

library of lives

The Pioneer Journal – Issue 13

FOR JESUS



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FRESH HOPE

I have just returned from a Delirious? gig at Southampton Guildhall. It will probably be the last time Martin, Tim, Jon, Stu and Paul will play together as Delirious? in our city.

I first met Martin and Tim in early 1994. They were just a couple of young guys experimenting with worship and running an event in the small seaside town of Littlehampton, called *Cutting Edge*. We talked about the possibility of running a similar event at our building in Southampton.

So that October, around 100 people gathered for the first Southampton *Cutting Edge*. Three years later, more than 1,000 mainly young people were crammed into Central Hall every month to experience not just a band called Delirious? – but the presence of God.

In the years since that time, I have met so many people whose lives have been impacted and changed by being at those gatherings – worship leaders, church leaders, musicians, artists and social activists – to name but a few. They were heady days!

In this edition of *Library Of Lives*, we trace some of the other ministries within or connected to Pioneer that had an impact on our nation – and beyond – during the 80s and 90s. The decades of bad haircuts, terrible fashion and Thatcherism also produced some amazing breakthroughs for the Church in the UK.

They are days to look back on with gratitude to God for his goodness and faithfulness – and to fill us with fresh hope and confidence for tomorrow.

Plans for our annual conference in February 2009 are coming together well. We've had a very positive response to the invitation of friends of Pioneer to join with us as we express our appreciation to Gerald, on the Thursday evening, for his contribution to the network since its inception. We're delighted Godfrey Birtill can join us for the Friday and Saturday – where we will be outlining our hopes and aspirations for the future.

Part of that will include stating again our commitment to the next generation. In September Paul Weston, Ellie Armstrong and Mike Andrea hosted *Converge*, a day for those involved with young people across the networks. We plan to make this an annual event – as well as looking at other ways to support and develop younger leaders.

Have a great Christmas – and see you in the New Year!

Billy Kennedy



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Greenford go for growth

Amid the doom and gloom stories dominating the media, a West London church has reported unusual growth.

Greenford Baptist Church has been growing slowly for the last five years. However, during the last 12 months the rate of growth has accelerated – with 23 people baptised and 41 new people welcomed into membership.

In addition to running *Alpha*, they have been taking their faith to the streets, knocking on doors and offering to pray for people, running a stall in the shopping area – and a ‘healing zone’ at the recent Greenford Carnival.

The church family is made up of people from about 30 nationalities and this diversity is reflected in every area of church life. ‘It’s been awesome seeing the way people’s lives have been impacted and changed by the power of God,’ said pastor David Wise.



WITHIN TENT:
Greenford Baptists
open their ‘healing
zone’ at the local
carnival

LUCAS SHINES A LIGHT

When it comes to shedding light on Christmas, many of us are still very much in the dark.

That’s part of the message from Jeff Lucas in his festive booklets *The Light & Soul Of Christmas* and *The Promise Of Christmas* – which go on to tell the true story behind the season.

A popular speaker and writer associated with Pioneer, Jeff unpacks the reality of Christmas in his bouncy yet biblical style. His booklets link in with the Christian Enquiry Agency and the rejesus website (www.veriteshop.co.uk).



WESTMINSTER IS ON ‘FIRE’

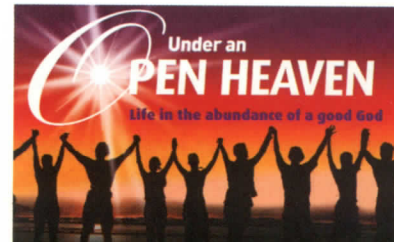
Regular meetings in Westminster for prayer and ministry – *Fire On Marsham Street* – have been underway every Thursday for the last 15 weeks.

It is expected that the events will continue until 29th November, with a break for Christmas and New Year. Meetings will resume in early January. To check on date changes, speakers and musicians, go to – www.fireonmarshamstreet.com.

BLOG BOOM

More than 4,000 hits have been targeted at a new blog that features news and views from Gerald Coates.

So if you want to join this wave of inquirers – and get Gerald’s perspectives on Marsham Street, Lakeland and Todd Bentley – then go to <http://geraldcoates.wordpress.com>



1,000 DRAWN TO ‘OPEN HEAVEN’

Bookings have been streaming in for the major conference on healing, *Under An Open Heaven*. More than 1,000 people are expected at the event, which is now almost full. The main partners behind it are Pioneer and River Church.

