

## A Calling for the Common Good

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*As Bishop of Liverpool in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, David Sheppard pioneered a form of church leadership that helped to heal a divided city. Throughout his life he championed the interests of disadvantaged communities and used his national profile to argue for jobs, investment and economic justice. Earlier, as a former England cricket captain, he had played a significant role in the fight against apartheid. In this article, his daughter, Jenny Sinclair, considers his calling, its legacy, and reflects upon her own vocational journey as founder and director of Together for the Common Good.*

All my life, people have said to me, “Oh you must be so proud of your father”, as they did also to my mother, “Oh you must be so proud of David.” There was always the perception of the “great man” looming large in our lives. But although I understand why people say this, it doesn’t feel quite right, because, for my father, it was never about him. God was always the primary agent at work.

So if there is one thing that I know he would want to come from his story being more widely known, it would be that it prompts more people to realise they too have a calling. Every person has a calling, a ‘vocational responsibility’ to play their part for the Common Good, according to their unique gifts and abilities.

My father’s courage was evident from an early age. He was eight, and already at boarding school, when he was told of his father’s death. A determination grew that was to prove vital in his twenties, when he found himself facing Australian fast bowlers, and, later still, in his dealings with Margaret Thatcher.

The passion for cricket that had taken root as a little boy was cultivated at school and by hours of solitary practice against the coalshed door at home. At Cambridge as a history undergraduate he spent more time at the crease than in the library. After scoring heavily when the university played the West Indian touring team in 1950, he was selected to play for England against them that summer.

However, the trajectory was not to be straightforward. After becoming involved in the Christian evangelical movement my father took the momentous step to give his life to Christ. By his mid twenties, a Boy’s Own hero after captaining England, he was also preparing for ordination. He had met my mother, Grace, by this time, and in a 1957 heatwave they married in the full glare of publicity, with scores of press photographers lining the pathway out of the church.

Their shared faith was the foundation of their marriage and they adored each other. But again, things were not to go to plan. Shortly after their honeymoon Grace had a serious nervous breakdown, was hospitalised, and then for more than 30 years was to live with agoraphobia. After just over 18 months’ curacy at St Mary’s, Islington, David and Grace moved to the Mayflower Family Centre in Canning Town in the East End of London, where he was to lead an inner-city settlement community as warden.

The Mayflower was built like a quad around a garden; on its sides a church, a nursery school, a swimming pool and a residential block with offices and a communal dining room. It was a cheerful, bustling place and people from the local community became part of the leadership team. It was a dynamic model of inner-city evangelism, and many came to see it in action, and to learn from it.

Everyone called my dad "Skipper", and he was much loved. My mother thrived in the down-to-earth atmosphere and was fully involved. More than 50 of us would pile on to the coach to Blankenberge in Belgium for the annual summer trip. The Sunday Group met in the room above my bedroom. My earliest memory is of feeling safe tucked up in bed hearing the dancing through the ceiling.

When I was three, my mother became ill with ovarian cancer and we nearly lost her. My dad never spoke to me of how he had faced the prospect of us facing life without her but I know he had been prepared for the worst. Perhaps it was this experience, and the loss of his own father so young, that etched in him such a deep compassion for others. I have lost count of how many people have said how much his love and care for them in times of crisis meant to them. David's calling drew him into politics. After meeting Fr Trevor Huddleston in 1956 and having his eyes opened to the evils of apartheid, he refused to play against an all-white touring South African team in 1960, and, after his retirement from Test cricket, spoke out against the proposed MCC tour in 1968-69 after the South African government refused to allow Basil D'Oliveira to play. My father lost good friends and sections of the press turned against him. The tour was abandoned and South Africa's exile from all sporting competition was to last for 22 years.

He had always assumed that his ministry would be spent as a "wilderness" figure, but Mervyn Stockwood, Bishop of Southwark, approached David to become the suffragan Bishop of Woolwich. We were a small family and my mother was still unwell, so it would be difficult to leave the Mayflower and the warmth of the East End. But as they prayed through the pros and cons, my parents felt the sense of calling was clear. And so we moved, and everything changed.

The bishop's palace in Blackheath was rejected, and a four-storey terraced house in Peckham found. For Grace, life became more isolated as the demands of my father's workload dramatically increased, and she coped courageously with the role of bishop's wife. My experience of school was mixed. My primary school was chaotic and I was bullied for a sustained period. My best friend Suzanne, whose dad was a black cab driver, and I were the only two from our class to pass the 11-plus and we were accepted into a local girls' grammar school.

