

The George Lovell Interview

Interview with The Revd Dr George Lovell by David Read and David Dadswell. A review of Dr Lovell's life and work in his own words in an interview which took place in September 2011

I: Interviewer
R: Respondent

Note: This transcript has been edited by the interviewers and by Dr George Lovell in order to ensure that what was said comes across clearly and so that details and names which may not have been remembered at the time of the interview are correct.

I: Today is the 29th of September 2011. The Revd Dr George Lovell is interviewed by David Dadswell and David Read.

I: George, what would you say is the most important thing that you learned through your life and work?

R: The thing that comes to mind is the respect of people and the respect of their autonomy and their freedom. That would be, I think, why I came to embrace a non-directive approach, because I realised that it was properly respecting people and yet it was trying to help them to respect themselves and to give dignity to their own worth and their own ideas and things like that. Albert Schweitzer's saying reverence for life has been very important to me and in the last few years, I've been thinking that if I wanted an axiom - I consider Schweitzer's saying to be something of a middle axiom - it would be reverence for human freedom, a vital aspect of reverence for life. Yes; and I think I regret the times when I haven't respected people's independence or autonomy; in my younger years I didn't. I think my theological education was one which was bent towards really trying to be persuasive, if not manipulative, of people. At the end of my first year in college I remember reading *Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James and getting terribly excited. I read it very quickly. I don't normally read books quickly, but I read that one very quickly, I just devoured it because of the insights into the varieties of religious experience that people have and the need to respect people's abilities to have different forms of religious experiences and the understanding that some people simply cannot have certain forms of religious experience. The beginning of the next term I went to my tutor, Clive Thexton, and told him that I was terribly concerned about Billy Graham saying, 'Come forward, you can have this experience tonight' when psychologically it was proven that some people could not have that kind of religious experience, it is not in their psychological constitution to do so. I was very excited and worked up about this. His reply was, "Well, it's fair enough because it fits the majority." I hit the roof. You should not allow something to go on, which is obviously faulted, and especially when you don't make proper provision for the fall out. I am writing some reflective notes on my vocational life and found that at a fairly early period in my life I got very upset by people who try to manipulate me. And, as I was brought up in a very working class

culture where that was part of the way in which people lived, related and controlled, it's the only way they knew really

I: You came to ministry from 10 years in engineering. What would be the influence of yourself as an engineer on the range of your life and work?

R: I think I ought to say something about my engineering experience, first of all. I was brought up in Lancashire in a traditional engineering culture, where if you started to say, 'Why don't we do it this way?' the response would be: 'No we have always done it this way'. So it was tradition bound. Eventually I got into a drawing and design office in a large textile machinery-making firm, which I thought was going to be different. Actually, I was greatly misled in the interview I had for the job. I had been studying at night school and the thing that particularly interested me at that stage was the way in which long spindles actually oscillated and the cycles they went through at different speeds. So when I was interviewed I talked about this quite animatedly and they said that would be useful. When I got into this department I found that it was not of any consequence at all to the job. It was simply just putting parts together according to various patterns for different machines and assembling them on the drawing board. I got out of that department when the firm set up a research department trying to find out how to spin more quickly centrifugally through containers floating at high speed on air cushions to reduce friction. I won't go into the details, but they/we had no idea how to go about doing research. A problem we could not solve led inevitably to the closure of the department. I was about 19 and I decided somehow or other that I was not going to go back into what I had done before. I happened to see an advert for assistant experimental officers in the Ministry of Supply. Even though I had never heard of experimental officers, something prompted me to apply. The Civil Service Commissioners for the scientific services interviewed me. To my amazement, I was offered a temporary post as an assistant experimental officer at the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough in the Mechanical Engineering Research Department. I had no idea where Farnborough was. I accepted the post with great excitement. That opened my life to a world I didn't know existed. I had never ever been in that kind of working environment. It was in every way the opposite of anything I had ever known: anything and everything was considered, and no idea was too stupid or ridiculous not to be giving consideration. Tradition had no place. I think there were about 8,000 scientists there at the time, engineers, graduates and so on, covering every aspect of aeronautics. Working there was the most incredible experience. It had a radical effect upon me. I was appointed to a section in the Mechanical Engineering Department that was carrying out research and experiment into problems related to escaping from aircraft under crash conditions. I spent about four years there interspersed by two years National Service.

Going into a theological college was a traumatic experience in some ways for me. All my higher education had been through part time and evening classes in engineering. Starting on a fulltime educational programme dominated by a classical approach to study was an intellectual culture shock. It was a good thing if you had done Latin, Greek and Hebrew. I had not studied any of these languages; indeed I had not studied English properly. Biblical languages were considered terribly important. I struggled enormously. All my past experience was not valued at all and, in fact, devalued. "It was great pity George you never went to grammar school and you didn't do languages" was not said explicitly like that but that was the message I got. So my

engineering experience was pushed aside and I was partly seduced into feeling that the only thing that mattered was this system of thinking and languages and critical analysis and theology and so on and it was that which I must master to be a good minister. I liked theology, I liked philosophy and I was reasonably well received as a preacher. So that went on all right. I'm not sure I would go so far as to say I disowned my inheritance as an engineer - it was extremely useful in my ministry that I had been in engineering. Being able to say that I had been an engineer was extremely useful in relating to a lot of people and they admired it.

I think the breakthrough was after I had been in ministry about five or six years and I got caught up with Douglas Hubery and other people, with the introduction of the experiential approach to Christian education into the Methodist Church. This really spoke to me - again, respecting people's experience, respecting their thinking, getting them to think for themselves - though not in as formulated a way as defined in the non-directive approach, which I wholeheartedly embraced a few years later. I started to draw diagrams to show the relationship between different modes of experience and the people communicating about it and so on. That was the first time I remember drawing diagrams since entering theological college. Now, you might think that's not very significant, but it was highly significant for an engineer who previously had always used diagrams to communicate: in conversations about a piece of work for instance, I would stand at the board communicating naturally with others as much through diagrams and sketches as through words.

I: It occurs to me that two things came out of your engineering experience. One would be the use of diagrams as a quite natural way of communicating and the other would be what you describe of the situation in Farnborough as being: the encouragement to people to have lots of ideas and try out different ideas.

R: Yes, that's right. I think that that was cramped as well. What I had gained from Farnborough, the freedom of mind to be with groups of people who were working on extraordinary difficult problems and they were working for ways around them and solutions. That I did not experience in the church. The church more or less had the answers and it was a matter of communicating them and getting people to opt into them. So that is right. But I came to see, a few years later, that in fact the fundamental thing I got from my engineering, I think, was the point that the engineer is always asking, 'How does this work? Why does it work like that? Why is it not working? How can it be made to work better?' Those questions were in my bones really, and in fact, they are not the questions that come out of a theological education. They are not the questions in the churches. I remember doing some work on a good neighbour scheme in relation to Project 70-75 (an action research project into the applicability of the non-directive approach ecumenically). The people on a working class estate were saying some very telling things about why a middle-class scheme was not working on their estate. We reported this to the ecumenical committee that had designed the scheme and were running it. In the discussion a woman who was a senior social worker and a tutor in a college got very irate and angry and was stamping her feet and saying, "It's just that they don't know how to make it work. It will work. It works!" She could not hear the fact that the people that we'd got together, who were operatives and recipients of the scheme, had identified why it wasn't working. The theory - and therefore the practise - was flawed and she simply could read the evidence.

Yes, I think that one of the main things that engineering, and particularly Farnborough gave me was the instinctive disciplines required to research why things were not working. So I am grateful to you for pointing that out because it liberated and stimulated me to think and ask fundamental questions and also to use the other part of my brain that is not strictly verbal.

I: I'm quite interested and one of the things that is puzzling me at the moment is there seems to be a division between church ecclesiology and management, or those who would say 'how do you make an organisation work?' And it's really interesting how they don't speak to each other effectively. Would that be another example of the sort of thing you're talking about, that actually it is this particular model and that's what it is?