Taking place at Magnet Leisure Centre, Maidenhead, from 11th-13th November, the conference features Bill Johnson – whose church in Redding, California, has reportedly been seeing hundreds of healings a week – and Che Ahn, whose network in Pasadena has been planting hundreds of churches in recent years.

Andy Read and a band from River Church will be leading worship. Christen and Judith Forster will be hosting. ‘By the time we get to Maidenhead, 90 key leaders will have been with Bill Johnson and Che Ahn at the Charismatic Evangelical Round Table, which I have chaired in recent years,’ said Gerald Coates.

‘This will have taken place in Windsor Castle where members of the Royal Family will be in residence. We shall be praying for the nation – and expecting an impartation from the participants.’ Conference fee is £84 (www.RiverEvents.org.uk).

RESOURCES HELP

Are you looking for the latest Christian books, CDs and DVDs? Then go to the Pioneer website – www.pioneer.org.uk – and under *Shop* you will find Kevin Mayhew Publishers.

There you can access music, resources, Christmas titles, school resources, special offers and limited stock lines – as well as the latest in publishing and recording. Every purchase benefits the Pioneer Trust with church planting, leadership training and youth initiatives.

DRAGONS DARE

Youth leaders from across the Midlands and south of England gathered in Kent recently to do battle with some 'dragons'.

No, it wasn't some weird new form of spiritual warfare. Fortunately, it was an activity at the *Converge* conference based on the TV show *Dragon's Den* – with Matt Green, Caroline Kennedy and Gerald Coates as the dragons!

Six projects pitched for £500. The dragons found that challenging – with so many impressive youth initiatives going on across the Pioneer network. But after much discussion about the presentations and projects, the award went to Global Generation Church Ramsgate.

Hosted by Paul Weston and team, *Converge* was a mix of teaching from

Patrick Reagan of XLP, buzz groups, making and designing a pizza lunch for another youth leader, excellent seminars and a time of 'impartation' led by Gerald Coates.

Everyone agreed there should be another day next year. The *Dragon's Den* idea was so successful, it was decided that Paul Williams from Church in The Theatre/Engage in Leatherhead – who featured on BBC's *The Secret Millionaire* – should host a similar event at the Pioneer leaders' conference early in 2009.

Churches are encouraged to bring youth leaders – and younger people who show leadership skills – to the conference, which runs from 26th-28th February.



POST-IT PEOPLE: Delegates take part in an interactive exercise at Converge

AGENTS OF CULTURE

More than 80 young adults have been trained to plant churches in the emerging culture – thanks to *ReSource* – an initiative partly facilitated by Pioneer.

The 07-08 course has just ended, having consisted of what has been described as 'an inspiring mix' of youth workers and those involved in leading emerging churches with students, young adults and young families.

Now underway, the 08-09 course offers longer weekends in February and April, as it helps churches respond creatively to the challenge of mission in contemporary culture.

'While "church planting" has been on the agenda for many years,' said one of the partners Roger Ellis, '*ReSource* has been created to help churches and movements explore more about what it means to create new cells, congregations, clusters and churches focussed on the "emerging generations".'

The result of a partnership between ACPI, Pioneer, CMS, Oasis, Alove, Revelation, St Thomas Church and New Community Network, *ReSource* is for those already involved in leading a new/fresh expression of church – or seriously interested in starting something (www.resourcemissionplanting.com).

STEPH IS A 'FIRST'

She is the first artist to record their own album as part of a strategic initiative by Urban Saints to discover and develop young musical talent.

Steph Kailou leads the worship team at Pioneer's Global Generation Church, Ramsgate – and has just released her own six-track recording *Mountain Song* as part of the 'Songs Of The Saints' project.

The 22-year-old is part of a new wave of worship leaders, singers and songwriters that is sweeping through Pioneer (www.stephkailou.com; www.urbansaints.org). Order her album through the Pioneer shop.



STUDENTS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Students from across Pioneer have a unique opportunity to help lift schoolchildren in India out of poverty.

According to retired teacher Paul Dennison, help is needed in a variety of primary and secondary schools in the tribal region of Andhra Pradesh.

