



Community of St John Baptist

Newsletter Christmas 2019

E ditorial

Dear Oblates, Associates and Friends

It's good to be in touch again with our news for the second part of this year. Cuddesdon has been as busy and fruitful as ever, and we're privileged to be part of such a thriving community.

One of the undoubted highlights was our invitation to become Honorary Fellows of the college, in recognition of our presence here and our contributions to RCC life. We were officially admitted (if that's the right word) on the Friends and Former Members' Day as The Community of St John Baptist, rather than as individual sisters. This was because so many sisters, together with our Chaplain The Very Revd Lister Tonge and our Bursar The Revd Peter Viney, were so much part of the process of our coming here together. We are the first group to be honoured in this way. The fellowship was and is, a recognition which touches us deeply.

On a personal level we're getting used to being here without our dear sisters Jane Olive and Ann Verena, who moved to St Mary's Convent and Nursing Home in Chiswick in 2018 and are being lovingly cared for.

Many of you are interested in our Clewer Initiative charity work on issues concerning human trafficking and modern slavery, and we welcomed Sr Pamela from the CSJB American Community, who is exploring ways in which *they* can be involved in similar ministry. Some of you will remember her when she was with our Community here and ran our Retreat Wing at Clewer with such dedication and efficiency. She thoroughly enjoyed her time and the opportunity to experience life at Cuddesdon. We are planning a visit to CSJB in New Jersey soon after Easter 2020.

Our routine here continues with our duties and privileges as the last working sisters of our own community, and joining in college life as much as possible. This includes worship in our chapel, and at the village church, and being able to go to lectures, and various college events. I love my chaplaincy work which is mainly, but not exclusively, with the part time students, and Sr Anne has been informally involved with the Ordonots (the glorious group title adopted by ordinands' partners); and we both keep links with our ministries outside the college.

The college organises an annual summer school, and this year's was particularly outstanding with the theme being 'Science and Faith'. It's a popular event and this year Sr Anne and I were able to attend together. We were able to enjoy worship and lectures both from guest speakers and our excellent college tutors; and there are outings too. The conferences are a mixture of learning, social activities and time to relax. By the end of the week there's a warm feeling of community between those who are here for the first time and those who come here almost every year. We end with a special dinner, Cuddesdon style, and are all presented with certificates of attendance. This coming year's Summer School has the captivating title ***'The Earth is the Lord's...Caring for Creation; Honouring God'***. More details are on the Cuddesdon website if you're interested. Sr Anne and I hope to be there again.

Our Clewer Initiative and other charity work continues and Sr Anne writes about our links with the Medaille Trust and her time as one of the trustees for this very special charity.

As usual, we'd like to extend a huge thank you to all who make our presence here such a blessing, and pray for the work of the College which enables so many

students on their pathways to ordained ministry.

This time of year is a time of preparation, often stressful, for the hurly-burly of the Christmas celebrations imposed by the secular world, and it's sometimes hard to find time to reflect on our Advent journey. Our world seems to be more and more divided in so many ways.

It's often difficult to keep hope alive for the future; and Advent helps us with this as we approach the ultimate sign of hope, the birth of the Christ. I'd like to end with a quotation from an article by Canon Alexander Gordon of Holy Trinity Church in Geneva. He begins by referencing the pain of the world today, and continues ...

....So where is the hope in all this? [our world situation] For the Christian, our hope is in the risen and ascended Christ, King of the Universe. If, as members of his Body, the Church, we live his Good News in our communities where all people are valued and respected, if we have a concern for the poor and afflicted, the stranger and the outcast, if we continue to live as people who believe that acknowledging Christ's reign leads to human flourishing, healing and health, then hope continues alive in our world. If we are prepared to let Christ speak words of judgement on our darkest social myths of suspicion and separation, then hope continues alight in our world. If we care about Christian ethics, and have the courage to say that some things are just plain wrong, and come from deeply disordered hearts, then there is hope.

This comes as always, from all the sisters, Jane Olive, Anne, Ann Verena and me, God bless you all, with our love for your Advent and for a joyful Christmas.

Mary Stephen CSJB
Magazine Editor

Sr Pamela (Mendham) writes....

