

Dear Friends,

This is a heartfelt thank-you for your support and prayers over the last 25 years of seeing God's blessing, provision and protection in S.E. London! **You are warmly invited to attend a farewell service on 11<sup>th</sup> July at 7pm in St. Saviour's Church Middle Park Ave SE9 5JH. RSVP to Emma Sivyer (email below).**

Please note that as of 1<sup>st</sup> July my email address changes (contact our Jo Hartwright for details). The Greenwich Centre of Mission continues with Karen Saunders doing very valuable and very tough youth and family work in Abbey Wood, and a new evangelist starting work with families from deprived areas in Plumstead. I retire from Church Army (continuing to work part-time for the diocese) aged 70 this month. The focus of Greenwich Centre of Mission is on serving the poorest,



especially the poorest children, who through no fault of their own or of their parents and carers, live in a world of sadness, with limited hope and opportunities, and in the worst cases, of crippling low self-esteem anxiety, fear and inability to trust. A brilliant youth worker once wrote:  
"Love is the only thing that can give damaged children hope"

God wants his church to be the source of the greatest love of all – His love.

*If you would like to support the ongoing work of Church Army Greenwich, please email [Emma.Sivyer@churcharmy.org](mailto:Emma.Sivyer@churcharmy.org)*

**Heartfelt thanks to friends named below, and to so many other fellow- workers**

### **The first 12 years: 1999 – 2011, the Ferrier Estate:**

On being commissioned in 1999, Church Army placed me in a flat on the Ferrier estate - a 1970s concrete estate that had 1900 flats and houses, home to around 5000 people. Vulnerable tenants were surviving on the estate with not much support. It was culturally diverse, with a



concentrated population of refugee families whose children were often scarred by trauma in war. They could be sucked into the estate's youth gangs, young people who were often also survivors of trauma and neglect, many becoming drug delivery boys as young as 12. It was a place of struggle and suffering, but also of heroic mutual support, where the poorest supported one another and children were often unofficially fostered by friends of the family when their carers were battling addiction, mental or physical illness, or domestic violence and abuse of many kinds. Throughout my time in deprived communities I have seen the image of God in hidden heroes at work with a selfless dedication and generosity that are awe-inspiring and humbling. God was also



already at work at the tiny estate church (with our flat above it). and its congregation, and through a team from Eltham Green Church (EGCC), with Alan Robinson – also founder of the wonderful Greenwich Food Bank- co-ordinating work through the Ferrier Focus Committee.

### **Your prayers kept us going...**

Unemployment on the estate reached as high as 75%, and it was in the worst 3% nationally for crime. Much of the crime was youth crime and so children's and youth work became a priority. Our home in the main square of the estate quickly became a place where youths and children in trouble would come and seek help. The early stages of mission with troubled young people are always the most dangerous. They would vent their anger by urinating through our flat's letterbox and on one occasion pushed lighted newspaper through. (The floor tiles contained some asbestos and nothing came of it!) As they trusted in our genuine care for them this behaviour eased off. I later got to know the would-be arsonists: from an early age they had been victims of repeated violence at the hands of an alcohol-addicted father, and then of a drug addict stepfather who was later gaoled for domestic violence. We knew the power of your prayers as we were continually filled with 1 Cor. 13 persevering love for the most challenging young people. It was the most extraordinary feeling as the love of God channelled through us completely transformed young people's attitudes. They remain warm friends to this day, and their gratitude is undying.

### **Psychological Insights**

An O.U. degree in psychology which I completed over the first few years introduced me to a key concept: the mental lens through which we view other people and the mental mirror in which we see ourselves. Harsh childhoods had shaped the minds of the young people we worked with and they believed no-one cared about them, that adults were a threat and that there was nothing positive about themselves. Gangs were their support and protection. I also learned how the stresses of poverty and marginalisation destroy relationships and parenting, and create despair that opens the way to drug abuse.

### **Children and Youth**

I joined in with the work of Superkidz – started by Eltham Green Community Church (EGCC) and then run by Helen, who was part of the church's team and who, to my amazement, agreed to marry me! I was privileged also to volunteer for Greenwich Youth for Christ (run during my time by Dr. Nick Shepherd and then by Hugh Ridsdill-Smith) - a splendid organisation with outstanding volunteers and staff that befriended some of the most notorious young drug gang members. Helen's Superkidz team visited families on the estate and there were many living in desperate need, some with parents focused on the drugs that relieved their undiagnosed anxiety and depression, rather than their children, and most only able to afford the bare minimum. The Superkidz kids' club regularly had between 80 and 100 attending, and a special effort was made for birthdays which could be quite bleak for many of the children. The children's favourite song was "Our God is a great big God, and he holds us in his hands". Steph Blackwell and the Church Urban Fund supported Superkidz and Rev'd Kim Hitch from St. James' Kidbrooke oversaw its management alongside members of EGCC. In 2011 after it had become a registered charity, I took over its management. Gospel magic became the preferred method of evangelism to children and carers as it did not rely on Christian vocabulary and held attention, with the emphasis always on how the precious everyone is to God. Interactive puppet stories were used to help with self-esteem, resilience, perseverance and good attitudes.

