

THE JOURNAL INTERVIEW

GLENN BARKER TRACKS DOWN THE REVEREND JOHN PRYOR



As Christmas approaches, the Reverend John Pryor is concentrating on how to bring people together in this greatest of Christian festivals. And this isn't just about the widely varying denominations of Christianity. He is every bit as interested in people of other faiths – or none at all.

The universality of this highly unconventional, sometimes controversial, and often outspoken priest is what seems to draw to him those of differing race and creed. For the very tenets of his own faith demand that everyone should be made to feel truly part of the community in which they live.

Ageism is a particular bugbear. That came to the fore not so long ago, when this very fit 77-year-old wanted to hire a van to move some furniture. "I wasn't allowed to do it," he says indignantly. "Instead, I had to hire a van *and* a man." The altercation caused certain distinctly unchristian thoughts to cross his mind. "I started doing sums to see if I could possibly buy the flaming firm and close it down," he admits.

Such sturdy resistance to blatant age discrimination is likely to find favour among many older members of the Springline Group of Parishes – including Burton – in which he holds the title of Head of the Bishop's Taskforce.

Yet if John Pryor had followed the course set for him as a child, he would probably never have set foot at Walnut Cottage, Fillingham, where he now resides with his wife, Sheila. Born at Potter's Bar, John went to school in North Finchley. The family moved from there to Seaford, Sussex, and thence to Hadley Wood.

The original plan was for the Pryor family to relocate to Kenya, but the Second World War intervened and his father died. So - although his older brother had left in 1938 and his mother followed - the 16-year-old who had already left school in anticipation of the move was forced to stay behind to do National Service. It was three years before he was to see his family again. Before doing so, he worked in a bank and at Columbia Pictures.

Called-up, he became an RAF instructor, gaining a taste of what was to become his great love – the teaching profession which has combined happily with his ministry over many years now. Even after he finally arrived in Kenya, there were lean times, largely due to a lack of funds.

Hankering to farm, he began by coffee planting and later sisal. Meantime, he moved up-country, where he was able to teach and also got his mother a job as a school matron. She managed to survive in this capacity into her mid-eighties and her son fondly relates how this was achieved: "She lied so much about her age that no-one knew exactly how old she was - so she just carried on working."

Forever pondering how to get more people to come into the churches over which he presides, John also plans to remain in situ for as long as possible. His special task is to make the Springline churches "self-sufficient" in order to ensure their survival as meeting places at the centre of their communities.

Now – even though retired and unpaid - he has to apply for a licence to preach, along with his driving permit. But lay readers are in training and the hope is that there may be another non-salaried priest coming along to follow in his footsteps when the time comes.

He may well have spent his life in Africa - but it was the need for formal teaching qualifications that brought him back to England, where he met his wife-to-be, a textile designer and also a teacher. From then on, it was a case of going where both could get jobs, which took them from London to Cornwall and back. Working at Matlock, Derbyshire for some time and finally ordained at the age of fifty, John came to Lincoln as a trainer, following that with numerous other roles. In 1981, the family moved to Walnut College.

With their two sons and daughter now highly successful in the field - plus eight grandchildren at various stages of their education - the Pryors form something of a teaching dynasty. At Christmas, John's main commitment as an Anglican priest is to ensure that every communicant can take part in the Eucharist in any one of the churches. But his thoughts are on much wider issues and how everyone can be involved with the spiritual side of Christmas. "You don't have to be a fully signed-up member to be able to be able to participate," he says.

It all goes back to his famous inclusiveness. "I don't like anybody to feel excluded," he explains. "There is no room for exclusion of any sort, so I sometimes find myself seen as reactionary because I include people I don't really like very much."

