



# society of the sacred mission

May 2017

## European Province

St Michael's Priory, Newport Road, Willen,  
Milton Keynes, MK15 9AA  
Telephone: 01908 242190  
E-mail: bookings@stmichaelspriory.org.uk

St Antony's Priory, 74 Claypath, Durham, DH1 1QT  
Telephone: 0191 384 3747  
E-mail: info@stantonyspriory.co.uk

## MARK OAKLEY and *THE SPLASH OF WORDS*



*A recent picture of Mark Oakley*

*At the beginning of May, we were privileged in Willen to receive a visit from Mark Oakley, Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral, writer, broadcaster and lecturer, as well as priest. He came at the invitation of the Willen Library to talk about his 2016 book *The Splash of Words*. Believing in Poetry, and he has kindly given us permission to use extracts from his talk. It took the form of a question and answer evening, with Fr Jonathan Ewer asking some of the questions, together with other questions from the audience. It was a riveting evening. 'Q', below, refers to questions and 'A' to Mark's answers.*

**Q.** Mark, tell us a bit about yourself, your background, where you came from.

**A.** I am a Shropshire lad, born in Shrewsbury. "Shropshire born, Shropshire bred, strong in the body, thick in the head". That's a nice bit of poetry to launch us! I was born as an only child to parents who divorced when I was two years old, and I was really brought up by my grandparents. Because I was an only child stuck in the middle of sheep-laden fields, I developed an inner, imaginative life to get me through the days. I began to be interested in what you might call the inner life, who I am. I was very attracted to nature; in Shropshire there are beautiful landscapes. Then, one day, I just walked into a church. I was eleven years old, my family were not religious at all, and I can still smell the church now. It was obviously Harvest Festival. I went into this tiny church, and there were a few people dotted around and this man came out of a room in bright green. He started to say things, and I didn't understand a word of it, but I was haunted by its beauty. And I remember crying but I didn't know why. By the end of half an hour, because I think it must have been a mid-week communion, I remember thinking 'I want to do that'. Well, careful what you ask for, because now I have more changes into green garments than Lady Gaga on tour! That's how it all began and I was very lucky that I had a vicar who spotted a lonely boy. I looked up to him enormously. He prepared me for communion, and the rest, as they say, is history.

**Q.** How did you get into poetry from there?

**A.** When I was a curate I went to a poetry reading which was given by Wendy Cope. She has become a friend. She had just brought out a nice collection called *Serious Concerns*<sup>1</sup>. The first poem in the book is the one I remember hearing her read. It's called *Names* and Wendy wrote it about her grandmother. It is 107 words and it has captured the fragile life cycle of a woman that we immediately feel tender towards. I was struck. I had tears

### The aims of the Society are:

- to help others to give their lives to God's service
- to share in the mission of the Church
- to study and meditate upon the meaning of the Christian Gospel

falling and I thought this is a language I want to get to know better. The great Irish poet, Michael Longley, when he was asked by someone in the audience ‘where do you get all your poetry from?’ said ‘if I know where poems came from, I’d go and live there’. I think I felt that day that I wanted to go and live there. That’s the day I realised I wanted to know. I felt that this is a language that feels like a soul language. This is a distilling, an experiencing in a way that feels a little bit more like purer truth. That desire to search for a purer truth through language has never gone.

**Q.** *I was delighted when I found that you said that Auden was one of your very favourite poets. Can we take up something about the shadow side that is found in Auden, because I think it’s desperately important? I suspect that Christians are a little afraid of that shadow.*

**A.** The thing about W.H. Auden was that he was fascinated by everything. His poetry roughly is written over a large proportion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To read his poems is really to follow the history of that century. You’ve got the world wars; you’ve got the desire for world peace and a world order. You’ve got the 60s. You’ve got Freud and Jung, and Auden got very interested in psycho-analysis. What I love about Auden is that he was very interested in what you might call the shadow, the fact that human beings grow up trying to please people, and it starts with parents or grandparents, and siblings and schoolteachers and people in the playground. We are endlessly trying to fit in and – in order to fit in – we have to hide bits of ourselves, because they don’t fit with the face we are creating. We have to be acceptable and, as we grow older and older, what we’re hiding gets heavier and heavier. I think religious people often have very big shadows, because we are conscious that we have to be very likeable, because we’re supposed to be nice. Clergy have this a lot. If I say a naughty word in a joke or something, people say ‘you’re a vicar, you shouldn’t say that’. Now I want to say that, but I’m not allowed to because my persona is ‘vicar’. So clergy have big shadow sides – our manicured self and then who we are. Auden was very interested in this shadow, this darkness, because that is often the source of our creativity. To get back in touch with the shadow is important. Jung says that whatever we ignore for the sake of ambition will always come back knife in hand to take its revenge. I always tell that to young clergy. We humans spend energy and ambition and time trying to get up on the roof and then we suddenly discover it’s the wrong house! That’s called a midlife crisis; you suddenly realise that all the energy you’ve been putting into this persona and what you want to achieve is actually the wrong thing. Auden experienced this more than once.