Five days after my arrival at Cuddesdon to stay with the Sisters, I found myself at the top of the London Eye with Carol Wotherspoon. Looking west on a clear day one can see Windsor Castle.



Well, that particular Tuesday in October turned out to be cold and cloudy! Just the other side of the Castle, as we all know stands the old Clewer Convent. It was here in 1852 that Canon Carter and Mother Harriet took over the rescuing of 'fallen women' of the day. Today,

similar work is taking place by rescuing people who are being trafficked.

After our trip on the Eye, Carol and I took a boat trip down the Thames as far as Greenwich and back. Here we saw Dickensian sights of 19thC warehouses along the Embankment with new buildings in between.

Our day in London ended with meeting Bp. Alastair Redfern, former Bishop of Derby, who heads up the Clewer Initiative. He travels widely in his work and the week before he had been in New York and had been able to meet up with Sr Monica.. We met at the House of Lords where he treated us to a wonderful cream tea!

One week later, Carol took me to see some of the works, which the Cuddesdon Sisters are sponsoring. We first visited a 'safe-house' that the Sisters own, and allow the Medaille Trust to use for up to fourteen women that have been rescued from slavery. We enjoyed coffee and cake with the service manager and several of the rescued women who were all really pleased to see us!

We then visited One25 where we met with the Fundraising Manager and had lunch with the clients in the drop-in. As well as providing a cooked lunch, the drop-in allows clients to wash laundry, have a shower, and access sexual health services, get help with forms and participate in arts and crafts. They also have a wonderful library where clients can borrow books, return or not! Working primarily with street sex workers, One25 has a large van, which goes out five nights a week, providing hot drinks, sandwiches, scarves, hats and condoms. We learnt about the Pause Project where case workers provide high level support for women who have chaotic lives and have had their children removed from them by Social Services. It is an 18 month programme of getting clean from drugs, finding accommodation and not becoming pregnant again. They must agree to a long acting contraceptive like a coil or implant to guard against further pregnancies in this period. We then joined One25's Peony Project for a session of creative writing. This is for women that are ready to make a change. They have left street sex working, are on a

drug rehabilitation programme and want to prepare for employment.

Lastly, we visited Beloved. This organization we found in a church tower that has been very cleverly converted to office space. As you can see, it really is a tower, and surprisingly roomy!



Beloved go into massage parlours and reach out to the sex workers with unconditional love and nice treats. This is dangerous work and teams that go into the parlours are always covered in prayer by others praying for them outside. We met the CEO, two of their Trustees (one of whom had worked in a parlour herself) and two of their caseworkers. Their ethos is to find accommodation and work for the girls so that they have a pathway out of the parlours.

All this is still very much alive in my mind. Thistle Farms in Nashville Tennessee, the largest social enterprise in the US, is doing similar work, founded and run by Becca Stevens, an Episcopal Priest, with various "cell" groups around the Country. My dream is to one-day join the Clewer Initiative with its Anglican roots to that of the Episcopal Church in the US! It was also lovely to be able to stay with my Sisters at Cuddesdon, share in the life of the College and visit the Sisters now living at Chiswick.

All this has not only made me see with my natural vision but also with the eye of the heart.

Pamela CSJB

SAVE THE DATE

Commemoration Day will be on Saturday 18th July in 2020. An invitation will be sent nearer the time but please do put this in your diary. We were delighted this year that so many of the charities that we support were able to send representatives and it's given us an idea that we are going to work on over the coming months. So, as well as a Eucharist and a buffet lunch, we are hoping to set up an area where all our charities can showcase the work that they are doing. There should also be an opportunity to ask questions and learn a bit more about the work.

In the meantime, we are delighted to print, as an appendix, the text of the sermon that was preached at our service this year by Revd Rachel Carnegie, CEO of the Anglican Alliance.

LETTING GO AND GIVING UP - DIMINISHMENT OR GROWING OLDER?