### **Youth Work and Youth Violence**

Alongside work with secondary school students, we were committed to the socially excluded gang members. We found that 1 Cor.13 love reduces youth violence. Again, your prayers protected our work as we prevented at least two stabbings and as an angry youth intending to stab me for

calling the police was overcome by an uncanny sense of God's peace that fell on us both. Thanks to your prayers many of these perpetrators were reformed and one became a brilliant youth worker with Superkidz. I visited him in various YOIs and prisons from the age of 14 to the age of 25

### **Tough Youth Evangelism**

Evangelism was hard when none of the drug gang members had an idea of a loving father, let alone a loving Heavenly Father. Excluded from school and with terrible home lives, their vocabulary was limited and knowledge of Christianity almost nil. Harsh experiences made faith in God difficult. Repentance meant attempting an honest living, which they felt was impossible. Evangelism had to be tough too: "Would you take a stabbing for a friend? Jesus took death on a cross for us..." Some did become Christians. To this day I receive links to Christian rap videos from one who aged 14 "borrowed" our car to drive to see his mum in Clapham. The seed of the gospel took a long time in others: I was recently asked to baptise a youth club member to whom I first preached the gospel 15 years ago.

### **Work with Adults**

Esme Robinson from Eltham Green Church ran a wonderful drop-in (see picture of a birthday party she organised) for some of the very vulnerable adults placed on the Ferrier through Care in the Community, and I was able to start a church fresh expression there which later moved to St. Saviour's Middle Park and lasted until Covid struck. Images rather than words worked best as the members had various kinds of learning needs. They were a wonderful group, who sadly did not return after Covid.



### **Centre of Mission Born**

As Church Army moved away from residential college training and explored the idea of Mission-based training, we were joined on the Ferrier estate by a Church Army student, Craig Dowling, Happily, he not only completed his studies and took up his first Church Army post in the Centre of Mission, but got married too! He did tough work in Plumstead, casually mentioning once that a homeless man at his church fresh expression had pulled out a gun. Church Army Safeguarding went into overdrive!

### **Expelled from the Labour Party**

As the Ferrier was earmarked for "regeneration", I ended up as Chair of FRAG, its residents group, and was expelled from the Labour Party for vociferously defending tenants' rights in Full Council and on BBC1 London news. When the demolition "grabber" came to the church and our flat (the one with yellow walls in the picture) it mysteriously broke down for three weeks!



### **Expansion of Greenwich Centre of Mission**

Greenwich Centre of Mission gained new Church Army Evangelists, first Peter Wilson in St. Saviour's Parish. Peter is a grade 8 pianist and was later replaced by Trevor Clarke, a grade 8 trombonist! Both of these evangelists worked with Rev'd Wendy Saunders, Vicar of St. Saviour's parish, on re-establishing a foothold in the Horn Park Estate, a very isolated and deprived estate in her parish of St. Saviour's with little or no local authority community or youth work going on. Trevor eventually was able to start a café drop-in and prayer hub in the community centre that had been St. Francis Church and Hall. William Temple Church in Abbey Wood kindly hosted Church Army's Mission, and youth work was established by Nick Lebey, now replaced by Karen Saunders.

### **2011-2024: Spreading Out**

As the Ferrier was replaced by Kidbrooke Village (a large complex of thousands of medium and high-rise expensive flats with a very small proportion of social housing), our work spread to surrounding council estates, with new families soon outnumbering those from the Ferrier who had been relocated. Superkidz was grateful to be hosted by EGCC as part of its mission, Superkidz began to reach 500 to 600 people per year.

### **New venues for Superkidz work**

Youth work continued with gang members. We were blessed when Rev'd Steve Cook offered the use of St. Barabas church hall for youth work. The youths belonged to the Page estate (SE9) and St Barnabas was on the border with SE3, home to a rival gang. We had to lock away all kitchen knives and anything else that could have been used as a weapon, in case an SE3 gang member came past. Our campaign against knife carrying was successful, but some members of the Paige estate gang complained later that they had been unarmed and mugged at knife point by the SE3 gang. We pointed out that had both sides been armed, there would have been a blood bath, lives lost and lengthy prison sentences for survivors. OneSpace on the former Ferrier estate continued to provide another youth and children's work venue, thanks to Rev'd Margaret Cave and her team, until the site was bulldozed. Haimo and Holy Family Schools hosted children's work too.