Part of the Bridge Church, Hayling Island, Paul is inviting students to consider spending part or whole of their 'gap year' – to help pupils' grasp of reading, writing and speaking English. Education will lift them out of poverty as they become more employable.

'We were introduced to Rev Dr Paul Raj, the founder of all these schools, by John and Christine Noble over 14 years ago,' said Paul Dennison. 'Paul Raj is now a Member of Parliament for the Government of Andhra Pradesh.'

'Having visited this region and all these schools many times, I'm in a position to support and advise anyone willing to go and help.' Lodging and food costs will be met but flights need to be self-financed (phone 023 9246 5869 or e-mail paul@bridge67.orangehome.co.uk).

GROWING IN THE SPIRIT

They were heady days and heated debates. The 80s and 90s saw Pioneer rocking with *The Banquet* and *Champion Of The World* – and rolling on the floor with the highly controversial 'Toronto Blessing'. Gerald Coates looks back...

There was much hilarity at the Hilton. Uncontrollable mirth broke out in our business meeting at the Park Lane hotel. Another Pioneer leader, Steve Clifford, and I were trying to navigate our way through a challenging agenda with two key Pentecostal leaders. But they ended up choking with laughter.

It wasn't alcohol. It was only nine o'clock in the morning (or thereabouts). These men were 'drunk' on something much more heavenly.

The meeting had to be abandoned, and the issues we were meant to be talking about were resolved without further discussion. But that was one of the hallmarks of the 80s and 90s, as new spiritual movements like the so-called 'Toronto Blessing' took hold and shook us all with strange manifestations.

Full-scale network

Steve and I had met with those leaders because two of their congregations now wanted to relate to Pioneer. They had been very unhappy about such a move. This was another sign of the times, as Pioneer boomed from a few friends meeting in a front room – to a full-scale nationwide network.

Other streams had been emerging, too – the bigger ones being Harvestime, which became New Covenant Ministries; Coastlands which became New Frontiers; Ichthus; Ground Level – and others. We were all making an impact in different ways, with different people and in different parts of the country.

By the end of the 70s, it had become clear the church scene was starting to change dramatically. So two key

leaders – Arthur Wallis and Bryn Jones – had called seven people together. The aim was to study the theology of the early church, and the idea of restoration – which was to be a big theme of the 80s.

The restoration of apostles, prophets and gospel communities was a key issue for the charismatic movement. But they kept hitting practical issues which they – as theologians and scholars – couldn't answer. So they called in another seven, of which I was one. However, there was a storm to come.

I had written a book called *Not Under Law* – which explored such issues as quiet times, sex, the Sabbath, drinking, watching TV – and no publisher would take it. So I had it printed privately. It became a bone of contention, and contributed to a split among this wider group of leaders.

Bryn and Arthur had concerns about our teaching on grace. Eventually they went their way, and we went ours. However, on reflection, that process may have been vital to ensure we didn't all become charismatic 'clones'. As a result, I now look back on that time as *The Great Split Forward*. Both men have since died. But Arthur was foundational to the entire new church movement, and Bryn, like ourselves, was a true pioneer.

Greater identity

If the 60s-70s were about sowing seeds and seeing a small harvest, then the 80s-90s saw the charismatic scene mushrooming out of all control. However, none of

'The church scene was starting to change dramatically'



this activity was centralised – and there were probably about 20 different teams and streams that could have qualified as ‘new church’.

The 80s saw us all emerge with a far greater degree of identity. In Pioneer, we brought a lot of art and creativity into our activities. That was just part of who we were. Suddenly we moved from being invisible to being criticised – and then even accepted. People were hearing about radical groups like ours.

We managed to steer clear of some of the early excesses of those days – such as the so-called ‘shepherding’ and ‘prosperity’ movements. I think what helped us avoid those extremes was our message of grace. That’s because if you have a message of grace, it’s very difficult to be domineering.

People from the shepherding movement – an over-emphasis on accountability and authority – tried to influence us within Pioneer. I remember one of the leaders Charles Simpson saying to me, ‘My men don’t talk to me like that’. I told him, ‘I’m not one of your men, Charles’. They wanted what we were doing to be an outpost of what they were doing in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

But it wasn’t to be. We also managed to avoid being labelled with the tag of the ‘prosperity’ movement – an over-emphasis on health and wealth. In fact, most of the house churches have steered clear of an overt prosperity message.