After some considerable thought as to how to approach saying something about being a Trustee of the Medaille Trust, I decided to include it in this article "Letting go; giving up, diminishment or growing older?". Take your pick, but they are all about the same thing, which comes to so many of us as we clock up the years. The very first sign was needing to wear glasses for reading and close work..... many years later it was using glasses for driving, then driving in the dark. I am grateful that I can still drive, and on a clear day I can still see extremely well. Latterly the glasses have been joined by needing to use a stick when outside, and hearing aids and now falling asleep reading the paper after lunch. I never thought that it would come, but come it has!

Those are physical things which a very large proportion of people of a similar age or older experience (Sister Jane Olive could tell you all about it) and I expect many of you reading this are well aware of it too.

But the real letting go which I have found goes along with the physical diminishment are the many other aspects of my life; the recent being my last meeting of the Medaille Trust which took place the last week in October when I ceased to be a Trustee. I made the decision after the April meeting, when the drive home up the M40 was all misty rain and very poor visibility and that was when it was mid-afternoon.

I first heard about the Street women who were being held in virtual slavery at a Conference organised by the Justice and Peace group within the Conference of

Religious of which CSJB is an Associate member. The Sister who spoke was a Sister of Mercy of St Joseph of Annecy working with the street women in Southampton; she was horrified when she discovered the conditions they were living in and working under and had the agreement of her Community to try and do something about it. The Medaille Trust, named after the founder of her Order, had begun and within about 15 months she had been promised sufficient money to run a small house where the women who had the courage to find a way to get free, could be housed, cared for and helped with getting asylum status in the UK. But where is the house? I cannot remember exactly how it came about, but she met someone who was greatly impressed by her desire to help these women in a concrete way and he offered to help in some way: 'what do you need?' – 'a house' was her reply and that generous individual bought and gave them the house. The rescue work had begun. In the years following, they were offered further houses and I always hoped that at some point the Clewer Community might be able to do something. Having realised that it was not an option to offer the Priory, and the buyers wanted Priory House as well, I kept praying that one day

Oxford as we knew they didn't have one in the area. He told us Thames Valley Police would appreciate very much a safe house within their Area.

Medaille Trust's mission is to provide refuge and freedom from modern slavery. They are the largest provider of supported safe house beds for victims of modern slavery in the UK.

The trustees delegated Barry to look into it, with the property advisor of Medaille and the outcome was the purchase of a suitable house in their preferred location which is now known as Central Service. The location is near other amenities and English Language colleges, thus making it ideal in more ways than one! Central Service opened the year after that decision and has been running at its full capacity of 14 most of the time since then. The Community has always taken an interest in the House, the staff and the girls living there, including a few babies who arrive. At the same time, it was agreed that I should become a Trustee of the Trust, something I have appreciated and enjoyed very much over the years.

During those years the number of safe houses run by Medaille has increased from five to eleven in locations across the country and in total around 98 people, men and women, very young to sometimes older people now sleep in safety every night of the year. The majority nationalities are from the UK, Romania, Nigeria, Thailand and the Philippines. I have seen the relationship of the Trust with the Police and with the Home Office expanding, with a growing understanding of, and change in their attitudes to the victims of what is now known as Modern Slavery. When I began I was made very welcome, although I was the only non-Roman Catholic on the Board.

Now the composition of the Trust has changed considerably as the early members were needing to give up, and new trustees came in their place, including a new Chief Executive Officer. We also became more ecumenical - not by design, but in selecting those most suitable. As I cease to represent the Trustees of the Community, Barry Lynch has been asked, and agreed, to take my place. I did not want to give up; I enjoyed the meetings very much, but I was realising that some of it was getting too much for me to follow the conversation, and with a much larger organisation, and a lot more Government legislation it was also getting more complex.

However over the years I had been able to visit five of the houses, where I'd met a number of the residents and a number of the highly dedicated staff. Some of us from our board had hoped to visit the house on the



That day came when, at one of our Trustee meetings, we took the decision to start using some of our capital to support work which was very much in the ethos of that begun by Canon Carter and Mother Harriet 150 years earlier. A different age but the exploiting of vulnerable young girls was still happening under our noses.

We began in a small way, by assisting One25 in Bristol with their work with the street women. They too occasionally came across women who had been trafficked to the UK, but did not have the ability to offer support in the same way as Medaille was able to do. We decided to invite the Chief Executive of the Medaille Trust to come and talk to us - and tell us how we might be able to help. I think it was Peter (Viney) who said we had been thinking of a house around

south east coast, but didn't get there this year, so that is still on the agenda for next spring.