### **Middle Park & Horn Park**

Rev'd Wendy Saunders welcomed Superkidz and Coffee Stop (vulnerable adults) to St. Saviour's and they became part of the church's Mission Action Plan, reaching the neediest unchurched members of its parish. Youth clubs and kids and carers' groups started and attendance grew. Later mothers' and toddler groups started in Middle Park and Horn Park, an initiative of local community workers. We will always be grateful for St. Saviour's support (like a gospel mustard tree) in providing facilities for many of the most disadvantaged in the Parish. We soon saw the need to reach out to the local drug gang members and youth drug users, and followed in the footsteps of previous work with skinheads by Del Bearfoot and youth work by Ann and Jack Stanley from St. Saviour's. We started a youth support group at St. Saviour's Hall for young drug users and drug gang members belonging to "Nineside" gang in Middle Park. As usual the first year (until loyalty to us built up) was difficult, with vandalism and break-ins which cost Superkidz a significant amount in repairs. There was the usual postcode gang problem. As we cared for the gang members of Middle Park their aggressive and violent behaviour stopped and they became victims of other gangs, with individuals being stabbed or beaten up. One night one of the Superkidz workers, our brilliant reformed youth offender, spotted SE3 gang members jumping out of a car with knives and got all our youths into the hall and locked the door. Two days later the same SE3 members stabbed and killed someone outside our kids and carers' club on the Page estate.

### **Looking after St. Saviour's**

In 2016 I was asked if I could look after St. Saviour's Church in Eltham after the retirement of



Rev'd Wendy Saunders, with Evangelist Trevor Clarke supporting my mission work, and Evangelist Nick Lebey continuing in Abbey Wood. However, Centres of Mission were reduced to two evangelists shortly afterwards and Trevor moved away. It was not possible for the Centre of Mission to



support St. Saviour's congregation. Wanting to keep the church's witness alive, and grateful for the strong support for Superkidz' work as its Mission Partner, I did this in my spare time as best I could. The task became more onerous as much of the team put in place by Wendy gradually faded away, and I have had the privilege of friendship with a small tenacious mainly elderly team dedicated to "holding the fort". I thank God that as I retire, a non-stipendiary priest, our friend Rev'd Sue Charles, has offered to be interim Priest-in-Charge.

## **Fresh Expressions of Church**

Youth church began along with fresh expressions for unchurched families, with their mums volunteering to cook food paid for by a grant from Will Cookson at Southwark Diocese. Many of the children had ADHD and other special needs,, and I learned that even though they didn't sit and listen, they multitasked and were learning. I remember, for example, a little girl tearing about at the other end of the hall shouting, "If Jesus is king of the universe, why was he born poor?" I also remember a vulnerable adult standing on the vestry steps during what I planned as a moving worship time and loudly demanding a towel for the toilet because she had just done her "number twos"! I am sure there was heavenly mirth at that point.

## **New management for Superkidz**

As Superkidz employed more and more staff from the estates we served, their gifts shone out. Many had been hindered in their education and had experienced severe adversity, suffering and hardship. They often did not see just how able they were. It became clear that many were more able than far more privileged and highly-qualified people, Sometimes confidence had been battered and needed to be built up, and the effects of adverse experiences healed. These are now the new leaders of Superkidz, with Dawn, Glenn and Stacey in Senior Leadership. They understand the needs of their communities and now shape what Superkidz does.

## **Thank-you**

*In addition to those named above, there are so many to thank. Please forgive me if I omit anyone.*

Thank you so much to individual **donors and funders** who have supported our work through Church Army, including St. Paul's Cheltenham, my sending church, and many other generous churches and individuals

I shall always be grateful to **Church Army**, its CEOs and Operations Director Nev Willerton for huge flexibility in allowing me to follow my calling, to my successive Church Army managers Ron Bradford, Peter Graystone and Emma Sivyer, for a high standard of care, encouragement and support, and to my fellow evangelists for their support, advice, friendship and inspiration as they shared their God-given insights, ideas and visions.

I am thankful to **Southwark Diocese**, Bishops Christopher and Colin (RIP) and Karowei (RIP) and Archdeacon (now Bishop) Alastair Cutting, for great kindness in leadership. Rev'd Kim Hitch (Rector and Superkidz Management Committee Chair), Rev'ds Ivan Salonia (RIP) and Charlie Ingram at the Ferrier Holy Spirit Church and his wife Sarah (a model of extraordinary calmness when at GYFC working with dangerous youths), and to Sue Hall for counselling Superkidz staff. So much is owed to the **Superkidz patrons and donors** and the **volunteers of the Superkidz Board**, and especially its Chairs David Millard, Jeanette Purcell and Gill Moody (who enabled us to raise an unprecedented level of funding) , and longest serving, very able Board member Mike Stevenson, to our first fundraiser Steph Blackwell, to Superkidz staff especially Dawn Smith, Satcey Smith and Glenn Jeffries, and BACP Counsellor Teresa Parkinson for their flair and devotion and patience, to the wonderful Stay n Play team led by Kelly Boulila, to Alana Daly, so dedicated for so long to young people and families in all kinds of dire situations on the Ferrier and afterwards, to Alice Baird, Molly Carlson and Mia White.

A big thank-you to my **long-suffering family**, especially my wife Helen, for leading and then establishing Superkidz as a charity, coping with many years of being immersed in deprived communities and of my long and unpredictable working hours.

Above all, of course, **everything is owed to God**, for all our natural and supernatural gifts, for the privilege of being called to serve his glorious kingdom, for his long-suffering patience and forgiveness, and above all for the love that he pours out through the power of his Spirit.

*Nick Russell*

*June 2024.*