector.

It was not long after moving to Loughborough that they experienced an enormous lesson in trusting God. Through their website, a pastor in Haiti contacted them and asked them to lead a con-

ference. Haiti was in the aftermath of the terrible earthquake of 2010 that had killed hundreds of thousands of people.

Rachel and Noel couldn't afford to go but felt God was calling them to. Not knowing how they would pay for it, and with authorities saying it wasn't safe to travel to Haiti, the couple chose to go.

Noel said: "We had the most wonderful conference. Rachel preached and I'd taken my guitar and was leading worship there. It was just an amazing time."

He continues: "Just before we left to come home, I said to Rachel, 'do you know how much this has cost us?' I'd written it down. It had cost us £4,010 so far. I said: 'We haven't got £4,010, I don't know how this is going to work'."

When they got back to Loughborough their mail included a

letter from Breckland District Council. It had been two years since they had lost their house in Dereham, but the letter informed them that the council tax on the property had been wrongly assessed back in the 1980s and they were due a refund.

Noel said: "So, there were 24 years' worth of refunds which came to £4,005. And that was paid into our bank account the day we landed from Haiti. Extraordinary! God was teaching us that when he says something listen because you'll be okay, he'll look after you."

This lesson stood them in good stead five years later, when the couple felt God calling them back to Norfolk. They still had no savings and their jobs were in Loughborough.

■ Story continues on page four.

Bishop to lead cast of Passion Play

A Norfolk bishop is set to lead the cast of a Passion Play due to be performed at Anglia Square in Norwich on Good Friday.

■ In Medieval times the church used street theatre to tell stories from the Bible as a way to communicate Christianity to everyone. The Anglia Square Passion on April 19 will continue this tradition.

The play, which is free to watch, will be performed under the glass canopy in the centre of Anglia Square and involve the shops around the square, local people, community groups, local churches, and even the Bishop Of Lynn, Rt Rev Jonathan Meyrick, who plays the Angel Gabriel.

Taking any performance onto the streets is ambitious. The Anglia Square Passion Play 2019 is based on a very successful version performed in Horstead last year.

Director Kandi Kammoun said, "At Horstead, the performance was inside the Tithe Barn on a stage, making life for everyone much easier. However, performing Christ's Passion is not about making things easy. If we are to understand even the tiniest iota of what He went through both physically and emotionally, then we have to be prepared to push ourselves too."

Through the Angel Gabriel's narrative lens, the audience is made privy to actions and emotions which lend a new perspective to a story that many may already know well.

Bishop Jonathan said: "The original events of Jesus's last days and death took place in public – the drama literally unfolded on the streets with hundreds of people around. Retelling the story in Anglia Square, surrounded by shops and shoppers, therefore feels very fitting. Kandi Kammoun's script is fresh and different. As we seek to bring it to life, we are hoping that we can make the old story sing in a new way, that the love released into the world then can fire us again now."

Eric Kirk manager of Anglia Square said, "Anglia square is pleased to carry on its tradition of working with local churches whether it is beer and carols or hosting a messy church for children. To be host to an open-air Passion Play is a special privilege and we look forward to it with great anticipation."

Admission is free and all are welcome to watch a part or stay for the whole hour performance on Good Friday, April 19 at 3pm.

GOOD NEWS

FOR NORWICH & NORFOLK

■ Good News for Norwich & Norfolk is published by Network Norwich & Norfolk part of Christian Community Trust for Norwich and Norfolk Ltd. Registered charity no 1105340.

■ Website: www.networknorfolk.co.uk

■ Editorial: 07712 788762 or e-mail stories to keith.morris@networknorwich.co.uk or send copy to Pear Tree Farmhouse, Wymondham Road, Wrenningham, Norwich NR16 1AT.

■ Advertising: Helen Baldry (01603) 926120

■ Distribution: Val Dodsworth (01603) 946294

■ Editor and designer: Keith Morris

■ Regular writers: Sandie Shirley, Helen Baldry, Kevin Gotts, Jenny Seal, Tony Rothe

■ Printed by Archant Print.

■ Churches, Christian organisations and individuals from within Norwich and Norfolk are invited to send news, events and pictures which relate to the demonstration of the Gospel in social action, community care and evangelism.

■ The deadline for material for the Summer edition is Friday May 17. Distribution is from Thursday June 6.

■ Reproduction of any part of this publication without permission is strictly forbidden. But please ask as we are usually happy to oblige for a credit line in non-commercial situations.

■ We endeavour to adhere to the IMPRESS standards code. If you have a complaint you should, in the first instance, contact the editor keith.morris@networknorwich.co.uk with details. If you are still not satisfied you should contact IMPRESS, details below.



Regulated by IMPRESS:
The Independent Monitor
for the Press CIC
IMPRESS, 16-18 New Bridge Street,
London, EC4V 6AG
T 020 3325 4288
E complaints@impress.press
W impress.press

THE
MATTHEW
PROJECT

no compromise on hope

Drug and alcohol
recovery in
Norfolk and Suffolk

For the many ways to
support our work or to
book a talk go to
www.matthewproject.org



Registered Charity No. 1122801
Limited Company No. 6388343

A special Easter sunrise on seafront

■ It was my first Easter since becoming a Christian the previous summer. Aged 14, I'd attended Sunday School for ten years and knew all the stories but, during this particular Good Friday service, I found myself moved like never before.

Afterwards, some friends proposed a picnic in a local park. It was sunny and unseasonably warm, the mood relaxed and carefree, but I was ill-at-ease. Jesus had just died – or so it felt – and I was grieving His loss.

Coming home early, I holed myself up in my bedroom, only to find the next day was no better. Saturday, I went around in a daze, with that sense of emptiness and low mood known all-too-well by the bereaved. Jesus was gone. But, like all the best stories, there was a twist in the plot: Easter Sunday was coming!

I set my alarm ridiculously early and crept out of the house. I pedalled my bike in the dark down to the seafront, where I took my solitary place on the shingle and waited. The

An Easter reflection from Norfolk author Jane Clamp



sky was already beginning to lighten and my eyes focussed on that spot on the horizon where the action would soon happen.

It wasn't many minutes before the object of my quest came into view, the new day's sun, surrounding itself with striped robes of colour.

By the increasing light, I read from my Bible: John chapter 20, describing Mary's encounter with the risen Jesus. As I reached the part

where Jesus says, 'Mary, Mary,' I began to weep.

Three days before, Mary has seen Jesus die on the cross, believed him gone forever, but here he was, speaking her name in that precious way he always had. This was not the gardener, as she'd assumed. This was not another day of heartbreak and despair, as she'd expected. This was not the end; not for her and not for me. My tears, like hers, were ones of relief and gratitude.

The Bible says that 'all who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

I have a strong suspicion that it's God who whispers our name first, encouraging our response to Him in return. Mary knew the voice of her Lord. Though for some of us it's less familiar, an encounter with the risen Jesus can happen for us when we least expect it.

Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed.

Hallelujah.

Refugee camp mission

A Norwich Christian is supporting an initiative to bring solar lighting to a snake-infested displacement camp in South Sudan. Keith Morris reports.

Eldred Willey (right) meeting members of a community in the Nuba Mountains in Sudan.



In February, Baroness Caroline Cox

invited Eldred Willey, from Norwich, to be part of a visit to the camp with her team from HART (the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust).

"I was delighted to be included in the trip," said Eldred, "and surprised, given that I had recently broken my wrist and had my arm in a plaster cast. But I would not have missed the opportunity for anything."

Although he has visited many refugee camps, Eldred was horrified by what he saw in the Hai Masna camp near Wau. "The people were traumatised and in a truly pitiful state," he said. "There was no consistent supply of food, and many of the tarpaulin-and-grass shelters were falling to pieces."

