

# SOF Sift

A column in which Network members think out loud about SOF and their own quest.

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For the last twenty-three years the SOF Network has been my 'Church'. Not my only church but my true one, the continuing one, the one within which I feel genuinely free and bound to be 'religious'. Faith, for me, is action: acting – or aiming to act – as if we are all interdependent and incalculably enmeshed with every part of the earth's ecosystem. Religious faith is the awareness that this enmeshed state requires our reminding, revisiting, rehearsing, re-imagining on a regular basis. The Church, at its best, enables us to do this, but it is only rarely at its best. So, something else, something more is required.

My upbringing was southern, rural, conservative, lower middle-class and behind-the-times: at home the 60s were the 50s and the 70s the 60s. This was healthily leavened by a liberal, market-town non-conformity, a radical, socialist, Sunday-school teacher and a literary-minded minister. 'Religion' was practical rather than ritual: flexible, debatable, but not dogmatic. A childhood injury kept me 'off games' and left me weighty, bookish and inclined to socialise with my elders. History, archaeology and palaeography became my passions, along with cricket scorebooks, Tudor polyphony and folk-rock. Heading north to study History and Archaeology at Sheffield, I encountered evangelicals – and worse, fundamentalists – for the first time. It was a puzzling and disturbing experience: so this was also Christianity?

More significantly I also encountered post-industrial, urban poverty and the remnants of churches hanging in there in the inner-city. John Vincent's Urban Theology Unit was my way into Methodism, the secular gospel, liberation theology and political activism. After the briefest of archaeological careers in John Clare's fenland, I returned to work in the Sheffield City Archive, my year there coinciding with the duration of the Miners' Strike. I tithed my meagre wage to the NALGO Branch's Welfare Fund and served in a pit-village canteen. The impact of ideological dogmatism – of the right and the left – on ordinary people's lives was all too evident and left me restless. Trying to study again, this time in Liverpool, was impossible; *Sea of Faith*, the TV series, and *Faith in the City*: the report, were pulling me in other directions. I was employed



as the first Methodist 'Mission alongside the Poor' lay-worker in the Liverpool District, lived and worked in Toxteth and trained as a Local Preacher. Just at this point my sister's murder put paid to the last vestiges of conversational prayer that I was still able to aim at some notion of a deity 'out there'. Faith-wise I was raw; belief-wise I was flying without a wire.

A few years later this was followed, first by burn-out, then a life-saving marriage, a move to the Wirral, working for Traidcraft, and the real joys of bringing up children. Ordination, which had seemed the 'obvious' course, eluded me: twice. Firstly within Methodism, when a narrow-minded Preachers' Meeting charged me with heresy, and secondly, in the Church of England, when a Cupitt-bashing Bishop reversed my Selection Conference's decision.

I soon realised these were narrow escapes! I had come to understand the implications of Don's writings, and, via Anthony Freeman's little book and Ronald Pearse's good offices, I found my way to the SOF Network, to the excellent North West Group, many a National Conference, and the present Merseyside Group. Except for one further spell in the wilderness (when my support for inter-faith dialogue led a fundamentalist minister to claim that the Devil had entered 'his church' through me!), I have spent the years since working happily, but uncomfortably, as a Methodist Lay Pastor in Warrington and Wirral.

That is until glandular fever hit me at fifty and forced me to re-think the stresses I was putting myself through. I stopped preaching and then realised that I couldn't stomach services I hadn't prepared, so I stopped 'worshipping'. It has been truly liberating. Amongst other things I now run a small charity from the office of the aforementioned devil-infested church. I remain enigmatically unexorcised: a non-preaching preacher, a non-worshipping but active member of the church community; doing 'Jesus-ethic' work, but free of the nonsense of church politics and dogma.

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Andy Kemp will become editor of *Portholes* next year.