The Medaille Trust is now part of my diminishment, along with leading public worship which I no longer feel confident to do, evening meetings in Oxford and long walks. However there is much that I can still do including having time to reflect on a long, active life and its many fulfilling aspects. As the saying goes 'God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good.'

Anne CSJB

24-7- Prayer - Thy Kingdom Come

Many of you will be aware of the Archbishops' prayer initiative, Thy Kingdom Come, which runs each year in the 10 days leading up to Pentecost. In my home church, Christ the Servant King in High Wycombe, we have marked this over the past 3 years with a 24-7 prayer event. During this time we turn our worship area into a quiet prayer space and encourage people to sign up for an hour slot. In this week there is someone praying in the church all day and all night for 7 days.

A small team of people meet in January and pray together to gain a sense of what God wants us to do with the time and space. We then pair up and create prayer stations that aim to encourage people to pray about specific issues. This year our prayer stations represented homelessness, family poverty, modern day slavery, Christian persecution and environmental issues.

It won't come as any surprise to learn that I chose modern day slavery as I knew some people who could provide resources for this! My lovely friend Veldees also felt called to cover this topic and we therefore paired up. Now I am a very practical person, a resource investigator if you know about Belbin, but Veldees is very artistic so we make a formidable partnership!

As we prayed together and waited on God we both felt a sense of deep darkness; but there was also a sense of hope and rescue. Veldees knew exactly how she wanted to represent this and you can see the result to the right.

Our station had lots of resources provided by both the Medaille Trust and the Clewer Initiative, and we also had running the short video 'We See You' which was produced by our trustee, Barry Lynch. If you've yet to see this, it's on the Clewer Initiative website <https://www.theclewerinitiative.org> and also on YouTube. You may find that, like many people who visited our prayer station, you will be moved to tears.



Finally, as part of the prayer week, we have two sessions of guided prayer each day, Morning Prayer and Compline. For the second year running our very own Sr Mary Stephen led the Compline service on Tuesday evening. She is a firm favourite in my church and has made many friends at our Community Café!

Shortly after the prayer week Sr Anne hosted, at Cuddesdon, the Clergy Chapter of the Deanery and invited Garry Smith, the CEO of the Medaille Trust, to speak. This generated a lot of interest and I was also able to display a cut-down version of the prayer stand. Word is getting around!

Carol Wotherspoon
Trustee

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It is a great pleasure to be invited here today. One of the joys of my recent years has been to get to know the Sisters and Trustees of the St John Baptist Community. My organisation, the Anglican Alliance, is so encouraged by your support of our work in tackling human trafficking and modern slavery.

For all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

We are all one in Christ Jesus. This morning I would like to share three stories from around our worldwide Anglican Communion – three stories which illustrate how we are all one – how our lives are woven together across the world and across the centuries.

The first story is about John and Sarah. This time last year, we were running a training event for Anglicans in Africa to learn more about human trafficking and how to respond. One Kenyan participant, Revd John, was motivated to send a message on social media to all his contacts explaining about the dangers of human trafficking. Within an hour he got a message back from a young woman, Sarah, who said: “I think I have just been trafficked.” Sarah (not her real name) had been recruited to work as an office manager in Iraq. On arrival there was no job. Rather she had been forced into domestic work and was terrified that it might turn into something worse. John’s message, coming two days after she arrived, helped her to see the reality of her situation. Immediately Fr John contacted a friend in the foreign ministry, who contacted the Kenyan ambassador, who in turn contacted a businessman working in that Iraqi town who found Sarah and her two friends. They were rescued and returned home to Kenya. When John told me this story, he beamed with delight at how God connects us all.

This action is a direct result of the gift of the St John Baptist Community to the Anglican Alliance. It also represents a direct legacy of the ministry of the Clewer Sisters – caring for the most vulnerable in our society. The story of lives restored – lives woven together across time and place. As Mother Harriet Monsell would have said: “About serving one another – about serving one another in joy.”