**Q.** *There is an introduction to your book which is magnificent, which is about theology and poetry. Also each poem or poet included is given several pages of notes or commentary. Those are enormously helpful and fired my enthusiasm. One of the things you did for us was make us stop and look at the words, the play on words. Do you want to elaborate?*

**A.** Well, if I suddenly said to you now ‘here is the news’, you would all tune in your ears to listen to the truth coming at you in a particular form, but if I looked at you and said ‘once upon a time ...’, you’d all tune in again, but you’d be ready for truth coming at you in a different form called story. We like stories because they communicate meaning

but without summarising it. I’m haunted a bit by this question: when people go into a place of worship, how have they tuned in? My guess is that most people walk into a church thinking that they have come to hear the news, but actually – as a Christian – I believe that they have come to hear the Good News, which is a different thing. When Jesus was talking about the Good News, he was persistently figurative. We’re told that people were always going up to him and saying, ‘I’m sorry but could you explain that?’, because he was parabolic. I don’t think that it was for nothing that he kept saying “if you’ve got ears to hear, then hear” (i.e. have you tuned in right?). So I’m searching for a language that doesn’t close down, doesn’t endlessly make black and white, but opens up like a sacrament. I believe language is sacramental and it should open up our faith. It should open up the ambiguities, the richnesses, the endless meanings. I feel that we ought to relax a bit and allow ourselves – like parables allow – to have a lifetime’s encounter with these things, to see how it shapes us. Because ultimately, for me, Christian truth is about information, it’s about formation, it’s about who it’s making me. I believe that God has given everyone a great gift. It’s called your being and you are asked to give one gift back in return for it, and that’s called your becoming. In order to help shape you, to form yourself as a Christian into the image of Jesus Christ, you are going to need a language that challenges you, not just strokes you. Poetry is difficult, and I make no apology about that because difficulty, spiritually, is really important. I believe language sometimes has to be difficult in order to take us to new places.

**Q.** *If poetry is difficult, then rather than being inclusive, is it exclusive? How can it work if poetry isn’t accessible to the common man?*

**A.** Well, I think it is, but we tend to think that it’s an elitist occupation. If you see it as an intellectual exercise, I think you misunderstand poetry. A lot of people are frightened of it because they have terrible memories of it at school. This book is written for you, if you have had that experience. What I’m trying to say is ‘relax’, and the example I give is to imagine you were going on holiday to Belgium. What would you do before you set off? You’d go online and do a bit of research and off you’d go. What you know is that, as soon as you get to Belgium, no matter how much preparation you’ve done, at some point you are going to be at a loss. You are going to say ‘I don’t understand what that sign says’ or ‘why is their national symbol a boy peeing into a fountain?’ That’s why we love going on breaks, because we have to rely on the comfort of strangers. We like the strangeness; we’re somewhere different. I see reading poetry like that. You haven’t got to learn all the rules; you haven’t got to do mega prep. You can just say ‘actually, yes, I’m at a loss sometimes, but I’ll stick with it because I think it’s important’. In poetry this is language not as we know it, where spaces occur, where punctuation’s gone for a burton, but you just have to bear it and see what happens. I don’t think it’s primarily an intellectual exercise. R.S. Thomas, the great priest and poet, said: “Poetry is what arrives at the intellect, by way of the heart”.