However, it is worth looking up the word ‘prosperity’ in Scripture – it’s all over the place – spiritual and financial. But that has to be seen in the light of other theological beams, like sacrifice, giving and living within our means.

‘People were hearing about radical groups like ours’

This mix of a radical charismatic nature with a balanced, reasoned theology, proved to be appealing. Clive Calver and Peter Meadows took much of what we stood for – worship, teaching, a culture of informality – and created an event called *Spring Harvest*. Although this popular conference has always been interdenominational, it clearly became more charismatic in style.

Throughout the 80s, increasing numbers of house church people were becoming involved in this annual event. Our people were seen as godly, productive and biblical. *Spring Harvest* enlisted the help of Dave Bilbrough, Sue Rinaldi, Noel Richards – who have all been part of Pioneer. I was a regular speaker for many years. We received much profile as a result.

We did our own events like *Festival* – which had all the features of Bible study and seminars on family issues, spiritual gifts and even ecology. Later, we launched a similar conference simply called *The Event*, featuring a very young version of *Delirious?* who at the time were known as *The Cutting Edge Band*.

In 1983, I received a prophecy about bringing music and worship together. So we hosted an event at Wembley Arena, *The Banquet – A Feast Of Rock And Praise*. Over two days we featured the best of contemporary music and worship – from Andrae Crouch and Larry Norman to Dave Bilbrough and Noel Richards.

We took *The Banquet* on the road with Ishmael and gospel singer Donn Thomas. Once again, we attracted some news headlines as I launched a verbal counter-attack against Don Cupitt and David Jenkins, leading liberals who had expressed deep doubts about basic beliefs of the Church.

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MUSICAL FEAST: Noel Richards, Wayne Drain and Matt Redman at the Royal Albert Hall



PRAYING FRIENDS: Two of the leading lights from Pioneer Roger Ellis (extreme left) and Pete Greig (extreme right)



POLITICAL ALLY: Former cabinet minister Jonathan Aitken addresses a Pioneer event

GROWING IN THE SPIRIT continued from page 7

Around this time, my wife Anona and I moved to Clive House, Esher, with record producer Norman Miller and his singer-songwriter wife Sheila Walsh. We started having New Year's Eve parties with a most varied guest list – from Cliff Richard to Brian Mawhinney; R T Kendall to David Pawson.

It was a big jump from our humble house church. Word was getting around about this movement called Pioneer. Long before the *Fresh Expressions* movement of today, we were experimenting with different settings of church.

Bigger scale

In 1985, sociologist Andrew Walker brought out his book *Restoring The Kingdom*, to explore the radical Christianity we were pursuing. I don't agree with some of his conclusions, but it is by far the best book on this subject, as it was based on countless interviews.

That radical Christianity took us to places no one had been before. When AIDS appeared on the horizon, we helped Patrick Dixon to launch a compassionate Christian response in 1988. *Pioneer For AIDS* eventually became ACET – AIDS Care Education and Training.

Meanwhile, Roger Forster and his church Ichthus, in south-east London, had gone around their locality with processions and singing and giving flowers to prostitutes. This declaration of Christ's compassion went so well, they felt they should do this on a bigger scale.

They drew in people like Lynn Green of YWAM and myself, and then I drew in Steve Clifford and one or two others. In 1987 we launched a simple attempt to get Christians out on the streets, to let people see a different sort of church.

We thought 5,000 might turn out. It was pouring with rain all day. We were about to start and there were a few thousand people milling around. What we didn't know was another 10,000 had been sheltering under a viaduct nearby.

As we started the programme, all these people flowed out onto the street. We just stood there and cried. We thought, 'What on earth have we tapped into?' The resulting press photos showed thousands of umbrellas on the march!

That was 'City March', the beginnings of what later became known as *March For Jesus*. There was never an intention to do another.

But I met up with Roger Forster in Los Angeles and said we should go for it again. We needed to tell Mrs Thatcher that the country needs the gospel – the country needs the Lord.

So we went to Westminster – and more than 50,000 turned up. The next year, it was almost 70,000. We did different things in different areas. On one occasion we had at least 200,000 people out on the streets.