R: I think so. I'm not sure that I'm articulating it as clearly as I would like, but it is to do with the fact that there is a body of theory about how the church works, how God works, how the Holy Spirit works, about how everything works: a deductive rather than an inductive model.

I: Yes.

R: A model, which automatically assumes that there is something wrong with the people down there if it doesn't work, not with this given the structure of thinking about it. Whereas, I think what I got from Farnborough and what I got from Batten and the non-directive approach was to respect what Batten called - and you've heard me say this before - 'the authority of the working situation'. Each situation has its own authority (realities, characteristics, nature) and if that authority conflicts with the authority of theories about how things ought to work, it should be taken seriously not dismissed out of hand on the assumption that the theory is right and the situation wrong.

I: Talking about the Batten thing and the way you got into non-directive approaches - and that you've documented quite well in different places - but one thing that is quite interesting is that at the same time as Batten was developing his approach (or they were developing their approach) there was a sort of parallel movement going on in things like counselling and that was non-directive. Just a historical question, were they cross-fertilising with each other?

R: I think that they were to some extent in my working life, at a very ordinary level. At a fairly early stage in my ministry - I can't date it - there was a movement that I was aware of and respected about listening to people, it was all about the creative power of listening to people in depth. You had to listen intently with genuine interest and that of itself was therapeutic. I think it was all part of groping after an empathic comprehensive way of working with people on their agendas. Quite independently, unbeknown to each other, T.R.Batten came up with the term non-directive in relation to community development at about the same time that Carl R. Rogers came up with it in relation to counselling. Batten told me that he was not aware of Rogers's work until someone who had been in the States studying counselling told him how he too was using the term non-directive. I drew mostly on Batten's work, but I read Carl

Rogers and gained much from doing so that I applied both to my work with groups and individuals.

I: But that whole thing about complete positive regard for the consultor, for person you're counselling...

R: Yes that's right, and then I got into that. I got a lot from my mentor, Reg Batten. But I got much from Rogers and some of the people with whom I worked in the early days had come to non-directive through counselling and then worked out the community implications of it. So they were using some of those ideas, whereas I was coming at it from community development as well as from non-directive counselling. In fact, I wrote a booklet forty years ago on first-aid counselling young people, which subsequently went through several editions and was used in a BBC series on youth work.

I: So we've now just about arrived at Parchmore Methodist Church, I think.

R: Yes indeed.

I: What were the key events there, particularly in relation to your development of the non-directive approach?

R: I'd met up with the non-directive approach before I went to Parchmore, but somewhat second-hand mainly through Terry Walton who was talking about it. I got the basics of it really. The key event was my Parchmore ministry, 1966-72. Before I took up that ministry the people of Parchmore had been coerced and manipulated into accepting their part in what was known as the 'Ten Centre Scheme'. They had been thoroughly manipulated in the very old-fashioned way of Methodism and threatened that the church would close if they did not take part in this scheme. During the first nine or twelve months of my ministry there was a moratorium on the schemes to do with the government. That was extremely convenient. So, the first thing I did when I went there was to suggest that even though they had signed up for the scheme I thought that for nine or twelve months we should not discuss this scheme at all, we didn't have to, and I should really get to know the situation and work at it and then perhaps we could take a long look at it and see where we were. That, they appreciated, because they expected me to come with the same manipulative approach. Then we looked at it and it was made quite clear - I made it quite clear to them - that they could say no to this scheme and we could do other things. I don't think that was very popular with the people in the hierarchy. So we sat down and looked at it and part of the deal was that they would go ahead with it providing that we really did get professional training. I went on Batten's three month course with the understanding that I was going on it to come back to the church and to use it and to teach them what it was and for them to use it. It was a pretty good contract. It wasn't all together easy as there were people who were very critical. Am I answering your question? That was how I really got into the non-directive approach, and how I came to go on Batten's course.

I: So you were aware of the non-directive method before that?

R: Yes, I'd already met Batten before I went to Parchmore. I suppose that he was advising me at the time to give them space. That would be what he would naturally do. So I was in a sort of relationship. I would have to go back and check the records but I think that's the case. As I have said, my introduction to the concept was through an extraordinary Methodist layman, called Terry Walton who died a couple of years ago. You probably don't know of him. He eventually became a minister. He was an extremely gifted, warm, generous, charismatic and inspiring man: no proper educational background but a brilliant original creative mind, but no discipline, who started to introduce ideas about open youth work and the non-directive approach through the MAYC (Methodist Association of Youth Clubs). He could be domineering, but he thought the non-directive approach was a good idea and I am eternally grateful to him for the part he played in introducing me to this concept.

I: I asked about the key events, and I don't know if this is the best way into it, but you began with the key event of the fact that there was space to think again about the direction for Parchmore.

R: That's right.

I: And they obviously then took on board the importance of working non-directively and wanted you to really find out about that and come back to them with it.

R: Yes, they did. But I made many mistakes. I became so purist that it isn't true. Even Batten said he thought I was too non-directive at one stage but I eventually learned to use the concept better. At one stage meetings went on until well after midnight and people got in trouble when they got home! Some of the leaders took me aside after this had gone on for some time saying to me, "George, we respect what you're trying to do but I think we'd better have the business meeting first and we'll conduct the business part or you can conduct it but you conduct it as a business meeting and then you can have your non-directive meeting." There was a lot of give and take, but I made quite a few mistakes. For instance, we had three or four annual church conferences, going away to think things through, which were very important and it was interesting to look back over the progression of these and the way in which I was too non-directive and they arrived tired from the city and we would take hours to decide what we were going to do. We had only 36-48 hours, whatever. It was ridiculous. Gradually, we worked out how we could structure them so there was time for them/us to think about things that mattered and not the peripheral things about the organization of groups except. So a lot of mutual learning went on. I don't think they were all as committed to the non-directive approach as I was. Yes, that was one of the most important things that made me - Parchmore made me. Whatever I was afterwards was forged in Parchmore.

I: So you owe a great deal to those people who worked with you and went along with you and bullied you?

R: Yes, and tolerated me. Yes, I do, because without them I could never have practised the approach *with* them and learnt about it *with* them through trial and error, evaluated it and researched *with* them all at the same time. With their blessing I continued to study what I was doing with Batten at the University of London. Eventually it was written up as a Ph D. It was not simply for the sake of doing a PhD.

Batten offered to act as a consultant to me in relation to Parchmore after the course. And I was attracted to this, because of the idea I had come across of researching church and community work as you were doing it. It was an American model: in some areas universities would be involved in some work in the local community and they would be bringing academic material and ideas to it. So I did various studies, I had to do a PGCE and do some studies at the university in sociology of education. It was all very exciting and all very pertinent. It (community development) fell between the disciplines, because community development was just a small department really in the Institute of Education. So it was calling on different disciplines - sociology and adult education. So I was doing all that study and writing the material up and learning about action research. There was hardly any material on action research at all when I started to research how you did it. So I was doing that and I had to find some way of evaluating work. I regret that I never really took that section on evaluation out of the PhD and published it, as it was original work. Sorry, you stop me when I become non-productive!

I: So all through this time then, what is the place of prayer and spirituality for you and for the community you were working with?

R: Yes. It was very important, I think; it was very important. I think my own prayer life suffered at times because of the pressure of work. In other ways, it deepened because some of what was happening was quite frightening. We were really out on a limb, in a sense, and the Methodist Connexion really didn't want to know. They set up these schemes and then when you cried for help they were not there, but thank God, the Circuit was, and magnificently so. The amount of work was colossal. It quickly expanded because people wanted to come and see me and Parchmore; then I became involved in supporting and the in-service training of other men and women in the Ten Centres; then I was asked to provide training courses for Methodist ministers in this way of working. So it was a very demanding time. And I was struggling at the time to make spiritual and theological sense, for myself and for the people, of the traditional ministry and the non-directive approach to church community development work. So, as I go back over the sermons I preached at that time, I was very often struggling to give some kind of spiritual understanding of the whole business of working in this way. There was very little material on the spirituality of this kind of approach.