**Q.** *So what about that elephant in the room? Can we talk about R.S. Thomas?*

**A.** R.S. Thomas was a priest in the church in Wales and a poet. I think he was one of the best religious poets of the

20<sup>th</sup> century. He died in 2000. I had the great pleasure of meeting him once. There is some mythology around R.S. Thomas as a bit of a grumpy old stickler – and he was in a way. But R.S. Thomas became for me in my own journey of faith, particularly around ordination, more than a poet. He became a lifeline. There are two kinds of fundamentalism around at the moment: one is the sort coming from Dawkins ('I'm going to set up this caricature of a God and dismiss it because it's ridiculous') and the other which is, if you like, a sort of Christian or religious caricature of God and which is equally unbelievable. Quite often, when I'm hearing a debate about religion, neither side is satisfying me, because neither of them are Gods I actually recognise. Sometimes with these debates, I feel slightly out of the centre of them. R.S. Thomas is a poet who, unapologetically, allows you to be in that space. For him, God is often absent and silent. Meister Eckhart, the medieval mystic, said that God is rather like someone who's hiding in the dark, but occasionally coughs to give himself away. And there is the cough as well in R.S. Thomas. He has that lovely poem called *Folk Tale*<sup>2</sup>, where he says why am I still praying, like I'm throwing gravel at the sky's window? He goes on, I would have given up years ago if, just once, I hadn't detected the movement of a curtain. That's a very important part of my spiritual journey, that sense of the movement of a curtain. He has another lovely image when he says "he is such a fast God, always before us and leaving as we arrive"<sup>3</sup>. That really kept me going for years and still does actually. There's a period of my life where I really needed help with that and he provided it. So the longest chapter in the book, and a rather personal chapter I think, is the R.S. Thomas one.

**Q.** *You talk about versio and conversio at some point, but I'm not sure that I've got it. It think I vaguely see what you're getting at, that is our attention is attracted, so we turn and then life is reorganised.*

**A.** Yes, I could be a bit more prosaic and say God loves you just as you are. I have no doubt about that whatsoever. God loves you just as you are, but God loves you so much that he doesn't want you to stay like that, because actually there's more of you to come. There are bits you are hiding; there are bits you are shadowing, and he wants so much more of you. You're going to have to open a few windows. I've brought a poem with me that you will all know. It's George Herbert's *Love III*. The poem begins "Love bade me welcome: yet my soule drew back, guiltie of dust and sinne" and ends "You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat: so I did sit and eat". It's a religious poem that never mentions God. What do you think would happen to this poem if you changed the word 'Love' to 'God'? Would you hear it differently? God is a very loaded word for some people. Edwin Muir, the Orkney poet, was brought up in a very strict Presbyterianism in the Isles in Scotland and he said – for him – God was "three angry letters in a little black book". So here, Herbert very daringly just calls God 'Love'. Let me share a little story with you. Strangely, a few years ago, I was asked to go and preach in Dresden. So I went, did the sermon and spent the weekend there. On my way to the station I got a taxi and the taxi-driver was very chatty. He said to me 'have you enjoyed your trip?' I said 'I've loved it' and he asked 'why have you come to Dresden?' I answered 'I've always wanted to come here'. He replied 'why?' I took a deep breath and said 'Well, I

was brought up by my grandfather and I do know that – although he would never talk about it – on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1945, he was part of the bombing raid here'. The taxi driver was very quiet. Then he said, 'Ah, that was the night my mother was killed'. Then he pulled the car over, switched the engine off and turned round to me. He said 'and now you and I shake hands'. When I got on the train, the thing that kept coming back into my mind was "Love took my hand and smiling did reply". Life and poetry suddenly came into one and I thought 'if there's a God, that man's just done something divine'. And Herbert knew it well before me.

**Q.** *We're getting near the end. Is there another poem we might consider?*

**A.** As we are coming to a conclusion, can I just quickly tell you about the end of the book, because the last poem in the book is a rather unusual thing? It called a *landay* and that is an Afghanistan poem. It's a short poem; it has twenty-two syllables, nine in the first line, thirteen in the second line. *Landays* are short folk poems and they are poems that are recited by native women. In a tradition where women traditionally have to be invisible and pliant, these little *landays* are shared amongst women when they gather together. They're surprisingly rich and varied, but they're all about a way of women keeping hold of their identity together. I ended the book with one of these *landays*, and it simply says in English "I call. You're stone. One day you'll look and find I'm gone". The reason I ended with this is because I tell the little story about a girl called Rahila. She lived in Afghanistan and she loved poetry. She was a very frequent caller on radio programmes. One day, in Spring 2010, Rahila phoned in from a hospital bed, in Kandahar, to say that she'd set herself on fire in anger. Her brothers had discovered that she was reading and writing poetry, and they beat her up very brutally to punish her. Her father took her out of school. With all the strength and resilience that she'd shown in writing and reciting her poems, she had set fire to herself. Just a couple of days after the phone call, she died. This is how I end my book. A teenage girl on the other side of the world decides that she is willing to die to witness to the importance of poetry and its celebration of a fine, whole, uncensored human person in a whole and uncensored world. I see in her story the poet of Galilee nailed to the cross, the man whose words were taken to court and put on trial. In Rahila and in all who bear the cost of liberating, perplexing, defiant, truthful words, I see the holy God of truth's beauty reflected.