In the chaos which is now South Sudan, many of those in the camp did not even know who they had

fled from. "All they knew was that men with guns had come, killing their neighbours, and burning their houses," said Eldred. "They just ran, without stopping to find out who was attacking them."

The team found that the biggest worry in the camp was the lack of light. "Last week my son was attacked by a snake inside our tent," said Asunta, a mother of six living in the camp. "We had to run away until morning, because we could not see anything."

Children were also being bitten

by scorpions in the night as they groped through the darkness towards the latrines.

HART is answering their needs by joining up with charity Power for the People (PFP), which produces what it calls 'Little Dream Boxes'. Each box contains 2kg of the latest life-changing solar technology, with an integral torch and hanging light, as well as the facility to charge a mobile phone.

As road travel is too dangerous in South Sudan, HART is arranging for 650 Little Dream Boxes to

be flown to Wau, for the most vulnerable families in the camp.

Baroness Cox and her team also crossed over into Sudan, to assess needs in the Nuba Mountains. Last year HART provided life-saving aid to 9000 Sudanese people who were scavenging for food after fighting had driven them from their homes.

Eldred has recently been appointed Chief Operating Officer of HART. You can support its life-saving work and stay in touch with its projects at www.hart-uk.org

Couple bring a world of experience to Norwich

Andy and Rosie Sexton have lived and worked all over the world, seeking to give people on the edges a brighter future. Since moving to Norwich in 2010, they have translated this experience into helping refugees, asylum seekers and recovering addicts access a better life. **Jenny Seal reports.**

Between them, Andy and Rosie Sexton have lived in Australia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Uganda and America. Nine years ago they settled in Norwich.

In 2011, Rosie founded English+, a charity that runs English classes in Norwich for refugees, asylum seekers and people who are isolated because they don't speak the language.

Andy is the Interim CEO of drug and alcohol misuse charity the Matthew Project; mentoring and running Bible studies for refugees in his spare time.

They became Christians as children and worship at Holy Trinity Church Norwich. Andy grew up in Australia. Rosie grew up in Kenya and, as a teenager, went to Norwich High School for Girls. Both of their parents served as missionaries in Africa and both saw their parents putting their faith into action by serving the poor.

Andy met Rosie in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe in 1996. Rosie was supporting market traders and rural people with business training and help to access markets. Andy was volunteering on a project educating children and young people about HIV and AIDS.

It wasn't quite love at first sight – Andy's hair was too long and Rosie wore the wrong type of dungarees – but they overcame these setbacks, and have been on a long-distance journey together since.

The pair lived happily in Zimbabwe until 2004. Andy worked with Scripture Union and then Tear Australia developing projects for homeless children. When his visa became un-renewable, he took an international role for the Christian charity Oasis and, with their two young children, the family moved to Uganda.

From here Andy travelled the



Rosie and Andy Sexton in Norwich.

world, from Bangladesh to Brazil, supporting teams on the ground setting up projects to help vulnerable children. Rosie raised the family in Uganda and did part-time work consulting with international development organisations.

Andy said: "It was a good life. But we felt less integrated in Uganda. It was harder to get to know local Ugandans. We really liked knowing some of the language in Zimbabwe and feeling part of the community."

In 2008, they moved to Los Angeles where Andy studied for a Master's degree in Leadership and Intercultural Studies at Fuller Seminary and Marshall Business School. Rosie home-schooled their children and became a ski instructor, fulfilling a dream she had had since school.

"We lived in mission accommodation in L.A. with people from all over the world," Rosie said. "It was fascinating, I loved it."

In 2010, their daughter was just about to start high school and they had to decide where to live next. Andy had taken a role as Associate International Director with Oasis, which could be based anywhere. Rosie was keen that their children should have an identity in the place where they held a passport. "I thought that citizenship was a privilege," she said, "and it was important that they have some sort of roots."

Rosie's parents lived in Ketteringham so the family settled in Norwich. Andy said: "I could fly from Norwich to Schiphol and from there onto anywhere. It was a good move for us. It couldn't have been better."

Rosie studied for a TEFL qualification (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), while she and the children settled into their new life. One fear they had moving to Norwich was that it would seem too monocultural, but Rosie soon found

that wasn't the case.

"I got to know of some of the families who were here from Africa," she said. "For me that was great because I felt very much at home in Africa. They started talking about how isolated they were, and how difficult English was".

She decided to set up an English class at Holy Trinity Church Norwich. Rosie said: "We just had four students from two countries. My mum helped me and a few other people came along to see what it was about."

Now, eight years on, English+ is an independent charity that runs four free classes across the city attended by around 150 people each week. Rosie said, "Our focus is on refugees and asylum seekers, but anyone is welcome. We have people from 46 nationalities who come."

"We have people coming who have just arrived in Norwich, who have nothing, and they've been here just a

few days. There are also people who've been in England for 10 years and have no English. People come who are isolated and often lonely, due to lack of English. People don't have a label in the lessons. You walk in the door and you're just there to learn English. Everyone always says the atmosphere is so welcoming."

There are language classes, a conversation class and an art and craft class plus specialist initiatives to build confidence and support integration such as driving theory support, cultural projects, volunteering initiatives and referrals to expert agencies for issues such as benefits, housing and immigration. There is a team of 40 volunteers along with a few part-time staff and Rosie.

"The challenges that people come with are quite tough," Andy said.

Rosie agrees: "There is a big emotional toll that goes with it. But you feel it's an enormous privilege because people trust you. You can walk alongside people in difficult journeys and that's a real honour."

Andy worked internationally with Oasis until 2016 and then took a short-term contract with Norwich School developing a Leadership programme. In his spare-time he started meeting with refugees, mentoring them in both matters of faith and employment. Then, in 2018, he put that on the back burner and took a role as Interim CEO of the Matthew Project where he is developing their new Next Steps Recovery Centre on Norwich's Oak Street – a place for those in recovery from addiction to access support and training for employment.

Here in Norwich they continue to do what they have always done around the world. Andy said: "I've always been very justice orientated and people orientated and interested in other cultures. It's just intrinsic to me as a person."

Rosie said: "It's funny to think my life's more multi-cultural in Norwich than it was when I was living abroad. All the skills and experience I've picked up, I've found I've been able to use in Norwich, which I never expected. I think we are called to show Christian love. I was always interested in people and I've had a very cross-cultural life so, for me, this is natural."

■ Find out more about English+ at www.englishplus.org.uk and the Matthew Project at www.matthewproject.org.

SEASONS

AWARD-WINNING INDEPENDENT SANDWICH SHOP

Homemade cakes, Hot & cold drinks, Buffets,
Inflight food, Offshore catering & Services

187 Reepham Road, Hellesdon, NR6 5NZ - info@seasonscateringuk.com - 01603 425591



cards n things

**Greetings cards, stationery, helium balloons, party products
and Thorntons chocolates**

193 Reepham Road, Hellesdon, NR6 5NZ - cardsandthings@btconnect.com - 01603 485832

Faith adventure after losing it all

■ Story continues from page one

"I had the best job I'd ever had in my life," Noel said. "I was a manager with a wonderful homeless charity called The Exaireo Trust. I'd set up this thing called the Ethos Project where I was getting guys who had been homeless back into work. I loved it."

They struggled with the decision but chose to obey and in 2015 moved to East Tuddenham. Noel said: "The first day we were there we got the furniture in and thought, 'what do we do now?' We had absolutely no idea. And it was just such a walk of faith, which we are still walking."

They have since had three addresses and now live in a house rented from the Church of England overlooking the River Wensum in Hellesdon.

Noel continues: "Coming back to Norfolk was right. We had to do that. Rachel was consumed in her ministry with the church in Loughborough and coming back here freed her from that responsibility. Now she can be fruitful where God has gifted her."