An event comes back to mind. We had clubs of large numbers of skinheads and of West Indians, I mean in the hundreds, and ordinary church young people brought up in Methodist organizations, and that was a volatile mix. But eventually the skinheads were the main group on a Saturday night and they would very often smash the place up and break it down. So I dreaded the time from 11:30 pm on a Saturday night to midnight. I remember one night they had broken the stained glass windows behind the communion table with billiard balls. It was an awful night. At the eight o'clock communion service the next morning I remember kneeling at the communion table. The sun was coming through and the rays glistening and then reflected on a shard of the window that had been missed in the clean up; it was just by the foot of a cross on the table. I was deeply moved by the symbolism of the way in which the work with the skinheads and the work of Christ on the cross intersected. It made spiritual and theological sense of it all. That was very important for me and also very important for the people when I told them about it.

So it was trying to find the spirituality; we were working at it and it didn't come easily. All the time we were trying to find the spirituality and the theology that really supported and vindicated us by giving us a theological explanation for everything we were trying to do. The more we got on top more of the practical business of how to work with groups and how to listen and all that, the more we convinced we were that it was sound praxis. We'd got that, but then it was something that the church didn't normally do.

And we had very good developments in the work we did in Christian education, through adopting an experiential approach to the education of all the groups of children and young people. That was a major step forward. We had a large well-established Boys Brigade unit with a long and distinguished history. They came together with the junior church and fellowship groups in a comprehensive educational programme. Also, there had been a long history in Parchmore, a dignified history, of Christian education. The minister during the war saw that one of his jobs was to build up an educational basis in the church that would serve the future. Nonetheless, the Sunday School was almost dead when I went there but there were some people there who were good experienced educationalists, and that was very important. And a new and exciting programme was established.

At one of our annual residential Church conferences people started talking about various groups in the church. They were saying that what was happening was that the community development and the education work were getting going and the worship aspect of the church was standing still. So I drew three circles moving away from each other to represent what they were saying. They saw immediately that what I was putting up showed two of these circles moving away and leaving the church standing. They said: "No, this mustn't happen. We've got to work hard on that." (I'm sorry; I get emotional because it was a very emotional time.) Then they said: "They've got to come together. Those three circles have got to overlap, otherwise the whole thing just fragments."

I: The three circles were the church?

R: One was the church work, the worship and the task meetings or the groups, anything like that. The other was the community work and the other was the Christian education programme. I think those were the three groups. And very strangely, when we came to write the book on Parchmore, Peter Sharrocks's son had designed a new logo for Parchmore and Peter (he was the second minister in line after me at Parchmore) brought this along to feature in the book. It was already adopted by the Parchmore people. The logo had three overlapping circles on a cross. When I asked Peter about the history of it he said he didn't know. He didn't know the history! We were amazed.

So, yes, we persevered with these three areas of work and I think a lot of people struggled. There were some very fine "died in the wool" Methodists, but they found it very hard to know why they should be involved in community work, it was so different from anything they had been brought up with. We had to struggle but we stayed together with one or two exceptions. We did not abandon each other and we did not cast each other off. People cared for each other.

I: And that in itself was a discovery of a new spirituality.

R: I think that's right and I think they knew that eventually.

I: And, rereading some of your writing, it is very striking how you constantly emphasize the importance of your whole approach as being undergirded by spirituality.

R: Yes, but I've not always felt that I've reached a sufficiently clear statement theologically or spiritually. It would be about the same time we started Parchmore. When I started working at Parchmore I decided (it was an extraordinarily difficult decision to make) that I was going to give myself completely to this work, the local work. That was difficult because I believed that most of the power to affect radical change was vested in people operating at national level. Also, Douglas Hubery, the general secretary of the Methodist Division of Education and Youth Work was very keen for me to become the general secretary of MAYC (Methodist Association of Youth Clubs). He was wrong about this, it was not me, but he wanted me to transform the MAYC into a much more soundly based educational movement rather than something of a charismatic movement. He wanted me to do that and I don't think I would have been capable of it. I would have been crucified if I tried because I'm not that kind of person. Against all my wishes he put my name forward and the committee, in their wisdom, decided not to appoint me, and I am for ever grateful. Douglas Hubery was a very important person to me because he had an open creative mind, he was searching, he was looking, he was trying to find new ways, but he was very firm. So he wrote to me saying that he thought there was something else I would have to do. I treasure the letter. So where was I?

I: The question was about the undergirding spirituality throughout your work.

R: Yes that's right. I had been pressurised to do various connexional things. So I gave up all that and I didn't know if I was doing right. Soon after I had made that decision I had a letter from Pauline Webb saying would I be one of the two circuit representatives (one was a minister and one is a lay person) on the Board of Lay Training. Can you imagine this? The Board of Lay Training with just two local based people! The others were ex-Presidents of Conference and divisional secretaries, etc. Seeing this to be confirmation of the rightness of my decision I accepted the invitation. Eventually the Board established various groups. I can't remember all of them offhand but the ones which proved important to me were: a sociological group with David Clark as convener; a community development group with me as convener; and an adult education group. The community development group did some very good original thinking for many years, twenty years maybe.

One of the things they set out to do was to find a theological underpinning for community development. We wrote - I wrote on their behalf - to I don't know how many theologians asking them to come and sit in on our meetings, to come to some of our centres and see what was going on and do a theological commentary. Most of them didn't reply; in fact to the best of my memory, nobody replied, certainly nobody said they would do it. (I'm sorry; I'm getting emotional again.) It was very, very distressing for us. After all, we were members of a prestigious group in the sense that it was a properly established Methodist group under Pauline Webb, who was something of a star in the Connexion, you know. It was not until I wrote to David

Jenkins (later famous as the Bishop of Durham) that I got any response. And David took us up and out of that came a three-year action research project on the theological understanding of community and community development work. He really grappled with the subject and helped us to think theologically in a rather unusual way. I think it would have been helpful to have got a different kind of mind working on the subject as well, but that's not criticising what happened. It was an incredible experience, to be in a group with David Jenkins for three years. It was a disciplined group. We met every three months for three years. The basic rules were: you had to prepare, you had to write the papers requested, you had to read, you had to attend the meetings and you had to work. In 1980 we published a report, *Involvement In Community* (a William Temple Foundation Publication). And I produced a parallel paper on the interactive reflective processes between the William Temple and the Community Development groups, also published by The Foundation, *Diagrammatic Modelling: An Aid To Theological Reflection In Church And Community Development Work*.

I: There are a whole series of partnership things, but it would be nice to talk about your partnership with Catherine Widdicombe. What is the significance of that?

R: Oh my word. You are going to interview her as well I hope?

I: Yes.

R: Indescribably important. Catherine will tell you how we came to be brought together. She was thinking about going on the three month course and she wasn't sure whether it was going to be useful, so she asked Batten if there was anybody in the church who had used these kinds of methods, and Batten told her about me. Reg Batten's wife, Madge, rang me to say "Reg doesn't often do this - but he's given your name to somebody without your permission, Catherine Widdicombe. He's very careful about whom he gives your name to and he doesn't like wasting your time but he is sure this wouldn't be wasting your time." I put the phone down and it rang again immediately. It was Catherine Widdicombe! I burst out laughing. She said, "What are you laughing about?" She too laughed when I told her what had happened. She came and we clicked together very quickly. We were of a similar mind though quite different people with different abilities. And so, how important? - that's your question, isn't it? I don't think the importance can be over stated or emphasised. She brought a new ecumenical dimension of the work. She brought a Roman Catholic dimension that I don't think would have been easily accessed in any way without her contribution. Through our partnership we carried out Project 70-75. When we came to the end of Project 70-75 Archbishop Derek Worlock said: "This partnership should not be broken up. You can't manufacture, you can't just make these partnerships, they simply happen once every so often and must be kept together." And he told the Methodist Church this.