<sup>1</sup>*Serious Concerns*, pub. Faber and Faber, 1992.

<sup>2</sup>'Folk Tale' from *Collected Poems*, pub. The Orion Publishing Group, 2000.

<sup>3</sup>'Pilgrimages' from *Collected Poems*, pub. The Orion Publishing Group, 2000.

*The above article is just a small part of the evening's conversation about the book. If anyone would like to read the whole conversation, this has been put into a transcript and can be obtained for a small contribution, on application to the Willen Library (01908 242693).*

**Mark Oakley's book is entitled *The Splash of Words. Believing in Poetry and is published by Canterbury Press. The ISBN is 978-1-84825-468-8***

# MY TIME IN DURHAM, 2016-17

by Gregory Stephens SSM



Fr Gregory Stephens, May 2017

All that I had thought about and how I was to spend my time in Durham was made possible by the free rein and honouring that Paul and Joan Golightly and the whole Team allowed me in Durham during my stay. Originally, my stay was to be six months from April last year, but that was extended to a 12-month stay. Although I have not been convinced of the benefits of the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator, I thank them!

Moving from one country to another (in my case from Australia to England) always has its challenges, with visas, banks, ecclesiastical structures and similar matters, but after a few hiccups I quickly settled into the joy of living in The Cottage at St Antony's Priory, joining the work on Thursdays principally, being a keen observer and traveller with the workers and guests, and wearing a track to the Cathedral Church of Christ, Blessed Mary the Virgin and St Cuthbert of Durham, i.e. Durham Cathedral.

I had come from the Diocese of Willochra in South Australia, by the generosity of the Kelham Theological College Fund, to reflect, read, watch, learn and to consider my future. It was Teresa of Avila who said something like when you have reached a certain maturity, the question or only question is 'how can you be helpful?' My main desire was to pray regularly, read constantly and work through what it meant to 'go down a gear', seeing that I celebrated my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday half way through my year in Durham. A university town always provides more than enough to dip in and out of, and a vibrant and sacred place like Durham Cathedral was the venue and stage for more than enough. In fact, I was often unable to attend events like concerts, lectures, and the new Dean's *Desert Island Discs* interview in the Cathedral, because of being further afield at the time. The weekly rhythm in sung services was a constant source of joy. Walking into the early Eucharist on a Wednesday, when a light over the crossing lit the way, never ceased to jolt me. Often times I would be the only one there, apart from the priest and vergers.

To my amazement, I was entitled to a free bus pass that took me to all corners – and unexpected surprises – of County Durham. Although an Australian country boy enjoying Durham's smallness, I was also attracted to the excitement and opportunities that the big city of Newcastle had to offer: the architecture, the Tyneside cinema and the Sage Theatre, as well as the huge smorgasbord of churches I could access – let alone the morsels and coffee I am very partial to, let alone the people!

Highlights of musical events would be the Verdi *Requiem* in the Cathedral, a Rachmaninov concert in the Sage Theatre, Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* with the touring National Opera in the Gala Theatre in Durham, Handel's *Messiah* and many mass settings on Sunday mornings, together with several organ scholars in recital at the Cathedral. Hearing James Lancelot play Olivier Messiaen's *The Nativity of the Lord, Nine Meditations for Organ*, inspired by the birth of Jesus, played on the glorious organ of Durham Cathedral and heard in that haunting beauty and holy space, certainly brought home the privilege of being there. As the Director of Music, James Lancelot's musical gifts were abundantly presented almost every day I was at St Antony's. After 32 years, James Lancelot retires this summer. On many Wednesdays, I volunteered as a guide in the Cathedral, where I not only met and spoke to numerous tourists (many Australians), but also befriended many other volunteers from the Wednesday 'gang'. There was a great well of knowledge and inspiration about life and what the Cathedral meant, and some of them became good mates. Together with the clergy of the Cathedral, I felt very much part of the Cathedral family.