Summer 1994 produced various reports of how many had actually taken part – this time in various locations across the globe. The Metropolitan Police said we had 75,000 in Hyde Park, London, but the park police said it was 100,000.

Suddenly with all these local and national events – in which Pioneer played a key role – we realised we were not doing this because we were well known or clever, but because it was the right time to take to the streets.

The *March For Jesus* office has long since closed, yet marches still go on across the globe.

Lynn Green went on to spearhead the Reconciliation Walk and the apology for the Crusades as intercessors walked to the Middle East. But amid all these good deeds, we were heavily criticised for our focus on spiritual warfare.

Around this time, my longtime friend Noel Richards caught a vision for large worship events in football stadiums. That resulted in his organising *Champion Of The World* at London's Wembley Arena in 1996, which sold all 11,500 seats.

That was followed in 1997 with *Champion Of The World* at London's Wembley Stadium. With an attendance of almost 45,000, it was the biggest contemporary worship event ever staged in that venue.

The press had started to take notice of Pioneer. In 1990 a journalist called Val Hennessy from the *Mail On Sunday* came to see me, interviewed me and attended our church. We gave her a warm welcome. But the resulting article was like a well-aimed salvo – and guess who was the target?

Still reeling from the shock, I soon received a call from the *Sunday Times*. They also wanted to do a story on Pioneer and the new churches. I told them it had already been covered. 'Oh no,' said the reporter, 'I want the real story.' A seven-page feature appeared. Suddenly we were a force to be reckoned with.

'It was a big jump from our humble house church'

FAITHFUL FRIENDS: Gerald Coates with Amber and Lindell Cooley formerly from the Pensacola revival, plus Anna and Martin Smith from *Delirious?* and *CompassionArt*





MUSICAL MATES: At Gerald's home, Sir Cliff Richard and Sheila Walsh meet Russian rock singer Valeri Barinov, just after he left the former Soviet Union



STRATEGIC STORIES: Gerald interviews one of the many guests who shared their testimonies at the Marsham Street meetings.

Since then there has been a steady trickle of coverage with such stations as Radio 2, Radio 4 and Premier Radio. For a while I had my own chat show on God TV. Pioneer also featured in the religious media – *Christian Herald*, *Joy* and *Christianity* magazine were among the publications who wrote about us.

Pioneer even featured in the property pages of the *Evening Standard*. The London paper ran an article pointing out how local estate agents were being thrown into a frenzy whenever we started a church plant. Suddenly, about 20 houses would hit the market in a week – or there would be an influx of new people to the area looking for homes. They were signs of change.

Another major media event was the 'Toronto Blessing'. I stumbled on this phenomenon when I was booked to speak at South West London Vineyard in spring 1994. Their leader John Mumford told me about this spiritual awakening that had hit a small church in Canada – with an intensity of religious experience that hadn't been seen since the Welsh Revival.

As countless people fell over, laughed, rocked and rolled their way into a deeper relationship with God, I was commissioned by Kingsway to make a documentary film about this unusual wave of charismatic phenomena.

But we also got caught up in a fierce debate. For the critics of Toronto were virtually frothing at the mouth. It was heady stuff – and very controversial. I was at several meetings where people almost ended up attacking each other physically. I realised I was not safe in one forum. People were very angry.

Some regarded us as untrained, even uneducated. But our teams had launched their own initiatives – *Training In Evangelism* (now DNA) and *Equipped To Lead* – which empowered countless people to pioneer in their own communities. There was a lot of reasoning behind our radical spirituality.

Throughout the 90s, the new church movement slowly grew through evangelism, social action and church planting. By the late 90s it was reckoned that 2,500 churches had been planted, attracting up to 300,000 people. It was a complete reversal of previous decades of loss for the Church.

In Pioneer we slowed down and plateaued. There were all sorts of succession issues, some of which were handled

well – some of which were not handled well. We were having to face issues in the 90s that we didn't have to face in the 70s and 80s. In the 70s we had 20somethings leading churches. In the 90s we had 50somethings who brought more wisdom but lost some of the vitality.