Their typical week involves leading a meeting of prayer, prophecy and worship in Weston Longville every Wednesday morning. On Thursdays they lead an hour of prayer and worship in St Stephen's Church in central Norwich followed by an afternoon of mentoring. Rachel is the Community Spiritual Director for St Stephen's Church and the couple are part of the congregation there.

Noel also leads worship at the North Norfolk Filling Station. He writes songs and is working on his second album. His first album 'Love Song,' a collection of 12 beautiful worship tracks, was released in 2017 thanks to a grant from Dreams and Visions.

The rest of the time is taken up with clients who approach them via the website. On Skype Rachel has mentored and prayed with people in Switzerland, Germany, France, Bermuda, America, Africa, Pakistan and India.

"The other day I had a phone call, out of the blue, from a pastor in Ethiopia," Rachel said. "He said: 'would you pray and prophesy for me?' I arranged a day to call him back and it completely changed everything for him. He had lost his hope I guess, and just speaking right in from God changed that and he was encouraged, and re-enlivened, and full of God and so grateful."

Rachel continues, "I don't think we're anything special. We're just living a normal, Christian life." Noel bursts out laughing. "I think I'd argue with that," he said, "I think our life is bonkers."

Rachel agrees: "It is bonkers, but what I'm saying is we're not any different. We are just ordinary people. And anybody can get revelation. It's just the Gospel. I want to encourage people that the adventure is there. Everyone's adventure looks different, but it's there."

You can find out more about Prophetic Lighthouse at www.propheticlighthouse.com.

The couple would love to support the church in Pakistan mentioned in the article. The End Times Revival Ministries runs an orphanage, a school and care for vulnerable women in the Punjab district of Faisalabad. If you would be willing to help this ministry, please email revrachel.alexander@gmail.com

Norwich couple **Eddie and Jeannie Pleban** have celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary, eight years after Eddie suffered a major brain stem stroke on a plane flying back from Australia and was given just 48 hours to live. **Keith Morris** reports.



Eddie and Jeannie Pleban cutting a 50th wedding anniversary cake.

Couple celebrate eight years after stroke on plane

In 2011, Eddie was taken straight from the plane and hospitalised in Dubai, where doctors told Jeannie he had only 48 hours to live "barring a miracle".

She said: "On February 6, 2011, I believed my earthly relationship with Eddie, and life as I knew it, was at an end. Family and friends worldwide gathered in support and prayer.

However, God had other ideas. He granted that miracle and Eddie survived, only to regain consciousness and find he was completely paralysed and only able to move his eyelids."

He spent nine days in ICU in Dubai and then was returned to the Norfolk & Norwich Hospital by Leahjet accompanied by a doctor and nurse and then spent a further eight months in the hospital and in Caroline House before returning home in September 2011 in a wheelchair.

In July 2012, Eddie carried the Olympic torch at Sandringham and walked a few steps.

In July 2013, with a team around him, he climbed the last 500 metres of Mam Tor in Derbyshire, taking three hours rather than the usual 20 minutes and raising funds for Different Strokes a charity assisting younger stroke survivors to regain their lives.

Eddie has been a co-ordinator of a local Different Strokes group since 2012 for younger stroke survivors in Norwich, which has grown from five members to 20 plus. He regularly speaks to medical students about brain stem stroke and has spoken at regional conferences and training days for medical staff.

Jeannie said: "Today we still grieve for things we have lost but celebrate what we have. Eddie doesn't drive anymore but gets around in a motorised wheelchair. He can't walk up mountains, ski or camp out in the snow. But we swim, travel and have returned a number of times to Australia to visit our daughter and grandchildren."

"Best of all, on December 7, 2018, with family and friends

around us, we celebrated 50 years of marriage, a day that in February 2011 none of us believed we would ever see. On February 6 we then met with family and friends to thank God for his goodness towards us."

Eddie said: "I want people to know that there is life after a stroke and my experience is that it is good."

In October, the incorrigible Eddie is planning to visit Norway to see the Northern Lights and fulfil a lifelong ambition to walk on Arctic ice.

"Looking back over the last eight years it would be true to say that life has not always been a bed of roses," said Jeannie. "Members of our family have been, and are still, going through trials and tribulations. But every day is a bonus, whatever it brings.

"To some it may seem a strange thing to say, but I don't believe our life would be as rich, in every way, as it is now, had we not been through what we did in 2011. God knows what He is doing."

Everyone has a story worth telling

Let us help tell your life story in your very own book

Included

- 5-7,000 words
- Up to 10 pictures
- 20 colour paperback printed copies
- Professional writers and editors
- Special introductory price of just £999 (£1300)
- Options for longer story and more books
- Contact us at web@networknorwich.co.uk or ring 07712 787762 to discuss recording your story for posterity or visit:

www.lifestories.org.uk



Steve's comic capers

Professional cartoonist **Steve English**, whose cartoons and illustrations have appeared in both **The Beano** and **The Dandy** comics, has now settled in **Stalham** and is using his talents to help with the outreach at his local Baptist church. **Tony Rothe** reports.

Steve was born on the Isle of Man and was brought up there and in Northern Ireland during the 1970s and 80s.

"I have always drawn since I was small, trying my best to copy the cartoons of Walt Disney," said Steve. "Life took me in various directions after school, but I always took the little skill I had at drawing cartoons with me wherever I ended up, including university. Some years later a friend remembered my drawing from that time when he had a book idea. That kick-started the idea in me of drawing cartoons full-time."

Steve has been drawing cartoons professionally for almost 20 years, and has illustrated the Horrible Histories and Horrible Science magazines, Scooby-Doo World of Mystery and The Dandy. In 2011 he won the Tartan Bucket prize organised by Dundee University and part of the prize was to have his cartoon featured in The Beano. "So I do make a point of boasting that I have featured in both The Beano and The Dandy," he said.

He has also illustrated Bible stories and puzzles for Scripture Union, Kevin Mayhew Publishing as well as the Salvation Army, for whom he still does some work.

"I enjoy writing gags as much as drawing them, and have produced a number of Bible cartoon strips," he explains. "Two of these, Peter's Cat (cat to the apostle Peter) and Two by Two (life on Noah's Ark) were published as books. That was over 20 years ago now, but Peter's Cat still kicks around in a Christian magazine in Singapore!"

Steve has since created a follow up to Peter's Cat called The Cats of the Apostles!

Steve has also been drawing and writing a weekly football cartoon called Football Earth for over 10 years. It depicts how animals might play football and it features in a couple of national magazines; a soccer paper in New York and is translated into Italian for a publication in Rome. A collection of those cartoons were published as a book called The Wild Side in early 2017.

Steve explains that his commitment to Jesus came about at university. He decided to join the Christian Union, and they presented him with a membership card that said something like, "I believe that Jesus Christ is my Lord



Cartoonist Steve English in his Stalham studio.

and Saviour".

"When I read it for the first time, I realised that this was something God had been waiting for," he said.

After university, Steve went to Poland to teach English as a foreign language with a Christian student organisation. This is where he met his future wife Susie when she joined the team a couple of years later. After leaving Poland, Steve and Susie looked for similar work in Britain and, after several interviews around the country, ended up in Cromer working with young people in youth groups, beach missions and church.

They have now been married for 21 years and have two children, Amy (18) and Joe (11), and they have been at Stalham Baptist Church for almost five years.

Steve volunteered to help with the children's craft at church events, and Peter's Cat has found its way into the weekly church bulletin. "Our pastor Ron discovered Peter's Cat on a bookstall at Greenbelt 20 years ago, but only recently connected that with me!" said Steve. "I feel that laughter is an important part of our outreach – Ron certainly has a very keen sense of humour."

Steve points out that his work is nothing new – over 100 years ago, WH Cooke produced a publication in Stalham called The Scorchers but was reputedly horse-whipped because he took the mickey out of the locals!