The woman managing the desk in the Cathedral was born and went to school almost within calling distance from where I lived in relatively remote South Australia just before I came to St Antony's! We were often seen and heard chatting about our lives, and families and Australia. The new 'Open Treasure' space, consisting mainly of the monks' old dormitory, opened while I was in Durham. This almost intact surviving set of medieval monastic buildings has been converted into a world-class exhibition space with many interactive features, rolling exhibits and mini-lectures on particular aspects or items. I attended some of these very instructive talks. Then there was the Durham Book Festival and – inspired by the shrines in Durham Cathedral – an exploration of the historic worlds of Bede in Jarrow and Cuthbert in Melrose, Scotland.

During the year, I had time away from Durham. This included a couple of journeys to London, where I stayed at St Matthew's House in Westminster. There were some special musical experiences, including hearing Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* at the art-deco Cadogan Hall. Additionally, the singing at St Paul's Cathedral, at Westminster Abbey and at St Bride's Church, Fleet Street always 'fill me up'. I had equally moving experiences at art exhibitions: the American Expressionist exhibition at the Royal Academy, Caravaggio as well as Australian

Impressionists at the National Gallery and a Paul Nash exhibition at the Tate.

There were trips further afield. I stayed for three nights at the Monastery at Monserrat in Spain, where I was able to enjoy the monks' first and last offices of the day in the mezzanine chapel above the high altar of the Basilica. In September, I undertook a *Jesus in Palestine* course at St George's College in Jerusalem. I was able to visit, pray at and observe holy places in Jerusalem and other parts of the Holy Land. The impact of the two-week visit was immediate on one level and ongoing on another. I was also able to visit Edinburgh and Berlin.

My over-riding memory of being in Durham at St Antony's for a year is the need for me to celebrate being with people where they are and – to the best of my ability – to respond appropriately. I was free to engage with people, be it in the Market Square, on the bus, in the supermarket, anywhere, because I wasn't rushing against a clock! That expression 'I'd love to stay but I have to go' sounds painful, as it conjures up a heavy heart in the receiving person. I'm sure such lines, thoughts, practices ring all too true for most of us.

There are numerous people stories I have buried in me as a result of being in Durham – both from the volunteering at the Cathedral and from my 'bussing' about the country. Space does not allow all these to be told, but they have planted themselves within the whole narrative of this

Durham sabbatical. Organisationally, attending Deanery meetings in Durham was rewarding and instructive, although having taken eight months to be given permission to officiate, this robbed me of opportunities.

Attending and participating in the Province's Windermere Chapter, and the most recent one at St Michael's Priory, has included and informed me. Jonathan and Christopher's visit to Durham in July was a happy few days. The visits of a church warden from Australia, the editor of the Melbourne Anglican newspaper, Roland Ashby and his wife Ros, also a fellow priest and friend from Tasmania and four friends from South Australia were all occasions to celebrate over food and Durham city.

Fairly early in my stay at St Antony's, I had occasion to meet and eat with an Irish guest, Bridie, her daughters and one of their partners. It was one of those meals where out-of-control laughter filled the refectory. Later, during my extended visit to London, they generously invited me to eat with them in one of their favourite haunts in Kensington. Again we philosophised and ate well, and I thank God for such people and occasions. Near the end of my stay in the north, I 'retreated' to Swarthmoor Hall, the Quaker founding house near Ulverston. Of course, the private silence and gathered silence in meetings was the perfect way to celebrate, internally, my northern sojourn. For all this and much more, thank you SSM!

## PASTORAL ASSISTANTS

*This spring, three pastoral assistants joined the team at Willen, with a view to taking up roles in a couple of the local parishes/ecumenical partnerships. This is in line with SSM's history of assisting in parishes. Although this still happens with some of the ordained and lay religious, we are all aging, so it is good to be able to boost our numbers in this way. In addition, Bob White, one of the pastoral assistants, has been accepted to train for the noviciate with SSM.*



*Ruth Cooper, May 2017*

### **1. RUTH COOPER** writes:

I arrived at St Michael's Priory in February 2017, to take up the role of Pastoral Assistant attached to Willen Church, in the Ecumenical Partnership of Stantonbury and Willen. My background is in NHS provision, in charitable organisations and other voluntary sector areas, with adults with disabilities

and in community rehabilitation. Over the last six years, I lived as a religious sister in Birmingham and in Kent. As well as developing a life of prayer, work and study, I have helped develop diverse neighbourhood projects, working with other faith groups, young people and café projects in deprived areas of this country.