A second story – a few years back I was visiting the Anglican Church in Kolkata. I went to a school - St John's Diocesan Girls High School. I now know, after reading the inspiring history of the St John Baptist Community, that this school was part of the mission of the Clewer Sisters in India. The school still flourishes – one of the finest educations for girls in Calcutta. But the school is also serving much less fortunate girls – girls who had been trafficked from the villages of North East India into sex work in Mumbai / Bombay. Still barely out of their childhood, these girls had been turned out of the brothels as they now had HIV. Some had found their way towards home, discovering help from the Anglican Church in Calcutta. They met in a little room, in St John's Girls School, to get support with their health and counselling to prepare them to return home.

It took my breath away when I realised that this contemporary support for the most vulnerable girls and women not only related to the vision of the Clewer Sisters – but actually took place in the very building where the Sisters had served for so many years. A direct inheritance of the ministry of the Clewer Sisters in India. Lives woven together across place and time. For we are all one in Christ Jesus.

A third story – of Asma, whom I met in Dhaka. Asma lived in Bangladesh – a wife and mother. Asma’s family was very poor – so it was decided that she should go to the Middle East to earn money as a domestic worker. The recruitment and contract all looked fine – but when Asma arrived in the Gulf, she was locked up and then forced into sex work. It took two years before she managed to escape. However, her sufferings were

far from over. Her husband rejected her because she was now, in his eyes, spoiled goods, bringing shame on the family. Now Asma lives with the Anglican Church and educates other women on the risks of human trafficking.

Asma's terrible experience of exploitation but also of stigmatisation, of being blamed for the violence perpetrated on her, chimes so directly with what Mother Harriet and the Clewer Sisters saw in the lives of the destitute girls and women in Victorian society. To quote from Valerie Bonham's book about the girls coming under the care of the Clewer Sisters: "Some girls had been servants and had been deceived or seduced (in many cases this meant raped). Punishment was always bestowed upon the girl, rarely upon the man."

With their loving care, the Clewer Sisters and Churches across the world seek to challenge such cruel discrimination. As we heard earlier in the reading from Galatians: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, - for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

This is the vision of the God's Kingdom – of all peoples gathered together, all lives woven together. The task undertaken by the Clewer Sisters, and for all others who seek to help build the Kingdom – the task is to Prepare the Way of the Lord, praying and engaging to heal a broken world.

This is the message which resonates today – on the Feast of St John the Baptist – called to prepare the way of the Lord. We heard the prophesy of Isaiah – ***"A voice cries out – in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord."*** And Zechariah picks up this imagery in his vision about his own baby son, the infant John: ***"And you child shall be called the prophet of the most high, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way."***

The Clewer Sisters know about preparing the way of the Lord - a call for humanity to restore the world - to make straight the pathways - but also a call to gently care for the vulnerable. We have the lovely image from Isaiah of the Lord God coming like a shepherd - feeding his flock, gathering the lambs in his arms, gently leading the mother sheep.

Quietly, humbly, generously and with joyousness - this is what the Clewer Sisters have been doing, serving the most vulnerable in society over one and half centuries. Serving with love – and also, distinctively, serving with joy.

When her health was failing Harriet Monsell wrote: "My own exhortation to the Sisters is not to let the sparkle out of the Community. I love that in a life of sacrifice they should give God a joyous service."

As we celebrate today the birth of St John the Baptist, we also remember the expressions of joy amongst his family – of Elizabeth, his mother, who reacted with happiness to conceive a child so unexpectedly in her later years – Elizabeth, whose soul rejoiced as she felt the baby in her womb leap in delight at the arrival of Mary pregnant with Jesus. We think of Mary, who responded to God's call with humility and gladness – "My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my maker."

And of John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, who recovered his voice after John's birth – who saw the divine meaning of this moment as God broke into human history. In those profound words of Zechariah - which the Sisters pray morning by morning in the Benedictus - we hear the promise: ***"Through the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace."***

The task embraced by the Clewer Sisters across the decades – and for all of us today - is to help prepare the way of the Lord, to search out those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death – to seek to respond with the tender compassion of our God, in the hope of the dawn from on high breaking upon us all – and to remember that each of us is blessed by the other – for we are all one in Christ Jesus.
Amen.