The modern equivalent of The Scorchers is Stalham's Community Scene magazine, published by Stalham Baptist Church, illustrated by Steve and containing at

least one of his cartoons. "I hope to escape the fate of Mr Cooke, however, as I do try not to be too controversial or cause any offence! But I do enjoy finding humour in Scripture," he explains.

Steve and the team at Stalham Baptist Church are always looking for ways to form links with the local community. He recently painted a board which was set up outside the local Tesco, where people were

invited to take photos of their friends and family with their heads poking through the holes. They were then encouraged to post the pictures on Stalham Baptists' Facebook page with prizes, contributed by local retailers, for the most "likes".

■ For more about Steve's work, or to purchase any of his cartoons or books, visit his website at www.deadseacomics.co.uk

Golden Triangle churches to stage May Fair

■ Churches in the Golden Triangle area of Norwich will be organising a May Fair in Heigham Park on Monday May 6 from 11am – 4pm.

This successful event for families has been taking place for many years and is well established in the local calendar.

St Peters on Jessopp Road are organising the fair with the help of Chapelfield Road and Bowthorpe Road Methodist churches. Hundreds of visitors enjoy a day in a Christian environment of love and fellowship.

In addition to the usual fete stalls and games there will be a small fairground and the ever popular donkey rides and dance performances. Several food outlets include a BBQ, crepe stall, curry stall, ice cream and the popular tea marquee.

All are invited to come and join in the fun. Car parking can be difficult but buses number 25 and 26 will get you within a 10-minute walk of Heigham Park.

Walk of witness

■ Sheringham churches will unite for a united service and walk of witness on Good Friday, April 19.

A service at St Peters parish church, Church Street, Sheringham, NR26 8QS, at 10:45am - 11:15am, will be followed by a walk of witness via the clock-tower to nearby Beeston Hill to erect the cross with a short time of worship.



FOR YOUR NEXT FUNCTION OR EVENT

Belsey Bridge Conference Centre, Ditchingham, provides friendly service and great facilities for your function in a quiet rural setting.

- Function rooms for up to 110 people
- Locally sourced food, tailored to your individual requirements
- Free Wi-Fi and AV equipment
- Hotel quality bedrooms at affordable prices

📞 0300 111 4444

✉ belseybridge@cct.org.uk

🌐 www.cct.org.uk/belseybridge

Belsey Bridge Conference Centre
Ditchingham, Bungay, Suffolk NR35 2DZ



EVENTS CONFERENCES
AWAY DAYS SHORT BREAKS
FUNCTIONS
CELEBRATIONS

Making a worl

Some people travel the world to make a big difference. **David and Ruth Southgate** have stayed in Norwich and made a world of difference in one small corner of Hellesdon. **Jenny Seal reports.**

On a single road in Hellesdon, David and Ruth Southgate have raised four boys, established a church, run a successful shop, founded an orchestra, tirelessly served the children and elderly of their community and now plan to build affordable homes for the elderly.

On the corner of Reepham Road and Middletons Lane in Hellesdon, north-west Norwich, sits the specialist card shop Cards 'n' Things owned by David and Ruth Southgate and managed by their son Paul.

The family home, that David and Ruth built almost 50 years ago, sits 100m away on the other side of the road. Just beyond their back garden is Meadow Way Chapel, the church the couple founded and helped build a few years later.

To the back of the church is land they have recently purchased, as trustees of a new charity, to build reasonably priced properties for the elderly.

David Southgate, a former builder, has lived in Hellesdon all his life. In 1964 he married Ruth. Both had become Christians as children and felt the need to start a Sunday School locally. David said: "We just felt that God wanted us to start a work in Hellesdon."

They began to open up their home for 'squashes' where they would pile youngsters in for evenings of quizzes, songs and refreshments.

In 1969, a half-acre plot of land came on the market on Reepham Road, just around the corner from where they lived. With a growing family and building business, the Southgates bought it and built a new family home.

Five months after moving, the Norfolk evangelist David Dixon got in touch. He had heard the Southgates had land and proposed pitching a marquee to host meetings for children and adults during the spring. The Southgates agreed and obtained planning permission for the marquee to be erected. Around 60 - 70 children came each evening.

From those tent meetings, the couple started a Sunday School and adult gatherings in their home. Then David applied for planning permission to put a mobile classroom on their land, which was purchased and used to hold the meetings.



Paul (left), Ruth and David Southgate inside Cards 'n' Things in Hellesdon.

David said: "With the help of a few people who joined us, we applied to the council for permission to build a small church on the land. We were devastated when we heard it had been turned down. But God had bigger plans. He knew we'd outgrow that too soon."

In 1972, after persistent enquiries to the Council and David's purchase of further land to enable the building of a road up to the Chapel, now Chapel Court, their plans for a church were approved. The church was built by a mix of volunteers and professionals.

David said: "We won't go into the Health and Safety of it!"

"Our young sons loved to help on the building site, even helping nail on the flat roof. People would be horrified these days!"

The official opening of the current building of Meadow Way Chapel took place in 1974. In 1975, the year their youngest son Paul was born, David decided on a career change. Ruth said: "He had this crazy idea of opening a toy shop! So, we went ahead and bought this little corner shop down the road."

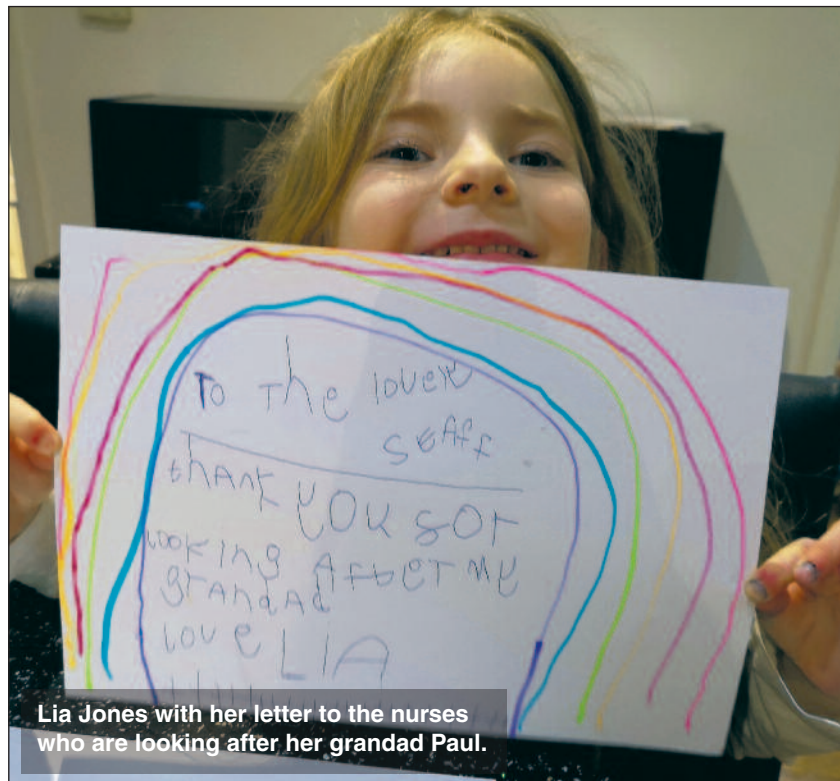
David said: "That was a total turnaround from me being a builder. When we look back we can see God

was in these plans. The shop is a good Christian witness."

By extending and knocking through, David transformed the small, front room grocer's shop at the roundabout on Reepham Road and Middletons Lane into 'Hellesdon Toy and Gift Centre'. In the late 1980s, faced with too much competition from larger toy shops and supermarkets, they decided to sell the shop or rent it out. The few cards they had were selling well so they decided to rent the small shop next door to sell cards and stationery.