Now I have come to St Michael's Priory, I am specifically linked to our local parish and the Church of St Mary Magdalene in Willen, where I work with the vicar, Paul Smith and the lay minister, Sr Margaret Moakes. I am a member of the Willen Church Council and I also have responsibility for the church's adherence to the Diocesan policy on safeguarding. Additionally, I help by opening up the church, setting up for services, cleaning, reading and serving. I also assist in Sunday services. At a recent service, we worked with the congregation to tease out ideas on how the church might be more accessible, not just in terms of physical access, but also in respect of worship, support and care. This is all part of the development of an ongoing mission action plan.

Pastorally, I have a specific responsibility for residents linked to the church in the local area known as Willen Park. I also assist the vicar in service provision in residential care and sheltered housing locally. I hope to be able to work with Paul and Margaret in accessing links to the school, and in taking

the lead in gathering information about the Willen area and the hopes and dreams of people living locally. One way of doing this will be by a presence at the local summer fete on the playing fields, in co-operation with the Willen Pavilion Committee. I am currently working on a questionnaire, which I will use in my encounters there, to record information towards building a profile of the area.

I also take my share in life in the Priory. I attend meditations and offices, and have been studying SSM's *Principles*. The timetable gives me structure and the *Principles* give me guidance. I use both in personal prayer and study time. In Holy Week, I completed a piece of work on the Stations of the Cross. I am also fully involved with the work of the house. There are several things I should like to develop further, such as giving thought to how we might support the Willen Hospice chaplaincy, how social media might be used even more effectively and how I might, personally, strengthen my skills in offering listening time to individuals. Above all, I am aware of how Willen Church has a great need of support from the Priory, and I should like to improve and strengthen the links we have with the church.



*Bob White, May 2017*

## **2. BOB WHITE** writes:

My name is Bob White and I have been living with the Community at St Michael's Priory for three months.

My Christian journey began in 2011, shortly after completing my undergraduate degree in Religious Studies. During my time at University, I had become increasingly interested in the Anthropological and Sociological study of Pilgrimage. Upon graduation, it seemed fitting to gain some personal experience of the phenomenon. I walked from Porto to the shrine of St James in Santiago de Compostela along the *Camino de Santiago*. It was during this pilgrimage that I came to know God for the first time and to realise him as an active agent in my life.

The subsequent six years have been spent discerning exactly what God is calling me to do and be; how should I live out my Christian vocation? After a period discerning with some monasteries in England, I took up the position of Pastoral Assistant at St Michael's Priory. I participate fully in the religious life of the Community and see the daily rhythm of prayerful and sacramental worship as the foundation upon which my other pastoral activities are built.

In Milton Keynes, I am on placement simultaneously with the Walton Churches Partnership and the pioneering Church Without Walls. I am fortunate enough to experience a diverse

range of styles of worship and doing church. My duties as pastoral assistant are varied. I can find myself one day shadowing the parish priest with wedding preparation and the next day assisting with a baptism. One of my regular activities is to help with supervision and planning of two youth groups. The groups run for children from 9 to 14 years old, and we attempt to focus group activities and games on a theme for the week to get the children to think about some theological and scriptural ideals through fun engagement. I have, coming up, a large funeral, which I am helping Fr Keith Straughan with. I see this as an important part of my discernment process as I will be able to be involved in the preparation of one of life's difficult 'rites of passage'.

Having settled into the prayerful and sacramental life of the Priory I made the decision to take the first step toward membership. I enjoy and get a lot from the structure of the daily office and meditative prayer. Therefore, I am now a postulant with the Society and hoping to upgrade to the noviciate in September when my pastoral duties finish.

## **3. MICHAEL LESTER** writes:

I am Michael Lester, hailing from the land of sheep and cows known as Devon, in particular the quirky region around the town of Totnes, where I lived until recently, and Exeter University, where I studied a BA and then Masters in Theology. When I heard about the opportunity to be involved in the life and work of St Michael's Priory, Willen, I was very curious. I had been doing some pastoral work in London and had felt keenly that something was missing from my discernment of vocation. In discussion with my supervising priest, we both realised that what I needed to do was experience community life. Since applying and being accepted to take part in the life of SSM ministering in Milton Keynes, I have already had so many more opportunities than I could have imagined.

I have begun to grow and be gently stretched in new ways. Coming from a very high Anglo-Catholic background, intermixed with conservative evangelical, to call a URC frontier church plant in the Walton Churches Partnership unfamiliar territory would be a more than moderate understatement! Likewise, the idea of working with young



*Michael Lester, May 2017*

teenagers was frightening for me, but I am finding the gradual supportive pace of work and development already has been a joy, as is knowing that I have the communal needs and communal prayers to provide a firm foundation for the various work that I do within the parishes.