Worlock knew Catherine very well because he had been an episcopal visitor to the Grail and she'd been with him in Vatican II, where she had headed up a secretarial group for him during the Vatican II Council. Consequently she knew him well. So she brought that, and that was very important. She also brought an incredible amount of energy and drive and she was in many ways much more outgoing than I was. She would make networking connections fearlessly and very confidently. She had a large network already, a Catholic network. So she was my entrée into the Roman Catholic

Church and I was her entrée into the Methodist and non-conformist churches. I would never ever have got into the Roman Catholic Church the way I did without her. And also, it was not just Catherine, but I really became closely associated with the Grail, as did Molly, my wife; they adopted us. We feel ourselves to be a part of the Grail family and have been for a long time, since 1967 or 68, that's forty odd years! She did all that and she was loyal and utterly committed. This was very important, because I had had some very bad experiences. It was awfully difficult to get youth workers when I was at Parchmore as there was a dearth of them. There were very few on the ground that were worth employing and training. I had had two youth workers who were very good and a community worker, but it was almost as though they never gave me the confidence that they were there to stay. They held over my head a threat that they might leave. But in Catherine, I felt here was someone who was here for the long haul and absolutely committed.

I: And the two of you as a partnership - can you talk about that and the importance of having you and Catherine working together in Avec?

R: Again, the importance cannot be overstated. It was undoubtedly an egalitarian, complimentary partnership of two dissimilar people totally committed to the cause of church and community development, the non-directive approach and to each other. We brought different gifts aptitudes and abilities to the partnership professionally. Catherine was more outgoing in some ways, and I was more reflective; we were both centred on promoting the newly established praxis of the non-directive approach to church and community development work; I was also concerned with exploring underlying theory and theology and developing the academic side of our newly emerging discipline, and did more research and writing; we were both committed to our respective denominations and to working ecumenically, with proper respect to their disciplines. So we brought to the partnership, equally essential contributions to the exciting and difficult work to which we had committed ourselves separately and together.

Once ideas started to come she would respond and reciprocate and develop them. And she was extremely good, and Catherine would say this, and has said this many times, at keeping on turning over the same course over and over, whereas she would say that I would start from scratch every time and think things out again. So there was that kind of a partnership.

There is, however, another side to the partnership, which needs mentioning here. She told me said she was committed to making sure that my contribution was made to the ecumenical scene and to the church at large. I was deeply moved by this. Even to this day she has never wavered from that and on being intent on making sure that I was in a position, I had the funds, I had the freedom, I had the time and opportunity to do just that. As far as she could she would help to make that possible and take any drudgery off me. It was unselfish really, and yet not unselfish because she believed that was the thing she must do. Maybe I'm overstating this, you'll have to ask her but that's how I have heard what she has said to me and what she has done. Therefore, this is quite precious really - to find somebody like that, and she was a woman!

All my best work, throughout my ministry, right from the beginning, has been done when I've been in the partnership, proper working partnership, with a woman or

women. And to say that is really an object lesson to me because when I was in the Army in Egypt a few months after I had been converted the Padre tried to persuade me to offer for the Ministry and I said quite categorically, "No, that isn't for me." And why it wasn't for me was because I had always worked with men and I couldn't abide the thought of going to work in partnership with women and going to work in an organisation that was largely populated by women. I just always worked with men. My father always worked with men in the pit. My mother was a weaver and she worked in the weaving shed and they were mostly women. My father would have rather been dead than work in the weaving shed. Please, that's terrible but you know, and yet when I came into ministry, certainly from Sydenham onwards, I had significant woman colleagues. In Sydenham there was a deaconess, Linda Castle, with whom I had an extremely important partnership in youth work.

And throughout, Molly was an important partner in my ministry. She supported me in many different ways. Up to recently, she typed up much if not most of the things I wrote. She took enormous risks when we gave up his security of Circuit life to launch out into project 70-75. That must have cost her dear. During the time that I worked in Avec she was the part-time bursar, and she entertained people extensively in our home. Some of the part-time associates would stay with us weeks at a time whilst they were attending or conducting courses.

I: So that partnership [with Catherine], that relationship, began before Avec started?

R: Yes. It started first of all through Batten being introducing us, as I have already described. She had got hold of the ideas of non-directive from a married couple called Broadbent, who were, I think, in government employment related to youth work. Catherine, and John Budd who was an Anglican priest, arranged and conducted non-directive workshops. She can tell you all about that. Also, she was in the Anglican Sensitivity Movement as one of the members of staff, so she brought that. So at the point of going to Batten, and for some time after, then she was somewhat undecided about what she should do in relation to these two approaches: the non-directive to community development; group sensitivity and group dynamics. Then she came up with the idea of having a conference to explore what the non-directive approach to church and community development was all about. It was held at the Grail and it was a very exciting event. How ecumenical it was, I don't remember, but there were certainly a lot of Catholics there and she asked me to lead it and then we wrote it up.

I think that it was after that that she went to Batten's course and while she was on Batten's course she had the idea of Project 70-75, which was an action research project to test out the efficacy of the non-directive approach in an ecumenical setting. She recruited an ecumenical team to work with her: an Anglican parish priest, John Budd; a senior Roman Catholic priest who was the head of a seminary, Patrick Fitzgerald; a member of the Grail, Elizabeth Rowan, who acted as recorder; and me. First of all we worked together on a part time basis, until we decided that to make the project a viable proposition it was necessary for Catherine and I to be full-time workers. Deciding to offer my services to this project involved a lot of hard thinking and heart searching for Molly, Dorothy Household who lived with us as a member of our family and for me. Up to this point the idea was that Catherine would be the only full-time worker, the rest of us would be part-time voluntary. Increasingly I came to the conviction that we couldn't make it work on that basis. Catherine had no

experience of working in a local church situation. Whilst having a meal with her after one of our meetings I hinted at the possibility of my coming full-time. It was not until I made the suggestion several times that the penny dropped that I was saying that I would be prepared to come full time. She said she hadn't ever dared to hope that because she thought I was too married to Parchmore. It was fairly quickly agreed with Batten who was acting as consultant to the project and the other team members that this would be acceptable and desirable. Implementing this decision involved some a frenzied activity. All the previous negotiations and the applications for grants had been on the basis of only one full-time worker. Re-negotiation were required all round. For me - and for Molly and Dorothy -, there was the whole business of withdrawing from Parchmore (Molly and I had no money) and finding somewhere to live and some money to go to buy some furniture. Dorothy Household - who was an enormous help in developing the ideas of a non-directive approach and all of that and working with me and helping me to research it - helped. (Two years later, in 1974, she was killed by an IRA bomb in the tower of London.) She was as committed as any of us. We got an Anglican house. There was no funding for the project or the workers at this stage; the funding didn't come through until three or four months after we had started to work and I had left Parchmore. The Methodist Church required someone to stand security for my stipend for the first year as part of their agreement that I could serve the project as a Methodist minister. Unbeknown to me, Catherine and Patrick Fitzgerald, the Catholic priest on the team, actually went around and got three or four people to stand surety for £3,000 each for my first year. In the event, they were not required to honour their offer. This shows how determined Catherine was and is and the Catholic priest. That was a big experience for me/us, and I've never regretted it, because I had to leave all the security of being a minister in circuit and connexional work behind. And that may sound like a simple thing to do but we had two children and there was no security. Molly went with me, but I don't think we would have been able to do it without Dorothy Household, combining her resources with ours.

I: So then you came into this Project 70-75?

R: Yes.

I: Can you say a little bit about that?