Ruth said: "Meanwhile we tried to sell or rent our shop. Three times we got to the point of selling or renting and each time, the day before we were supposed to sign the people pulled out. So, again we felt the Lord was telling us something and this time it was to go back to our original shop and fill it with cards. We are so pleased we were obedient to what the Lord had planned for us."

Their son, Paul, now manages the thriving card shop, but Ruth and David are still involved – David as the 'maintenance man' and Ruth meeting sales reps. As well as a very impressive selection of cards for every occasion, the shop sells helium-filled



Lia Jones with her letter to the nurses who are looking after her grandad Paul.

Lia joins church's kindness revolution

Five-year-old Lia Jones has joined a 40-day revolution of kindness currently being run by a Norwich church by offering a helping hand to nurses at the Norfolk & Norwich University Hospital where her terminally-ill grandad, Paul, is being treated.

Paul Jones, aged 61, is currently at the hospital and is being cared for in the last stages of chronic lung disease and heart failure.

Lia, from Kinsale Infant School which has joined the 1000 Hours acts of kindness campaign being run by Gateway Vineyard Church in Norwich during Lent, took it upon herself to draw sev-

eral pictures for the nurses and some patients on the ward.

Lia's mum, Lisa, said: "Paul is a very lovely gentleman and a great asset to our family. Lia is aware of what is happening and visits her Grandad daily as we are an incredibly close family."

"When we visit, Lia wears her nurse's costume and voluntarily talks to the patients and will draw them pictures. She has drawn some lovely pictures for the nurses and all the staff on the ward who have displayed them on their cupboards so you can see them as you enter the ward. The hospital offers us all a great service when we need it and the staff work so incredibly hard."

"Lia says she wants to be a nurse when she is bigger bigger!" says her mum.

Gateway Church meanwhile are praying for Paul and the whole family. www.1000hours.co.uk

■ Following a successful project during Lent in 2018 in which over 1750 hours of kindness were clocked up, Gateway Vineyard Church is once again aiming for its members and supporters to rack up at least 1000 hours of voluntary work and acts of kindness towards other people during the six weeks of Lent.

There will be individual acts of kindness and larger projects bringing together groups of people.

Church pastor, Hannah Deal, said: "Last year was so successful and well received that we are once again asking our church members to think about doing simple acts such as baking a cake for a neighbour, giving your postman a bar of chocolate or cooking a meal for someone in need."

"We have already planned some larger group activities by offering our

services for free to community organisations in the area. There is going to be litter picking at schools, streets and beaches. We will be serving tea and cakes to residents at De Carle House in Thorpe St Andrew, running craft workshops, a free clothes swap and hampers for Leeway clients."

There are also several projects planned in conjunction with the Norfolk & Norwich University Hospital and James Paget Hospital to show appreciation for staff including giving away chocolate bars as well as goodie bags for ambulance drivers and knitting items for the neonatal unit babies.

Hannah said: "We believe that simple acts of kindness will send ripples across our city and county. I hope that in big ways and small we will be able to show people God's love and kindness."

d of difference



times to accommodate growth.

The couple are still involved in the church's annual children's summer camp. Ruth helps with the luncheon club for the elderly, and David with the local friendship club. David also goes into local schools to take assemblies, telling Bible stories using his flannelgraph board, and both are in Meadow Way Chapel's Open the Book team. They also run Meadow Way's 40-piece orchestra that stages three charity concerts each year.

And now they are trustees of the Hawthorne Meadow Trust, a charity working to develop affordable housing for elderly people. David said: "We want to do a little complex for the elderly of Hellesdon. It is quite an exciting scheme which we are looking forward to."

In conversation, David and Ruth are incredibly modest and quick to downplay their achievements. David said: "The Lord's been good to us and we've been blessed with good health, strength and plenty of energy. He's enabled us to be involved in all these things."

Cards 'n' Things is open every day except Sunday from 9am-5.30pm at 193 Reepham Road, Norwich NR6 5NZ. There is free parking outside.

balloons, wrapping paper, gift bags and stationery. In 2011 they incorporated a Thorntons franchise to stock their chocolates.

The atmosphere is welcoming, and the staff are clearly attentive to the customers. "We are really blessed with the staff we've got," said Ruth. "They are pleasant and cheery and look after the customers."

David and Ruth, who are now in their 70s, continue to worship at Meadow Way Chapel, a vibrant church of around 130 people, which has been extended three



Editor Keith Morris.

Project to record people's life stories launched

A strong belief that everyone has a story worth telling is behind a new project to help ordinary people do just that and then publish their own life story in a paperback book.

■ The www.lifestories.org.uk website has been launched by the team behind the popular Christian news website Network Norfolk and the Good News for Norfolk newspaper.

The aim is to provide a cost-effective way of linking experienced writers with people who want to preserve their life story and family memories for future generations.

The service provides ghostwriters to interview and record their subjects and then edit the manuscript into an engaging short book of around 7,000 words. These are then professionally turned into a paperback format, along with family pictures and copies printed.

The idea behind the service came from website editor Keith Morris who realised too late that he had missed the opportunity to record the life story of a close relative when his mother-in-law, Mary, died four years ago.

"I strongly believe that everyone has a story worth telling and preserving for future generations to enjoy.

"I realised I had never sat down with Mary and listened at length to her fascinating life story and I had missed the opportunity to record it for family

and friends to read and keep.

"I did not want to make the same mistake again and so, soon afterwards, I began to use my skills as a writer to compile a short biography of my own mother. It was a wonderful thing to do, I learnt so much about Mum and her life and then I had the wonderful pleasure of presenting it to her on her 80th birthday.

"She felt so honoured and special that I had taken the time and trouble to do it – it was the best present I have ever given to anyone," said Keith.

"I enjoyed it so much and thought it was such a valuable exercise in preserving my own family history that I repeated the exercise for my father-in-law, Roy, and presented his book to him and all the guests at his 90th birthday dinner. Needless to say it went down a treat."

An introductory offer for the basic package is just £999, a considerable discount on similar services offered elsewhere, and can be adapted to suit individual needs.

To find out more about the biography-writing service visit www.lifestories.org.uk or email Keith at web@networknorwich.co.uk



Churches night shelter has positive impact

■ The Norwich Community Winter Shelter Project provided rough sleepers with a safe, warm place to stay during the winter months.

Churches in the city worked in partnership with Norwich City Council to provide accommodation for rough sleepers from November through to the end of March. Norwich Central Baptist Church (NCBC) and Russell Street Community Centre, run by St Thomas' church, hosted guests.

This is the first time a shelter like this has been provided in a co-ordinated way and accommodated 58 people who would otherwise have been sleeping on the streets. It has enabled some of them to engage with other services available and organisers believe that lives have been saved through the project.

Crucial to the project was the

army of 55 volunteers from the local community who took on various roles – from welcoming guests as they arrived, providing overnight supervision and clearing up in the morning.

One of the most exciting elements of the project was the longer-term outcomes for rough sleepers. Of the 58 individuals who used the shelter over the winter months, 29 have since moved on to more settled accommodation.

Gill Duffy, from NCBC said: "We are fortunate in Norwich that there are excellent services for homeless people and it is really positive that the Winter Night Shelter was part of that. There were challenges at times. We will be reviewing the project and reflecting on how it could be changed and improved next year. It was definitely a worthwhile thing to do."



Linvoy Primus speaking at the FGB dinner in Norwich

Former Premier League footballer and one-time Norwich City transfer target, **Linvoy Primus**, spoke in Norwich recently about how his life was transformed when he became a Christian. **Keith Morris** reports.

Football star Linvoy tells of transformed life

The former Charlton, Barnet, Reading and Portsmouth player spoke to a packed Norwich FGB Christmas dinner audience, including several civic guests, at the Mercure Hotel in the city.