At the moment, I am mainly helping out with existing worship

and providing a service of tea and coffee, conversation and encouragement with new Christians. I support the URC Minister with the various Sundays and take part in the weekday faith and community activities. Taking part in, and sometimes leading, exploring faith sessions which either focus on Bible Study or more general discussion of an aspect of Christianity is great fun. Figuring out how to explore the deeper themes of Christianity in an accessible fashion has finally managed to rekindle my love of Theology after about a year's burn out, following the intensity of academic study. Also – since once of my main loves is interior prayer and Christian meditation – being able to be involved with that aspect of a new worship church community is very exciting

and challenging, and it feels very empowering to be encouraged to expand these areas for the community.

It is still early days for me, but already new opportunities are opening and I am really excited to have the chance to use my gifts and also, potentially, to start up new things; something that the ministers have really encouraged. The real joy of this is that there are no expectations. If you work hard and are dedicated, then the scheme is about you as a person, not some pre-existing pastoral assistant template. I honestly could not ask for more supportive and encouraging hosts than the members of the SSM Community here in Willen, and I am excitedly looking forward to continuing my journey here.

## MY WORK AT ST ANTONY'S PRIORY

by Paul Tyler

Up until October 2016, I was the full-time Anglican Chaplain at Her Majesty's Prison (High Secure), Frankland, near Durham City. I also worked as a self-supporting priest in the old mining town in County Durham in which I have lived since 2013.

My background is as a parish priest in County Durham ex-pit villages and dockland parishes, being first ordained in Durham Cathedral in 1983. I also worked for sixteen years as a secondary school teacher, during which time I was an Old and New Testament tutor on the Diocesan Readers course and did sessional tutor and teaching work for the Durham University's School of Education. I am a musician and keen competitive racing cyclist and motorcyclist.

My connection with St Antony's Priory in Durham began ten years ago when I started coming here for regular day retreats and spiritual direction. Having completed the Spiritual Direction course here, paid for by the Prison Service, five years ago I began regular voluntary work here in spiritual accompaniment: we have many such volunteers at St Antony's.

In October 2016, I joined the team here as a two days per week employee. The major part of my work continues to be spiritual accompaniment. So, for example, at present I am accompanying five Anglican priests, two Free Church ministers, six people who are either in training for the priesthood or are going through the vocation discernment process, and one Anglican lay person. This developing work is immensely fulfilling. I am continually struck by the depth of faith of those whom I accompany, and am aware that it is a privilege which I would not have been ready for when I was younger: I am sixty next birthday.

In October, I am very much looking forward to being tutor on the Spiritual Accompaniment Training Course here. This is a great responsibility and it will be a privilege to be working beside some very experienced and talented colleagues. Typically we have around a dozen students on the course.

In addition to accompanying individuals, I have set up a support group for those in ministry. These Ministry Support Days happen each month, involving morning prayer, silent reflection, a time to share our joys and difficulties in confidence with each other, midday prayer and a meal. I

have set this up because I am aware that many clergy need support in the face of growing pressures on themselves and their loved ones. At the moment we have around a dozen who have attended and who have expressed that they greatly value the days. The 'Catch 22' is that many have had to cancel their planned attendance at short notice because of the pressure of, for example, yet another funeral or fellow clergy being off work through illness. This is a great concern to me and is something for which I would value your prayers.

St Antony's Priory is a much busier place than I would have expected it to be. We have regular activities, such as university students who come to a meditation class, groups of people in recovery from addiction who garden here and then come to our Thursday Midday Eucharist, those who come to a dancing-our-prayers group, well-being evenings, outreach work to schools and communities, links with a children's project in India, church group days, individual retreats, clergy meetings, Saturday meditation mornings and the annual Spiritual Direction training course, to name a few. Inevitably, this means that the phone and doorbell need answering on a regular basis (I have just stopped writing this for five minutes whilst I went to find which directee had parked in the drive and blocked in the car of another directee who needed to head off home). This routine work is all part of the job and has increased since we took over the old pub at the bottom of the drive to improve and increase our accommodation.