R: Yes. Project 70-75 was sixteen different churches of seven denominations in North London's Finsbury Park area testing out the ecumenical viability of the non-directive approach. We wrote that up as *Churches and Communities*. The approach had already been successfully researched in Parchmore i.e. in a church of one denomination. Now it needed to be tested in other denominations. From the beginning of working in this field I had been determined that I must not slip into it, as it were, by the religious backdoor - I must study it and what I'm doing. The idea of doing a PhD on it was to get some official academic recognition of the worth of the work, which we were doing. We believed it was as relevant to other denominations as to Methodism. With Batten's help Catherine worked out some ideas about how it could be tested out ecumenically and demonstrated that it works. From the beginning Batten was a consultant to the project. The team was formed to develop this project. There were two full time workers, Catherine Widdicombe and myself, and John Budd, who died recently, and Patrick Fitzgerald, who is still with us. He is retired now, a Catholic priest, a senior White Father, a man who worked extensively in Africa. And we did a

whole lot of different project work with people and tested it out. I wrote it up with Catherine's help, support and extensive editorial help. It was towards the end of that project that we asked, "What should we do next and where should we go now?" And the idea came up of setting up a service-training agency. Archbishop Worlock and two Methodists took the initiative, Owen Nankeville, a distinguished layman, who was the treasurer of the Methodist ministerial training department and the secretary of the Department, the Rev Christopher Bacon. (It was a Roman Catholic and Methodist initiative. The Anglicans, begging your presence sir [addressing one of the interviewers], didn't commit themselves and that was really one of our problems throughout the life of Avec. The Anglican Church used us extensively but never really signed up to responsibility for helping finance it.)

I remember going down to see Bishop Worlock whilst he was the bishop of Portsmouth in Portsmouth with Catherine, Owen and Chris to spend half a day discussing the possibility of setting up what became Avec. It was a great day for me. I have never been more proud to be a Methodist. The way in which they talked, moved and excited me (I'm getting emotional). It was imaginative and courageous; they put their necks on the line by taking great denominational, ecumenical and financial risks. And that is how Avec was born or formed. The idea had to be thoroughly tested and vetted by the Roman Catholic and Methodist churches. And that was a rigorous and trying process. Eventually, an ecumenical group was set up to form Avec under the chairmanship of the Rev Edward Rogers - a great man, who became a father in God to me. I'm afraid I'm wandering...

I: No, no it's good.

R: I'm in my eighties now; I have to be careful. I'm not quite as disciplined as I used to be.

I: One of the things you've sort of said a little about was the welcome or recognition of the work that Avec was doing in the various churches and denominations. What is your feel on that? Did you think that it had an impact?

R: Yes, well already in the Methodist Church there was a growing group who worked in the Ten Centres. Then there were some courses. Towards the end of my last year or two at Parchmore I was running courses under the aegis of the Methodist in-service training programme. So there was a growing feeling of its importance and there were people who were practising it with different degrees of expertise. And it was welcomed and so there were quite a lot of people who came to it and it was taken up in quite a big way. The Methodists took it up in two or three different ways. The Connexional Secretaries, by and large - a good number of them were highly committed to it and so I did work with them at one time or another as a group.

But the Missionary Society, the Methodist Church Overseas Division, they really took it up in a very big way and they were one of the most open minded and *avant-garde* groups in the church. I was enormously privileged to work with them for 20 or 30 years. It all happened because Ted Rogers said at an early stage in the life of Avec, "You must go and see Colin Morris," who was the head of the Methodist Church Overseas Division, at that time. "You must go and see him because I think he could use you." (Ted Rogers opened many Methodist and ecumenical doors for us. There

was hardly any church leader he hadn't worked with at depth or knew them personally.) So I went to see Colin Morris. I think I waited about 1½ hours after the appointed time. By this time all the offices were closed. Without ceremony he said, "What can you do for missionaries returning to the home work?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said that he had returned a few years ago, and had a terrible time settling down and that he couldn't orientate himself and this is a common experience. "What can you do?" He asked, "What can you offer that John Vincent can't offer?" I said: "Well, I think you'd better be the judge of that, not me. I can only tell you what I can offer." He liked that reply. Then he said, "I've got two or three things: a college Kingsmead in Birmingham; finance; missionaries; secretarial staff." I gave him one or two thoughts about debriefing, reorientation and work-study courses. He said, "Let me have a paper within twenty-four hours." And I said that I would. So I wrote a paper for him, and it suggested two or three principles. First, that the missionaries should attend a course soon after they came back to this country; they should have a week together in residence to consider their time overseas, extract what they had learnt and what they wanted to apply and look at the situation and make some tentative objectives for the first year. Secondly, it should be for families to come, not men, but the whole family. The wife should be able to join into the discussions in relation to what they were feeling and the children and young people should be given sessions to help them to think their way through their overseas experience, and the transition they were making. Then, they should come back one year later when the process would be different: they would do work papers, position papers, on their work and their situation, which would be studied in small groups. Wives too would contribute position papers. They should review where they were in terms of their aspirations a year ago, and there should be some sort of general material in the first year. Well, that really worked for 20 odd years. We modified it but we didn't change the formula. Colin Morris wrote back immediately accepting the proposals. We actually took the first group within weeks, I think.

I: Perhaps the area of the church that you didn't get into, in terms of people thinking things through, was ministerial training.

R: Well, yes, sadly. Can I come back to that? So, we were accepted in some parts of Methodism. We were accepted into the Roman Catholics with open arms, especially the religious orders. They were in ferment, they were trying to make sense of Vatican II, there were challenges in the communities, and they didn't know how to deal with the newfound freedoms. We got involved into a very large organisation for many, many years: the Roman Catholic Association for the Profoundly Deaf. So we got a lot of work. And we did a lot of work with the Anglicans and several bishops took us up in different ways and several bishops came to our courses exclusively for people with regional and national responsibility - provincials, bishops, chairs of districts and so on. There were some very influential people came to those. So we got into the churches fairly well, I think.

Now then, about the ministerial training. Strange, because they were the main sponsors of us, in a sense. Trevor Rowe was the General Secretary of The Ministerial Training Department, and one of our trustees. He was into community development way back when I was in Parchmore, and he was in circuit work in Sparkbrook, Birmingham. Where I don't think we got very far was in the Methodist and other pre-service training colleges. That's where we didn't get very far. But I was the keynote

speaker at a curriculum conference for tutorial staff of Methodist colleges. I introduced them to the concept of 'reflective practitioners.' And that idea seems to have got into these bloodstream of Methodism but that was fairly late in my time at Avec I was a bit nervous about all of that.

[On reflection, I don't seem to have made a very good job of answering this question! The short answer, I think, is that we didn't get into pre-service training, but we did get into in-service training in a big way and into work consultancy.]

I: The reason I mentioned it is that the non-directive approach has never really, it seems to me, got into the bloodstream of ministry through that initial training.

R: That may be right. Yes, it never got into the...I've not thought this one through, but we tried and tried to get into the Methodist theological colleges and into one or two Roman Catholic seminaries. We did have some sessions in the one in Chelsea. The priest who was in charge there for many years was a very good friend of ours and of the Grail, and whilst he was there we had various discussions with him. We never got really past the tutors; they were highly suspicious.

I: Did that mean that when people came to Avec they were coming and looking for something that seemed to be important and that they got very excited about, but you were working against the formation that so many had received?

R: I think this is very perceptive. What I think was happening was: here were people in all denominations who'd had their formal training, their pre-service training, and then the initial training and they found it didn't work or that they were up against difficulties that they didn't know how to deal with. Frequently they got into difficulties, particularly in terms of people and human relations and development schemes that didn't seem to get off the ground properly and didn't achieve what they were meant to. Large numbers of people came with those kinds of problems. They were unsatisfied, dissatisfied, with their way of working or with the results of their way of working and they were looking for ways of overcoming the problems and make things work better. And that involved some corrective to their praxis that they had been inducted into. And almost universally, the evaluation forms and the work papers that are in the archives show that members of our courses said that what we were doing was something that should be taught in the colleges. They felt that this is something they should have been introduced to earlier, if only in the most elementary form. But we never got there. I think there were just isolated people who tried to get it into training programmes. One was a Roman Catholic priest who eventually went to the in-service training wing of the Upholland Seminary in Wigan. He had been on several of our courses and was involved in the team ministry when Catherine and I worked with a large Roman Catholic team ministry of 15 to 20 people in Skelmersdale for several years. The one thing that did happen as a consequence of the lecture I gave at the curriculum conference where I highlighted the ideas of reflective practitioners and lifelong reflective practice - I don't think anybody there, or hardly anybody, had heard of that kind of an approach. The Rev Kenneth Howcroft took up this idea in a big way and wrote about it at some length. But you're absolutely right, it has never, even to this day, I don't think, got into the bloodstream of ministry through that initial training.