In the early 90s the 'restoration' leaders – those who fell out during the *Great Split Forward* – started meeting together again. It was privately called the apostolic and prophetic forum. We would meet together twice a year. Then it became the Charismatic Evangelical Round Table, which I chair to this day.

The same decade saw the launch of Pioneer's revival meetings in Marsham Street. I just thought of hiring this church centre in Westminster for a few nights and see what God would do.

We ended up meeting five nights a week for several months, and drew on average 200 people a night. It was worship, a bit of teaching and lots of prayer for people. Many became Christians.

Some important ministries emerged from those meetings. An unknown Lancashire photographer Godfrey Birtill received fresh vision – and is now one of our most radical singer-songwriters in the prayer and worship field.

Martin Scott, already a recognised Bible teacher and prophetic figure within Pioneer, took Marsham Street a stage further. He led prayer teams around the British Isles, called *Sowing Seeds For Revival*.

Our people were constantly breaking new ground. We tended to do stuff and then work it out later. That was our pattern. This was no longer a group of wacky Christians living in Surrey – this was now a network of churches. And these folk have now been around for a long time.

Birthing out of a hunger, and now growing in the Spirit, it was clear they were not going away.



Gerald Coates is Executive Editor of *Library Of Lives*, and founder of the Pioneer network of churches, ministries and teams. The third and final instalment of his story will appear in the next edition of this journal.

SAVIOUR OF SUBURBIA

It was ambitious. Let's have some fun to draw people to the gospel. The origins of Sidcup's *Lark In The Park* were almost embarrassing. A tent, some music and a few events. Now it's another story. Our correspondent checked it out...

Mick Jagger and Keith Richards met here and decided to form what became one of the greatest rock bands of all time. Or so the story goes. Noel Coward mentions the town in a play. This was typical 30s suburbia. I was in Sidcup.

It was Wednesday morning 8am. The leader of Pioneer's New Generation Church was soon on the scene. I had been concerned that having driven from Surrey, I would arrive in this former gateway to Kent, absolutely oblivious of my bearings.

My fears were unsubstantiated. As I drove into town I saw an array of tents, flags and security panels. Having parked my car, I was met by Paul Weston who took me on a tour of the ten marquees, special facilities and staff designated areas.

Fun festival

Impressive was the word. To be sure, they'd been doing this for 12 years, but this was substantial. This was not a one-day hit, but went on for over two weeks – morning, noon and night.

This was *Lark In The Park* – Sidcup's premier community event. It consisted of a core team of 12, more than 25 departmental heads and a staggering 350 volunteers – mostly but not all church folk – who wanted to serve the community.

More than 1,000 people booked in every day prior to the event – and another 500 turned up every day throughout late July and early August. Most of these had no church background. So why come?

This was not just a fun festival with a covert Christian message amid puppets and playtime. You could go into any tent and there would be pictures, banners, paintings and icons of scripture, Christ, gospel messages and contemporary Christian stories.

What made mums and dads queue up long before events started, to ensure their children got in? One stream had a staggering 900 children register for a day of activities that were creative and humorous – but had the Christian faith at their core.

'A space to unwind and dip in and out'



Over and over again the phrase 'we're Christians, we represent the Church of Jesus Christ' was heard from the main platform, in seminars, events and projects. Yet visitors seemed unperturbed by what could be seen as a sales pitch for Christianity.

Creating community

New Generation have also built up trust between police, young adults, schoolchildren, parents, churches and others – who have included well known football players, politicians and Christian leaders.

Another attraction was that at *Lark In The Park*, 'almost everything is free'. According to Paul Weston, it is about creating community – 'a space to unwind and dip in and out of a creative, varied programme designed for all ages'.

Local bands from schools and colleges, talent competitions, quiz nights, acoustic musicians, candle-lit couples nights, dads and their children – and even a dance team from South Africa – were just a few of the featured items.

SPIRITUAL SUMMER: Scenes from Sidcup's Lark In The Park, which offered everything from worship to wacky events!

There was even *Church In The Park* – which was basically New Generation Church, who normally meet in a cinema, gathering in a tent. Non-religious, almost chaotic and yet conveying Christ, creating aspects of church that people could relate to.

And the budget for all this? Well over £60,000! Where does this come from? 'We couldn't do this out of the church budget,' said Paul Weston, 'so we've had two special offerings each year and most of the money comes from ordinary people who want to bless their town. The local council and one or two other trusts add to this.'