After growing up in Stratford, East London, Linvoy played for a Sunday youth side at the age of 12 and, after a trial, signed an apprenticeship at the age of 16 with Charlton Athletic.

He was awarded a professional contract aged 18, but after a year was told he was not wanted and he signed for Barnet and then Reading.

"I was always playing with anxiety and a fear of rejection after my experience at Charlton," said Linvoy. "I thought happiness was playing football. But I was not really happy and there was something missing and I was still trying to prove something."

"I started chasing the dream of money for a little while, because the world tells you that the more money you have then the happier you will be."

"But it's not true and because of it, my partner Trish started to suffer from depression. I had achieved everything I wanted to as a professional footballer but I was still not happy."

Linvoy left Reading because he could not agree a contract and was offered one by Tony Pulis, manager at Portsmouth. For away games, Linvoy shared a room with his fellow defender, Darren Moore (until recently manager of West Bromwich Albion), who was himself a Christian, and he started asking Darren hard questions about his faith.

"Then my wife Trish got invited to church," said Linvoy, "and initially I went along to make up the numbers, but I heard about Jesus, that you could have a relationship with him. It was probably after about six weeks of asking difficult questions that I finally realised that I'd filled my life with all these different things and

the one thing missing from my life was Jesus."

"Weeks later I had an encounter with God where I was healed. I got hit by his power and at that moment I said 'God whatever you want me to do I will do because I know you are real, I know this is it.'"

Linvoy believes that it was no coincidence that this realisation marked a dramatic improvement in his performances on the pitch. He was freed from the burdening pressures of results and a desire to please 'every single fan'.

"At last I knew what real peace in my life was and my whole attitude to football and people changed as God changed me on the inside. As my confidence in God rose my relationships improved and I even began to play without fear and as a result performed to a higher level than I could have ever imagined."

Linvoy continued to play for Portsmouth for several seasons, helping them to win the Division One title and get promoted to the Premier League, before retiring in 2009 because of a knee injury.

He was so popular at Portsmouth that the Milton Stand at Fratton Park, was renamed "The Linvoy Primus Community Stand" in honour of his outstanding services to the club.

He released his autobiography in 2007 entitled "Transformed" and went on to help found and work with the Christian charity Faith and Football which provides a range of community, educational and overseas programmes using football as a platform.

He also walked the Great Wall of China to raise £100,000 for Prospect Children's School in Ibadan, Nigeria and a new medical centre, school and orphanage for a village in Goa.

Linvoy was awarded an MBE in the 2015 New Year Honours list for his contribution to football and charities.

www.faithandfootball.org.uk

YMCA NORFOLK

Summer BALL

WENSUM VALLEY HOTEL & GOLF CLUB
FRIDAY 14 JUNE 2019, 7.00PM

3 COURSE DINNER • DANCING TO WAPSCALLIONS

Dress code: Black Tie/Formal Carriages at Midnight

Early bird package: £40 a ticket, £400 a table
if paid in full before 12 April (£45 after this time)

For tickets & further information contact:
Judy Bailey, judy.bailey@ymcanorfolk.org

Tickets are also available to purchase at:
www.eventbrite.co.uk

YMCA

ROC Conversation identifies social issues across Norwich

Six key community social issues in Norwich have been identified following a **ROC Conversation** event in **Norwich** in February and an Action Group has met to take the project forward. **Keith Morris** reports.

Over 160 people from churches, Christian organisations, civic bodies and the Police gathered at the King's Centre in Norwich to exchange ideas and passions around community engagement.

Debra Green, founder of ROC, said: "There is so much happening in Norwich that really is worth celebrating. Many were surprised by just how much is already taking place and we encourage mapping existing activities and working with existing plans and strategies.

"Having a conversation is a great first step, but it needs to lead to action if community change is to be achieved. A local Action Group is being formed to move things forward, and what is particularly encouraging is that an incredible 62 people have already offered their time and skills to the community.

"We are particularly grateful to Darren Woodward from Oak Grove Community Church, and his team for their incredible local co-ordination. Darren will also be leading the Action Group."

The top six Norwich community issues identified by participants covered two-thirds of all those raised. They were: mental health; drugs; social isolation / loneliness; family support; communication / co-ordination; and homelessness.

A further six issues, covering 25% of replies, were: children/young people; domestic abuse; low aspirations / self-belief; debt; employment; statutory services stretched.

The report carries a series of recommendations, which include:

Mental health:

- We recommend that the Action Group liaise

Debra Green from ROC, left, interviews Chief Inspector Sonia Humphreys at the Norwich ROC Conversation.



with Mind to see what support is required, what gaps in provision exist and how any proposed actions will tie in.

Drugs

- We recommend that the Action Group consider the ways in which the community can be engaged in being vigilant and encouraged not to tolerate gangs, violence and drug dealing.

We recommend that the Action Group work with the police and other agencies to create a presentation for parents and youth workers informing them of the issues their children face – and how as parents / youth workers they might respond to them.

Social isolation / loneliness

- We recommend mapping existing activities and discovering where the gaps are and work in partnership to avoid duplication; producing a leaflet detailing support and activities; and taking up the challenge to encourage and establish 'Know my Neighbour' schemes.

Family Support

- We recommend the Action Group be alert to opportunities to work in partnership with statutory agencies and considers establishing a mentoring scheme in partnership with local schools.

Communication / Coordination

- We recommend the Action Group properly map all the existing community activities.

Homelessness

- We recommend the Action Group considers how to welcome new residents and assimilate them into the community and those who wish to help the homeless do so through an existing charity.

Following an initial meeting of the working group at the end of February, Norwich co-ordinator, Darren Woodward, said: "It is envisaged that the action group will evolve into a few smaller sub-groups focused around proposed plans and projects that will serve to work towards alleviating some of the highlighted issues.

"Successful action is dependent upon both people and a passion coming together to act as a catalyst for change, which naturally means that there may be a sway towards one or more of the issues initially."

The next proposed meeting for the Action Group is April 4, 7pm at Oak Grove Community Church.

If you missed the initial meeting but would like to become involved, email Darren Woodward at darren@oakgrovecommunitychurch.co.uk www.roc.uk.com

Conversation starters

Soundbites from speakers at the initial Norwich ROC meeting.

- Tim Lawes, headteacher at Cat-ton Grove Primary School for over 20 years, said: "We can make a big, big difference to the children and families in our community.

Kids need someone being alongside them giving them messages over a fairly long period of time to give them direction. If you empower kids to be able to make choices, sometimes they will make the good choices."

- Emma Smith, Strategy Officer at Norwich City Council, said: "Everybody in this room represents the assets of the city. As a statutory organisation we now have limited resources and it is about being really innovative and bringing as many different resources as we can together to make a difference. We find there is often duplication of effort and what we want is to be able to bring people together to make the best use of the resources available."

- Chief Inspector Sonia Humphreys, from Norfolk Police, said: "There are so many people out there who want to do the right thing and to help. Within the faith groups there is a readily available resource for us to be able to work together and do good things."



Kevin Cobbold Funeral Services



01603 528800

07789 586817

Christian funeral director

Independent, affordable and personal

Home visits, Full quotations, Funeral Plans, Memorials

109 Cromer Road, Norwich, NR6 6XW

www.cobboldfunerals.co.uk

cobboldkevin@yahoo.co.uk

Norwich church opens new community social hub

A newly-opened community hub on Mason Road in Norwich, run by Soul Church, is already seeing an influx of people from the local community taking part in a range of activities. Helen Baldry reports.

■ Godwins House is located close to the current Soul Church premises and is a venue for activities for all ages and offers a range of support outreaches for those in need of a helping hand.