I: But the idea of reflective practice has become much more accepted, I think, in in-service training. Would that be ...?

R: Yes, but this is twenty or thirty years ago. I think I was responsible for introducing many of those people to the idea of reflective practice. But it is a sadness for me that we never got there [into the initial training programmes]. Towards the end of my time in Parchmore, when I was considering what I should do after completing the work on Project 70-75, my district Chairman, Norman Dawson, Chairman of the London South East District and a former minister of Parchmore, wanted me to go into a theological college as a lecturer on church and community development work. And I sometimes have wondered, and Molly particularly has wondered, whether I did the wrong thing not to follow up his advice. It certainly would have given me security. But I didn't, and I didn't even try - whether I would have been accepted, is questionable, because I'm not an academic in the ways in which the authorities at that time thought of academics. And I don't know whether I would have had the same influence in the long run. Reg Batten was quite convinced that in-service training was the way forward and convinced me that it was. All his experience indicated that the best way in which to introduce new concepts and ways of working with people was through in-service training and not pre-service training. That was his feeling. I may be overstating it but his view was that many of the ideas about non-directive work with people do not make any sense to people who have not had some real experience of human working situations. Also, he argued that the expectations and assumptions in the workplace are that young ministers straight from initial training learn how to minister from those with more experience, not to be teaching them new tricks. They do not normally have the status to introduce radical new ways of working. That was what he was saying. And rightly or wrongly, I based my working life from that point onwards on the implications of that - that we were more likely to be able to effect radical change in praxis through in-service training and consultancy work with well established and respected practitioners well placed to introduce new ways of working. And, not only that, these self same people were in desperate need of help and everything that followed proved this. Able people who are alive to the fact that they had not got what's required are the people who are going to make the greatest impact. And also the information gained from the reality of practising these approaches in the actual given situations informs pre-service training needs. Do you think I could live my life again and go back into the colleges?

I: It's quite interesting that, at the moment, lots of the churches are using the manipulative model of church which you described as being dominant when you began your ministry. If this is so, it is actually going to be more and more difficult for these processes, these ways of doing things, and these ways of approaching the work, to be accepted. For example, towards the end of the MA consultancy course's life at Cliff College it just felt that we were less and less a good fit because of the way that the theological approach there was developing. I just wonder whether there was a time, in the middle of this period that we're talking about which actually was a good time to get in and sow these seeds, and actually it might be getting more difficult to do that at the moment.

R: Do you think so?

I: Well I think there seems to be a greater recognition in the secular world and particularly in lots of caring professions. But I think in the church setting, because there is such a growth of a conservative approach, a dogmatic approach, a certainty approach telling it to people from the pulpit, would make it quite difficult for these ideas to get into large sections of churches.

R: Yes, and I hope you're wrong but I have a feeling you may be right. Yes, yes. My mind is starting to buzz around a sort of area, which remains, a work area that remains, and I'm trying to think what could happen? What could persuade the people in the churches and in the training colleges? Would research on the material we've got already? I don't know. I went once to a group of Anglicans in the Derby area. They were first year out of college and their bishop was very pro the work we were doing and he really understood what it was about. I went there at his invitation and they ignored me. There were 15 to 20 black suited young priests in clerical collars; I had been asked - someone was chairing it - to give an introductory talk, which I did on what I was doing, some of the basic things to do with the non-directive approach. Questions followed. One of these young priests said to me, and the rest agreed, you may not believe this, but he said to me, "Well I don't think we have any need of your services at all. We have been in the seminary for so many years and we know exactly what the people need and want and we have the answers and it is our job to tell them." And he added, "I'm very sorry, but I think you've wasted your time coming here." He said it as clearly as that. So even if you get past some of the tutors, you can be faced with people like that. But that doesn't mean to say that we shouldn't try. I think my time of trying has probably past. I did go and give lectures to theological colleges in Bristol and Cambridge. I was generally well received by students but I don't know how well received by the staff.

I: And it's a question, isn't it, of what enables this to take root? And I think it only happened for me when I came to do the MA in consultancy, mission and ministry and I was forced, quite properly, to undergo the co-consultancy sessions.

R: Oh yes.

I: And thinking it through there I really began to understand what this was really all about. People get excited about it, but they don't then know what to do with it. That brings us to the setting up of the MA and how you saw that. You came out of Avec and you spent some serious years harvesting that experience - and publishing. Then how did the MA come about?

R: Yes. Can I ask you a question? Are you getting from me what you wanted?

I: Absolutely.

R: I want to say another thing and that is in relation to this discussion that we have just had. I came into the non-directive way of working because I had failed to do what I wanted to do by traditional methods. And I knew I'd failed. I put years into it and I sat down and decided that I did not want to go through my life, my ministry, setting up work and doing things and knowing that it is going to go off at half-cock. I wrote to several people about these difficulties asking to see them. The only person who responded was Reg Batten, who rang me and said, "You'd better come and see me,

but before you come read my books.” So I went to see him. The rest is history is history, as they say.

Now, to return to your question about my coming out of Avec, spending some serious years harvesting that experience, publishing and setting up the MA in consultancy ministry and mission. How did that come about? I think that period of my life was a messy business. It started dramatically through an entirely unexpected conversation with Michael Bailey. He was an Anglican priest from Sheffield, who was a part time member of Avec staff. We did quite a lot of work together. We were together in the upper room at Chelsea talking about some work we were going to do and I suddenly burst out, saying with much emotion that I was finding it extraordinarily difficult to hold everything together in my work as a director of Avec in relation to money, the course and consultancy work, writing, everything. I didn't even know the tension and very deep feelings were there. The expression of them came as a complete surprise. Michael said, “I think you ought to do something about this. We ought to talk and you possibly ought to hand over the leadership to someone else.” To cut a long and complicated story short, the Trustees set up a 48-hour residential meeting of some of the Trustees Catherine, Molly and me. (Ted Rogers had left the Trust by this time. I think things would have worked out differently if Ted had still been there.) They set it up and conducted it very well and various people interviewed Catherine, Molly and me, separately and together. Various ideas came out of that meeting. The long and short of it was that they felt that I ought to resign as director because they thought that somebody else at this point could take it on. They suggested various possible things that I could do. One was that I could become a research worker to Avec, and therefore concentrate my efforts harvesting that experience and making it more generally available. The other came from John Taylor, who was the Divisional Secretary of the Methodist Division of Ministries and a trustee of Avec. He thought there would be no difficulty at all in my going into college and that it might be appropriate for me to go to spend a few years teaching non-directive church and community development work to ministerial students and to members of the college staff! Both Molly and I eventually decided, yes, I ought to move on. The wisdom of the group and my/our own feelings were saying to us that it was time for me to resign and to move on and for somebody else to take over. I talked to the Associates about this and they reluctantly felt that was the case. And they set up this elaborate business of interviewing somebody. But the wrong person was appointed; subsequent developments demonstrated that he really was the wrong person, I think. But having done that, I became a research worker to Avec charged by the Trustees with the responsibility of “harvesting the work of Avec and making its intellectual assets more readily accessible” and I continued to staff the academic diploma, the man who was appointed to follow, me, Malcolm Grundy said he wasn't going to have anything to do with that at all and tried to get two young men to take it on, they spent a lot of time but never really felt they could take it on, in the end.