This past year has certainly been 'different' for the church. 'Children have seen angels,' said Paul, 'we've had people come to us and ask, "How do I get saved?" – and scores of people with little or no church background have asked for prayer.'

More than just modelling community in Sidcup, *Lark In The Park* is an inspiration for churches everywhere. It looks like much more than the Rolling Stones could emerge from this outpost of Greater London. Sidcup overflows.

'We couldn't do this out of the church budget'

Our special correspondent is a writer and speaker approaching retirement in another leafy suburb of London.



THE FIRST NOEL

He is one of Britain's foremost Christian songwriters. He has written some of the world's best known modern hymns. And his roots are in Pioneer. Clive Price asked Noel Richards about his latest projects

There were few worship songs that could sum up how Christians felt, the Sunday after 9/11. Allegedly, for celebrated Bible teacher R T Kendall, his personal choice was *Great Is The Darkness*.

Penned by Noel Richards and Gerald Coates, the words became more relevant than ever: *'Nations are slipping in hopeless despair, though many have come in your name...'*

This powerful 'prayer song' has been given a soulful treatment, courtesy of Canadian worship leader David Ruis. It's just one of 13 tracks on a new selection of Noel's compositions, *Love Songs From Heaven*.

Ace producer

A whole host of singers covered his material – such as Martin Smith, Darlene Zschech, Tim Hughes, Cathy Burton and Graham Kendrick – and the sound polished up by ace producer Paul Burton.

The idea came from Stephen Doherty of Kingsway in July 2007. 'He wanted to record some fresh versions of songs that have become favourites over the years,' said Noel, '...and get some of our friends to do the vocals.'

The result is a powerful presentation of some of the most popular and poignant praise compositions from Noel's 30 years of songwriting. 'The songs reflect our journey,' he explained.

Noel was born in Wales – the so-called 'land of song'. Mum and dad supplied the music at the Elim church in Llantrisant – a 'city set on a hill' just west of the Rhondda Valley.

It's a hub of praise. Llantrisant – literally, *the parish of the three saints* – boasts a site of Christian worship believed to date back to the seventh century.

As a young lad, Noel was soaked in this atmosphere of classic hymnody. 'Music was very much part of our everyday life,' he recalled. 'School started with singing hymns. So I got used to singing.'

A life-changing moment came in 1971. Noel accompanied his youth group to a Christian concert in Bristol. 'I remember all these different bands came on and played,' he said.

'It was a bit of a shock to our youth group,' Noel recalled. His mates wondered if this spectacle of sound and light might be unbiblical. But he lapped it up. A young Graham Kendrick performed a set of songs. Noel was hooked. 'I thought, "That's what I want to do",' he remembered.

He wrote his first worship song in 1979 – *Lord And Father, King Forever*. Noel worked with Youth for Christ, and became part of the beginnings of Pioneer in 1980.

Since then, he's written some of the world's best known contemporary hymns – such as *All Heaven Declares* – composed with wife Tricia. And he has taken the praise and worship experience to sports stadiums.

CREATIVE FORCE: Noel Richards
(Photo © Andy Colthart www.jharts.co.uk)

Noel spearheaded a whole movement of stadium-based worship events – from Wembley to Berlin – and stations in between. He became skilful at writing songs that could be sung from the terraces.

Simple declarations

A couple of years back, Kingsway chief John Pac issued a challenge: 'You've done songs for the stadiums – it's time to get back to writing songs for the Church'. Noel acted on the advice. A selection of new songs, *Heaven's King*, is about to be released.

The mood is reflective, unlike the triumphant anthems of the past. These are simple declarations of justice and compassion. 'We've made church and being a Christian so complicated,' he sighed. Sounds like a man content with simplicity.

We spoke while he and Tricia packed for Mallorca – not for a holiday – but for a home. They're moving to the island for three months, to join a group of friends there. Noel can travel around Europe to do his thing, and they'll see how it goes.

'We're just looking for the next stage of the journey,' he said.

Clive Price is Editor of *Library Of Lives*, and has followed Noel's music ministry since his first album in 1986. *Love Songs From Heaven* and *Heaven's King* are released by Kingsway. Visit www.noelrichards.com for details.

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