Former Premiership footballer Linvoy Primus was at the opening ceremony and the ribbon was cut by 18-year old YMCA resident Jasmine Mickleburgh. The hub is part of Soul Foundation, a local initiative that works in partnership with other charities to bring hope, dignity, practical help, food and friendship to the vulnerable across the city.

Jon Norman, from Soul Foundation, said: "We're so excited to be able to open our doors to the community. There's so much need in our city and we hope that this will be a place where people can come to feel safe and supported. We'd like to say a huge thank you to everyone who has worked on the project so far, including residents from YMCA Norfolk, members of our homeless community and young people from Soul Youth."

Godwins House will be used for after-school clubs, homework clubs and a youth drop-in, as well as sewing cafes, knit and natter sessions, job clubs, financial budgeting sessions and mental health awareness and support groups.

Groups and sessions will be held on the ground floor of Godwins House, with a chill-out area upstairs where people can come and relax, make new friends, read books from the in-house library or play board games.

If you'd like to find out more about the outreach programmes run by Soul Foundation and their partners, please visit www.soulfoundation.co.uk



The opening of Godwins House in Norwich

Action stations for couple

Majors Mark and Andrea Sawyer were appointed leaders of the Salvation Army Citadel in Norwich last summer bringing energy and enthusiasm to their new roles and have already made a big impression. Helen Baldry reports.

■ The citadel, located on St Giles Street in Norwich city centre, is a warren of rooms, floors and flights of stairs. It houses an impressive 500-seat hall, as well as offices, a kitchen and St Catherine's cafe. Mark said: "We've inherited something that has so much potential." He is not just talking about the physical building but of the opportunities to further develop relationships with the community.

Andrea spoke of loneliness as one of the biggest problems of our time, a concern as rife in the 18 – 24 age group as with elderly people. Pastoral care is a high priority for Andrea, who has experience of women's ministry in prisons and of working with children with special needs.

Mark and Andrea were called as part of the emergency response team at the Grenfell Tower fire, where they offered food, drink and emotional support to the emergency crews at the scene. They are people of action and are often visiting the Salvation Army's community projects in Norwich, including the charity shop and the Arc, a drop-in centre for homeless and vulnerable people. Andrea said: "We don't want to be chained to a desk. We want to invest in people."

The couple are clear about their gifting; Mark is an evangelist and Andrea is a teacher. Mark enjoys bringing the Bible into everyday life and



Majors Andrea and Mark Sawyer in Norwich.

he shares his faith in a natural way. He said: "I love sharing the Jesus story and making it relevant to all ages."

Andrea grew up in Cambridge and Mark in Romford. They have had diverse placements with the Salvation Army and travelled all over the world – including setting up a schools project in Ghana and leading the world youth con-

vention in Sweden, with 126 countries present.

An early placement was in a deprived area of Middlesbrough where there was a high crime rate and many disaffected young people. Making church relevant to these young people was a real challenge and the experience gave Mark and Andrea a good – if somewhat eye-opening – grounding for their future ministry.

They moved on to a very different posting – a middle class area in Bourne, Lincolnshire – followed by a placement in Castleford in Yorkshire mentoring young people and leading summer camps. It was here that they saw phenomenal growth in the church family and describe it as a very special time, "Such a privilege to help people on their life's journey."

Over the years, Mark and Andrea have conducted 61 weddings between them – some of whom were relationships formed at the youth camps! Marriage is something the couple feel strongly about. "We realise life's tough. We have to work hard in every department of life and marriage is no different. We invest in helping people to flourish in marriage and relationship."

This year a Valentine's meal was held at the church in Norwich and 40 couples enjoyed a meal and were invited to attend a marriage enrichment course. One couple had been married for 75 years. Mark said: "You are never too old. There is always more to learn."

They have enjoyed their first few months in Norwich. Andrea said: "We love Norwich. It's an amazing city full of history and character. Our heart is very much for the local community."

"My goal in life is to keep the Jesus story alive," said Mark. "This story of love and hope is going on all around us. My aim is to help people discover who they really are in Christ and build the kingdom."

There are exciting plans to develop a carers group, grow the Messy Church ministry, establish a parent and toddler group, as well as a vibrant women's group, with support and encouragement at the centre of every activity. Mark said: "We want to develop a space so that whatever people are going through they can find something to help. As soon as they come through the front door they feel they belong."

No ordinary life for Mark

In February ordained minister and former prisoner **Mark Humphries**, who lives in East Norwich, was invited to address a reception at the House of Lords. **Jenny Seal** reports.

Coinciding with the 12-month anniversary of Mark's release from prison as part of a life sentence, it was a fitting end to a year of remarkable opportunity and activity.

Mark Humphries seems to fit more into life than most. In his 51 years he has trained as a chef, been ordained as a minister, set up a small enterprise selling vegetable boxes and served two terms in prison as part of a life sentence.

Mark, a well-built man with a soft Welsh accent and down-to-earth manner, tells his story openly with a sense of awe and plenty of superlatives. He describes the last twelve months as "a massive year".

Since being released from his second term in prison in February 2018, Mark has started work for an educational TV production company. He has also become a newspaper columnist in the Bury Free Press, begun preaching again, developed a blog, continued his studies with the Open University, turned an award-winning piece of writing into a novel and been invited to sit on an advisory panel for the Prison Education Trust.

On Tuesday, February 5, he addressed a reception at the House of Lords talking about the importance of education in prison.

Some of this rapid success he attributes to Val Dodsworth, "a massive friend, influence, supporter and mentor." Since leaving prison, Mark has been living in accommodation in Norwich owned by the Christian homeless charity House of Genesis.

Val, the founder of the charity, has become a close friend, introducing him to people and opening doors for him. Mark said: "Had it not been for Val I think I might be in a totally different place."

This is no doubt true, but it is Mark's openness, positivity, humility, talent and hard work that enable him to make the most of the opportunities he is given.

Mark was already a chef and



a pastor when he committed the 13 incidences of arson that led to him being given a life sentence. He was 25 and had undiagnosed bi-polar disorder. Thankfully no one was hurt in the fires.

"I guess it happened very abruptly," he said. "It went from the real high time of enjoying everything; being Rev Mark Humphries, Pastor of Eastside Christian Fellowship as it was at the time, to nothing. To not actually caring about my faith, not actually caring about my life, not actually caring about going to work.

"And so, I set the fires. And then a month or two months later I walked into the police station and handed myself in. There was a realization, 'actually, Mark, what have you done?'"

He served 10 years including three years in a therapeutic facility, "a wonderful prison called HMP Grendon". He came out in 2003, settling in Norfolk where, with his partner of the time, he rented a smallholding, growing and delivering vegetables and tending pigs.

The relationship ended, and in 2014 Mark got into an aggressive confrontation for which he was recalled to prison. "The World Cup had just been on and it was a stupid, boy argument. We were really vociferous and shouting," he admits. "Because we were in an approved premises at a probation hostel it didn't

go down too well." He ended up in HMP Wayland for four more years.

"Even though I say I was annoyed about the recall, I think it was actually a good thing," he said. "It allowed me time and space to repair what I'd left undone when I came out of prison in 2003."

When he talks about his time in prison it is always in positive terms. "It's an amazing place prison," he says. "I got to know myself so deeply that it was life changing. In fact, it changed my whole outlook on life and faith."

Mark became a Christian when he was 14 at a summer camp on a beach in South Wales. As a teenager he was part of a strong youth group in a charismatic church.

After leaving school he trained as a chef and moved to London where he got a job with Eastside Christian Fellowship feeding homeless people in a church-run makeshift hostel.

His pastor saw his potential and encouraged him to go into ministry. After some persuasion, Mark enrolled in a Distance Learning Bible College and received ordination.