This was a pretty dismal period. But it was all messy and I don't think I got on terribly well with my successor and maybe I was an encumbrance. So I was left very much to my own devices to sort things out. John Taylor didn't deliver on the promises that he had made about a teaching post in a Methodist theological College. The Chair of the District was a friend and he was very sympathetic. Home Missions weren't very helpful. Donald English was on sabbatical, a very keen supporter. So I was left out on a limb to work out my own salvation. It was Chelsea Methodist Church, who hasn't

appeared in this discussion so far, who played a significant part in my rescue. Chelsea Methodist Church was my spiritual home for twenty odd years. I was at the time an associate Minister. They were terribly important and supported me through all the ups and downs of Avec, in every possible way. They gave me a place, a spiritual bearing. I should have mentioned this before. They gave me a spiritual home, they respected me, they responded positively to my preaching. So it was they who came to my salvation, really, and they took me on for a year as a part time staff member. It was just some added responsibility but they were keen that I should get on with this writing and research, and they paid the shortfall in my stipend. They were quite a wealthy church. Then I got a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellowship for the research, so that relieved and redeemed the situation. The time sequence of this is all mixed up in what I'm saying now but that doesn't matter for our purposes.

At that time I read an article in *The British Journal Of Theological Education*, by Dr Bernard Farr, head of the Theology Department at Westminster College, Oxford, entitled, "Accounting For Growth: Theology At Westminster College, 1981-1991". A postscript to the article said that anyone who was excited by the vision and who might be interested in working with the College was invited to contact the author. I felt we were both speaking the same language and I thought I would like to meet him. So I wrote to him and he invited me to visit him at the College. When I got there, there were three people he'd invited to meet me, one of them I had known from way back in the early days of Avec, The Rev Michael Elliott when he was in the British Council of Churches with a brief for community work. In those days we had serious discussions about community development. It transpired that Farr and his colleagues were very interested in having me involved at Westminster College. Soon afterwards they invited me to be a Part-time Senior Research Fellow. Alongside doing my 'harvesting' they wanted me to develop ideas to do with consultancy and some other things. So, from 1994-1999, I went as a part-time Fellow with a very small stipend. Importantly it gave me a base [and a title]. At that time the Westminster College School of Theology was a very exciting place to be. There were all kinds of other things going on alongside the under- and post-graduate programme through the School's eight Research Centres. [They were: The Religious Experience Research Centre (developing the work of Sir Alister Hardy); Centre For Faith And Culture; Wesley And Methodist Studies Centre; International Interfaith Centre; Institute For Social Research And Education; Centre For Critical Studies In Religion, Ethics And Society; The Pan African Church History Project; Centre For Development In Religious Education.]

For me, it was very exciting place to be, because I was deeply interested in the whole range of subject matter that was being researched and taught. And The School decided after my appointment to get together a group of senior people with various experiences to form a group of senior research fellows, (Rev Marcus Braybrooke, a distinguished inter-faith scholar was one of these, I recall). A senior staff member arranged for us to meet as a group and have interdisciplinary conversations. So it was a great setting for me to do my work.

It was decided that I should attempt to set up a consultancy scheme to service, help and support the increasing number of world-wide graduates of the MA in Theology courses about whom they were concerned who were left to their own devices to put into practice what they had learned. So I wrote something about the idea of a

consultancy service for the graduates designed to be an educational feedback loop to the tutors and courses. So what was learned through the consultancies would be fed back to the tutors and courses in terms of confirmation, correction and redirection of the studies and the educational agenda so that there was increasingly a better fit between the constituencies they were trying to serve and the educational/training programme that they were developing. We were all excited about this and laid plans for providing it. As part of this programme they encouraged me to get together a large group of about 30 or 40 people, all from the higher echelons of all the churches and allied organisations and principals of colleges for a one-day workshop to critically examine the ideas were emerging.

Then, in the middle of the night, (or when I was shaving one morning?) it suddenly hit me, "If we set up a structured consultancy agency/service, who is going to staff it?" I realised it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to staff it professionally; the personnel required were simply not available. I discussed this problem with the staff. We soon realised (there was a very good staff meeting) that what we needed, first of all, was a programme to train consultants, because if we don't have such a programme, we were unlikely to have adequate consultants. So the service would be unlikely to work, and really a waste of time or worse! So with the help of two or three people in the Department, and particularly Heather Walton, I designed and ran the first year of a two-year postgraduate diploma course in consultants successfully. Then we encountered enormous difficulties: there was a lot of unhelpful undermining political activity going on; the department changed radically; Westminster College was taken over by Oxford Brookes University; the course was no longer viable, at the College. All round it was absolutely tragic, and all that brilliant, exciting extension work associated with MA in theology - it was in India, New Zealand and Australia and they had tutors going out there and students coming back - contracted.

Fortunately, before all this happened, the Chair of the Methodist Church Council had visited and reviewed the work in all the Methodist colleges. When he came to Westminster he said, "Why aren't you doing something with Cliff College and UTU? You ought to be cooperating." And we immediately saw and said that this consultancy programme was potentially something upon which we could cooperate. Thoroughgoing discussions between the three colleges led to a partnership agreement about the consultants' course. That agreement actually saved the course when Westminster started to collapse and Heather Walton left Westminster for a post in the University of Glasgow, where she is doing brilliant work. (Heather is a feminist theologian and a Methodist local preacher. By strange coincidence her mother is in this church in the Circuit to which I now belong.) But somehow or another with the help of Howard Mellor (Principal of Cliff College at that time) who was absolutely committed, I managed to hold the course together and relocate it at Cliff College after Westminster College ceased to support it. And then it took off from there and you [David Dadswell] came in and Helen Cameron and the rest is, as they say, history ...

Incidentally, during this period I published *Analysis and Design*. Soon afterwards there was an examination of the research work being done at Westminster by an external Oxford University Assessor. My work, and this book, were submitted as part of the research work of Westminster. The Assessor got quite excited about this and enquired how much more of this kind of work has been done/is in progress. I was most gratified and still am!

I: Is there any more you would like to say about Avec, and perhaps particularly how would you assess the impact of Avec on the churches, short term and long term?

R: I think the impact of Avec during its lifetime was enormous. I've never used that word; I've never said that before. But I think it was enormous. I think in comparison to the number of people, the size of the operation, the amount of money, the premises from which it operated, I think it was very, very considerable, yes.

I: Long term?

R: I don't know. I don't know where the church is going, particularly the Methodist Church. It seems to have lost anything of ... it seems to have lost much of the kind of thrust and dynamism that I knew it had. However, some of it might have been misappropriated at times, but it had a life and it seems as though it's fragmenting and it doesn't seem to be thinking as coherently as I would like -- or is it in the way in which I would like it to think and act? I don't know where the church is going. I don't know what the impact of Avec is, except in and through a series of individuals who were more deeply affected by Avec than others. Some of them turn up from time to time and I hear about them, and they are still committed to what was at one time called "the avec approach". I just cannot begin to think long term. One thing has been coming to me as this interview has gone on is how important it might be for there to be some kind of evaluation of the work of Avec and its contemporary importance and relevance. But I think the long term effect of Avec may now be realised through the MA in Consultancy for Ministry and Mission, There is no one more thrilled than I am, absolutely thrilled, that it's going on and it's under new management and I have, in fact, no input at all, (personal input), and haven't had since I retired from it. And, from what Ian Johnson and others tell me from time to time, I am delighted it's going on and developing new ways of teaching. And you [David Dadswell] have written a book about it, which I'm dying to read. And Helen's written several books, which are all superb background material. The consequence is there is a growing body of material now, and I managed to write three textbooks whilst I was still operating. I think there is something there and I hope to God that it continues for a good many years. It is now well established in a reputable institution, and operating and doing just what I hoped it would do.

I: I remember when I talked to you first about the fact that my book, *Consultancy Skills for Ministry and Mission*, was happening. I remember your reaction was a sort of hallelujah, because someone like SCM publishes it and that it's recognition by the establishment, the world or whatever, that actually this is useful stuff. And from that I got a thing that has come up a number of times, that there is a sort of frustration that actually the church has not recognised how helpful things like non-directive approaches and church work consultancy and all that sort of stuff has been, and actually there might be a sense that there is some recognition of it happening now in a way that it wasn't being, which you found very frustrating in your working life.