Outside of the work here, I am licensed as associate priest in the parish in which I live. I am particularly involved with working with those who are outside the church. To that end we have begun a Wednesday evening food, prayer and Bible study fellowship. An ex-prisoner and a Salvation Army Captain are amongst those who help me with this. The little, elderly congregation have been remarkable in welcoming in the outsider, so it is my hope that several prisoners with whom I have worked, on their release will come and live in the village and be part of a community here who pray together regularly and who share meals together. I also have the joy of being a non-residential canon of Durham Cathedral and so celebrate there on a regular basis. Life is, indeed, good.

# GATHERING AT KENNINGTON



On Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> April, a group from St Michael's Priory were able to travel to St John the Divine in London to meet up with Fr Robert, whilst others were engaged in church duties. The group included our two novices from Lesotho, Katleho Motsoeneng and Mojalefa Lenkoe, who have come to take up formation in this country for a year. It also included Br Andrew Muramatsu from Japan, who was here for a Provincial Chapter meeting. The picture opposite was taken on the occasion.

*Left to right: Fr Jonathan, Fr Gregory, Br Andrew, Mojalefa (novice), Fr Robert, Katleho (novice)*

# 50 YEARS OF MILTON KEYNES

"The New-style Kelham Sets Up Its Houses" – so went the headline in the *Church Times* of summer 1973. It was in this same year that the Priory in Willen, Milton Keynes was founded. Two other houses were already established in Lancaster and Nottingham. The third was to be the new Priory in Sheffield, and the fourth house was in the still very young new town of Milton Keynes.

In January 2017, celebrations across the city marked the start of an important anniversary year. These began with a service of praise and thanksgiving at the city church, the Church of Christ the Cornerstone. Back in 1967, Milton Keynes was relatively unknown to most of the UK, and Willen even less so. Today it's very different: the town is proud of its identity, one marked by interfaith dialogue, ecumenical co-operation and religious life. The town (which we all think of as a city) is, in fact, home to three Christian religious communities, SSM being the first to make its home in Milton Keynes!

The expansion of the new town was rapid, and it soon came to prominence not only because of its layout and design, but because of its hugely successful and prestigious Open University. The town/city and the university and, indeed, the Priory continue. In 1967, the first plans were being drawn up for what would become the last sizeable new town. And the presence of a religious community was part and parcel of both church and state planning. In January this year, there was a double celebration being marked, in which SSM has played a key part. Twenty-five years ago, the Church of Christ the Cornerstone was founded.

On a cold and rainy January afternoon, the Community

took part, with over 400 others, in the anniversary service of praise and thanks. Fr Frank SSM, who was with us at the service, remembered the early years of the church, as we made our way from the Priory to the centre of Milton Keynes. Irene, Frank's sister, was involved in many of the early developments at the Cornerstone church. Speaking with others after the service, many fondly remembered Fr Ralph Martin and Fr Dunstan McKee. Others recalled Br Jimmy, Br Bertram, Fr Francis and others. It was Dunstan, in fact, who persuaded the Society to pay the rent for the fledgling Cornerstone church which, in the early years, used to meet in the same building as the central library and the community centre round the corner.

There are continued signs of growth and new life. On the same day that we attended the anniversary celebrations, some of us made a detour to the train station, on our way back to St Michael's. We'd agreed to collect one of the new Pastoral Assistants, all three of whom are featured in this issue of the magazine. It's wonderful to commemorate, with our novices, postulant, aspirant, pastoral assistants, professed members, alongsiders, volunteers, visiting clergy, and many old and new friends, how the vision of SSM brought here in 1973 still continues. The early documents in the life of the Willen Priory ask SSM simply 'to be a community that demonstrates a dimension of Christian living not otherwise provided for in Milton Keynes'. Let's thank God, who has given this opportunity to simply 'be' in Milton Keynes; and let's also give thanks for the life and work of the new town. We pray, too, that the life and work of SSM remains a part of the bigger landscape which is Milton Keynes.

# SAD NEWS

We are very sad to report the news that Dr Peter Hughes, who put the SSM Archive into such good order during the 1990s, died recently. His death occurred on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2017. He had suffered for a number of years from chronic lymphocytic leukaemia. The condition progressed in 2013 and, at the same time, a serious heart condition was identified. Peter carried on valiantly with his various items of work for different

communities, but his condition worsened in January this year and he died after five days in hospital. A funeral service took place at Nazareth House, London W6, followed the next day by cremation and a committal service at Enfield Crematorium. SSM will ever hold him in great esteem for the quiet and efficient way he took charge of our Archive and arranged its transfer to the Borthwick Institute in York.