His time in prison opened Mark up to other faith traditions. "I came in as a staunch Pentecostal, happy-clappy, very charismatic Christian," he said, "to now understanding that this broad church of Christianity is massive." Now as well as attending his local Anglican church he also wor-

ships at the Norwich Quaker Meeting House.

He describes prison as "a real powerful place for a Christian to be". He continues: "I've had big, big bodybuilding men in tears in my cell because of whatever. But they wouldn't show that to the rest of the community. In prison people get to know about your faith whether you preach it because you talk to them or whether

you preach it because you show them."

It was in prison that he also discovered a love for writing that has now become his passion, and the reason he is a wholehearted supporter and campaigner for education in prison.

"When I went in in 1993, I understood a sentence had to have a capital letter and a full stop," he said. "That was it -

semi-colons, colons, commas and the rest of it, forget about it! At Bible College my work kept coming back with red grammar marks and punctuation marks in it, and I'm thinking 'I have no idea what they mean'. So, I went to prison and thought 'I've got to find out what they mean now'. So, I gained the GCSE in English which was fantastic."

"And then I wrote a story because I was bored one night. I thought, 'you know what, I actually like this'. Someone then told me about the Koestler Awards that run an arts prize every year in prison. The story won bronze in its draft form. And so that was it, I was off - I wanted to write now."

Now he writes crime fiction novels, poems, blogs and is a newspaper columnist writing on behalf of charity Greener Growth. Mark is also studying for a Degree in English and Creative Writing with the Open University and has recently taken on the job of Broadcast Coordinator for Wayout TV, an educational channel streamed in prisons, where he has contributed to their course on writing.

"All prisoners need to learn up-to-date skills," he said. "It's great that you went in as a builder, but if you've been in prison 20 years as a builder, stuff has changed. So, let's just keep refreshing those skills, renewing them with new ones."

It is certainly an approach that is working well for Mark.

BRIGHT QUALITY PLUMBING

**No job too small
One year warranty on all work
Available weekends and evenings
Repairs and upgrades undertaken
Free estimates. No extra call-out charge
Handyman services also available**

**Please phone Greg Bright
Home: 01603 479216 Mobile: 07814182940**



K.P. ELECTRICS

**FOR ALL YOUR DOMESTIC ELECTRICAL REQUIREMENTS.
NEW ADDITIONS, REPAIRS AND EMERGENCIES.
FAST, FRIENDLY, RELIABLE SERVICE**

**PLEASE PHONE 01603 744208
MOBILE: 07770 921399**



God's love in a shoebox

Just before Christmas, 5,500 shoeboxes packed with toys, stationery, winter woolies and toiletries were donated by people across Norfolk to children living in poverty overseas, a charity effort co-ordinated by **Trish Ellse** from Wymondham. **Jenny Seal** reports.



Trish Ellse from Wymondham (centre) out in Bosnia helping to deliver the Samaritan's Purse shoeboxes to children.

In January, Trish visited Bosnia, one of the countries receiving Norfolk's shoeboxes, to see the impact.

Every year, the Christian charity Samaritan's Purse mobilises churches, schools and community groups across a number of Western countries to pack shoeboxes as Christmas presents for children living in Sub Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In

2018, an amazing 10.6m shoeboxes were donated globally, through the charity's Operation Christmas Child, including over half a million from the UK.

In June last year, Trish took on her dream job managing Operation Christmas Child in the East of England. Trish, who is originally from South Africa, moved to Wymondham in 2013. She was introduced to Operation Christmas Child

through Wymondham's Alive Church and soon became passionate about the cause. Before working full-time for the charity, she was a key volunteer co-ordinating the collection and processing of shoeboxes across Norfolk.

In the run up to Christmas 2018, around 20,000 shoeboxes were transported from the UK to Bosnia and Herzegovina, some originating in Norfolk.

In January, Trish visited the country with a team of seven UK volunteers, to see shoeboxes being distributed and to meet the local people who make it work.

Trained volunteers, from Bosnia's small number of evangelical churches, distribute the shoeboxes. Visiting schools, homes, hospitals and local communities, they take shoeboxes to children who may never have received a Christmas present before. When appropriate they also share a Gospel message. It is a way for the local church to open doors, build relationships within their communities and tell people about the love of God.

Trish talks about these volunteers with awe. She tells of Tomislav Dobutovic, Pastor of the Baptist Church in Sarajevo, who travelled to a mountainous community to give out shoeboxes at a tiny school for seven children.

"I'm always blown away by what people do here in the UK for shoeboxes and the giving that's involved," she said. "But the part that our local church partners and volunteers abroad have is inspiring."

Trish and her group were able to accompany local volunteers to a shoebox distribution in a Roma community in the industrial town of Zenica. Unfortunately, the temperature was -6°C so the children vanished indoors to open their prized possessions.

It was on visits to people's homes that the team got to see the joy of children opening their shoebox. Trish said: "One little girl, who was about two, got her shoebox and there was a Peppa Pig in her box and that was the first thing she saw. She grabbed that and hugged it. Each one of the children would take things out one at a time and look at them, not like our kids who might empty out the box!"

The team visited the home of a single mum to give a shoebox to her son who has cerebral palsy. Incredibly Anne, one of the UK volunteers, is married to a man with cerebral palsy.

Trish said: "It was such an encouragement and blessing for this mum. She kept saying to Anne, 'you married him? And he's okay? He has a wife?' and that was just such an encouragement for her. Only God knew that Anne was going to visit this woman. It wasn't planned. None of us at the time knew that Anne's husband had cerebral palsy. It was just an incredible God moment."

Trish said: "The boy's favourite item was a toothbrush because he'd just had a visit from the dentist that morning. So, his whole face lit up when he saw the toothbrush."

"Sometimes people may worry about what they pack in a box," Trish said, "but God knows what's going in that box, and God knows every child that that box is going to go to."

After receiving a shoebox, each child is invited, with their parent's permission, to attend The Greatest Journey, a fun 12-part introduction to the Gospel. In Bosnia, a few hundred children have enrolled on the programme.

The team saw one of these sessions at Zenica's Word of Life Church with a class of eight children, who had received their shoeboxes a few weeks before. One young boy called Demir walked 5km each way, in the snow, to attend.

"That was my highlight," said Trish. "Seeing the passion that their teacher, Azmina, has to teach those children, because she loves God so much. They play games, they sing songs and the children are so engaged. They are just so thankful."

Azmina had received a shoebox when she was a child. A few weeks after returning to the UK, Trish received an email from Azmina to tell her that seven of the eight children had given their lives to Christ. "Which is just so exciting," Trish said.

"You don't know the difference that a shoebox is making in a child's life," said Trish. "They get to hear the Word of God, and they get to experience God's love through a shoebox."

If you would like to encourage your church, school, work place or community group to pack shoeboxes, or if you would like to volunteer with Operation Christmas Child in another capacity, please contact Trish at trish.ellse@samaritans-purse.org.uk

Do you have a heart for young people?

Why not become a Supported Lodgings or Nightstop host?

If you are willing to provide a young person in need with a room in your home and support them on their journey, we would love to hear from you.

YMCA Norfolk is looking for hosts for vulnerable young people and has both paid and volunteer opportunities, from just one night or up to two years.

You won't be alone in this, YMCA Norfolk will help by providing training and ongoing support.

To find out more please contact our friendly Supported Lodgings team:

YMCA Community Housing, 29-34 Anglia Square, Norwich, NR3 1DZ

E: community.housing@ymcanorfolk.org

T: 01603 662455

www.ymcanorfolk.org



Find us on Facebook
[facebook.com/ymcanorfolk](https://www.facebook.com/ymcanorfolk)



Follow us on Twitter
[@YMCANorfolk](https://twitter.com/YMCANorfolk)



YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

SUPPORT & ADVICE

ACCOMMODATION

FAMILY WORK

HEALTH & WELLBEING

TRAINING & EDUCATION