R: On the one hand there was a lot of recognition going on, okay? I mean people like Peter Selby were very keen and very committed as were many people in the Methodist Church including a number of ex-Presidents and there was a lot of support in all the churches from people at a fairly high level. The Roman Catholics were very

supportive, Timothy Radcliffe was influenced by it and also put a lot into it. Then there were all the people who were coming to courses and making very positive evaluations of them and saying, “It would have been extraordinarily helpful if we had had this when we were younger” and so on; there was all that extensive affirmation. That was on the one hand, on the other was the frustration that the establishment and people on the fringe but influential, they were not really taking notice and they were spending money elsewhere.

But there was also a frustration with myself. Oh yes, a frustration with myself that I just did not have enough ability; frustration; if I had just been quite a bit more able I would have been able to break through. John Vincent had the ability to break through. He had the ability and the desire, which I didn’t have, and the energy to run with so many different things and to run for Presidency and to be President of the Methodist Conference and to be on all kinds of committees and travelling and lecturing in all kinds of universities all over the world. And to be doing... I just couldn’t, I mean what I did, the work I did occupied everything I’d got and more. In writing I’m not as gifted as he is, and some others, and if I could just have had - and I feel frustrated that I just didn’t have the ability to be able to do those other things. One would be to do the work of Avec *and* to walk in the courts of the church at the same time; I couldn’t do it. The work was absolutely absorbing and maybe Vincent wouldn’t do what I did. Maybe he couldn’t have given himself to other people’s work in the way I gave myself, and also walk in the courts of the church. The other was if I had just had a little more academic ability, better writing, to have really got right through to that point where people were really talking about my writing on a wide scale. I feel frustrated at that.

I: It seems to me, as I thought about it over the last few weeks, thinking about coming to see you, and this in a sense is in response to what you’ve just said, that Avec, you in Avec, and Catherine, were trying to do three enormous things concurrently: develop a completely new way of working, convince the churches that this was worth taking on board and the totally absorbing task of actually running those courses and taking consultancy around the country and around the world. I mean, that was something...the stress of it all. That was really a hugely absorbing and demanding range of tasks.

R: You’ve put it very well. And that won’t be edited out. And when you talk about developing a new way of working, it was finding the theoretical underpinning and working out the theology of it. Nobody had worked out the theology. Batten didn’t work out the theology. When Milson challenged me in my PhD about where is the theology, Batten who was on the interviewing board said, “It’s there! It’s the brotherhood of all men!” But I mean, working out the theology - that was an enormous task of itself. What I never regretted, and don’t regret, is I gave myself wholeheartedly to Avec. I did not look after my own career; I did not have a career concept. I can honestly say to God that I never had that, and that was where my successor went wrong. He said at some point, he thought it was a good idea for him to come to Avec for his career, for his future career, it was a step in his career. I never thought that. I gave myself to it because that was the work that I saw needed to be done. It just gripped me, absorbed me and held me. And God was very kind to me. He never tempted me with other kinds of offers because he knew I probably would have struggled at times. And it was a most remarkable life really. You may not believe me

when I say when I was working on those courses on work paper [personal position papers] sessions for an hour and a quarter, and for that hour and a quarter I rarely ever, in fact almost never, had any thoughts about anything except the person and the work situation in front of me. It was one of the most liberating experiences from being involved with yourself. And that was my life and I don't know how I could have done anything else.

Well I could. There was one occasion when the Secretary Methodist Conference, Brian Beck, wrote to me and said that a Committee wanted me to take on the job of being responsible for a growing piece of work with ministers and deacons who were getting into difficulty, marriages breaking up or they had crises in their ministry. We corresponded about this and I said, "No - I couldn't do it." He really did want me to say yes. My main argument was that I would be in an impossible position. Here is a person who is in trouble up in Middlesbrough and I'm in South London, and that person needs an immediate response. And here I am with a group of ten people whom I'm committed to and who need my total attention. Had I accepted that part time appointment that would have taken me to a very different place. I would have been, first of all, doing it alongside Avec and who knows where it would have taken me?

So there has been that kind of frustration. But you see it was a problem. I mean another thing I realised I should have done was to have written more articles, and I didn't. Batten said he wrote articles whenever he came up against a problem, an interesting problem, on working with people, he worked with it with those concerned and then he wrote an article. He had ready outlets in community development journals. There was no ready-made outlet for me. There wasn't any Methodist journal or any other thing that's just made for church and community development in the churches. But there wasn't then and I didn't do it.

But then it was a question of time and energy. Batten recommended, that we should lecture face to face for a certain number of hours in order to give us sufficient time for reading and researching and writing up. Off hand I don't remember how many hours a year but I do remember that more often than not, we doubled or trebled it to meet the need for our services and to get enough money to survive. In fact, if the churches had put more money in we would have been able to do some of this intensive training, and then a month, say, when we wrote it up, and then intensive training. But Batten did three months, from Easter time to the summer, and the rest of the year he had no courses, in his later years. It was very different. And he didn't waste it. He didn't waste a moment. I mean he would be going to different parts of the world doing consultancy.

I: But it's about that loop of feeding, isn't it? You said you needed the space in order to be able to do the intensive work

R: That's right.

I: But if there are financial constraints that make it very difficult.

R: Yes. I was fortunate that I could work very long hours and regularly worked, rising at six and working until midnight. And in the early days, the courses were two continuous weeks, so I would work all weekend to get ready for the next week.

I: Can I ask you one more?

R: Yes you can.

I: We talked a bit about the way the church is and how far the community development model has or has not taken root, and probably not as much as the people in this room would wish that it had. But do you think that it has much more, somewhat more, accepted the importance of a whole range of means of support for ministry, including, and perhaps particularly, with consultancy?

R: I think the need for support is now much more widely accepted. The Methodist Church has accepted self-appraisal and although that really wasn't the best form; and Leslie Griffiths argued in the Methodist Conference that in fact they should never have gone forward with that scheme because we had a working model already in Avec, and how they actually could have used and could have developed that. I think there is that need, yes, the need is much more recognised for a range of things, from spiritual directors, counsellors, consultants, etc. Yes, I think that's broadened out. I also think there have been enormous changes in the authoritarian approaches. A lot of people have become non-authoritarian without becoming - in the sense that I would understand it - non-directive. And in a sense, the use of a large number of terms, and I don't know whether I can remember them, because I know there are several of them: collaboration, collaborative ministry (so that's two of them) and they really are to do with non-directive, in a sense. And teamwork, collegiality and subsidiarity, yes, and those kinds of things. They are part of what I would understand by the non-directive approach. There has been a large movement, and the non-directive approach was only one. There was all this work about the laity and the involvement of the laity that was going on in the 1960s and 70s. So there have been an enormous number of different kinds of movements that have gone on. But, as David just said, if there is a rise of fundamentalism and extremism and conservatism, I don't know what you can do about that. It is very attractive to people and a lot of the modern forms of worship really live on a sort of a conservative basis.

Have we covered the ground you wanted to cover?

I: Yes.

R: What was the other question? You had two questions.

I: I think the question I asked is the question you answered. Is there anything that you feel we've missed?

R: You've been pretty thorough; I don't think so. I can't think of anything. I think that what I would want to say is that from the time I was appointed to Parchmore - before then, when I was in Sydenham and tried to do community work - there was a very long period when I just felt constrained and the way opened sequentially, as it were. Parchmore and working with Batten and then there was Project 70-75 and then there was Avec and then there was a messiness but then there was this consultancy course, then writing up the stuff. But there was a very long period of being held, that I was held. I used to often say, "I am just held in this work." It wasn't a question of

thinking out opportunities and is this best for my career? It was a responsive ministry to a very deep area of need that I thought I had come across, and a possible way of working at it. And what doesn't come out as clearly as it might do is the vital importance of Reg Batten, and I've written about this from time to time. But I mean, he was extraordinarily important to me. A father in God, even though I don't know if he believed God. He was very important to me; I miss him so enormously.

I: Thank you very much indeed.

R: Thank you for taking the time and trouble coming all this way. Thank you very much.