David was now responsible for 250 clergy in 150 parishes. As he got to know them and the people in their areas better, his understanding of the different styles of Christian churchmanship broadened. Having started as a conservative evangelical Anglican, his focus became 'social' as well as evangelistic. He saw more and more evidence of the estrangement between people in affluent areas and communities in the inner city and outer estates. He would ask clergy to take him round so he could learn about deprivation from those experiencing it first hand. His solidarity with people in disadvantaged areas strengthened, and his determination to work for solutions grew. He set out what he had learned in Built as a City.

In 1975, we were on the move again, and the call was to Liverpool, which at the time was blighted by sectarianism, high unemployment and unstable local politics. This time our home was the official bishop's house and effectively was a public building. Grace rose to the challenge but not without personal cost. I found the lifestyle difficult but found friendship in my co-ed comprehensive.

When Derek Worlock, another southerner, was appointed as Archbishop of Liverpool a few months later, my father turned up on his doorstep to welcome him with a bottle of wine. They realised Christ had called them together for a reason. Understanding the crisis the city was facing and the human consequences it would lead to, they resolved to stand with the families and communities who were most at risk of job losses. Despite their robustly held theological differences, they quickly established a working partnership.

My mother played a key humanising role in their Anglican-Catholic relationship, and the three developed a warm personal friendship. It was in a room set aside for her in Archbishop Derek's house that Grace wrote the story of overcoming her illness. Her bestselling book, *An Aspect of Fear* was to inspire thousands of readers to confront their own fears.

The city was fractured, and the two bishops found themselves in a position of civic leadership. Regarded as "honest brokers" they listened to all sides, always putting the flourishing of communities first. Their instinct was to build social solidarity. Bridges were built between employers and unions, the affluent and the working class, the police and the black community.

They convened the [Michaelmas Group](#), an influential group of business leaders, to retain jobs and encourage investment. Critical of the polarised political offers of their time, they refused to support the Militant hard Left and famously challenged the Thatcher government to fulfil its responsibility to the whole nation.

In a time of deep division they, and the Free Church leaders they worked with, described their role in bridging divides as one of "reconciliation". They didn't always succeed, but it meant a lot to people that they stood with them and were seen to fail with them. Their courage in acting so publicly together established a new model for ecumenical relations.

Our kitchen table was often the place of debate with key figures of the time. But I felt I had to chart my own path and look for a more normal way of life. Predictably, I rebelled, and had a great time doing so in the Liverpool music scene, giving my parents no end of grief, staying out late, keeping company they neither liked nor understood. By my late teens I could not wait to leave home. I became estranged from the Church.

By the mid-1980s, my father's sense of calling about the unnecessary suffering of the urban poor and his concern about "two Britains" was crystallised in *Bias to the Poor*. He set out his view that Christian responsibility to the Gospel is both about transforming people from inside out and about changing the course of events to set people free. His focus on bridging divides, building trust, ecumenical partnership, better race relations, decent jobs and the importance of dignified work were becoming familiar themes. Shortly after this, he played a central role in the Church of England commission that led to the ground-breaking *Faith in the City* report.

In my mid-twenties, a turn of events followed that none of us could have foreseen. Following a conversion experience, I was received into the Catholic Church by Fr Michael Hollings. Archbishop Derek and I had a mutual understanding for which I will always be grateful. My parents could have been forgiven for initially regarding this development as part of an extended adolescence, but they each took the news with typical graciousness, and came to see it for what it was, a calling. In a sense, their faithful prayers for me over the years had been answered, even if not quite in the way they had envisaged.

In 2011, I felt the Spirit prompting me again, this time to explore the legacy of the Sheppard-Worlock partnership. My first instinct was that it wasn't my job to hold a torch for them. But I prayed for guidance. People joined me and the work of Together for the Common Good has unfolded in remarkable ways. Although the work of my father and Archbishop Derek in Liverpool was T4CG's original inspiration, we are not naive enough to follow it wholesale. This is a new time that warrants new responses. We take a different view in some areas. But I think they would approve.

Like them, we are rooted in prayer and we are communitarian in instinct. We emphasise the importance of strong local institutions and local leadership, and we help people fulfil their unique role in building the Common Good. Like them, we believe that the churches can help to foster a culture that puts people, communities and relationships first. In our view the key components which made their relationship so unique, were the combination of the 'outward-facing church' and Catholic social thought.

Walking away from a stellar cricket career seemed crazy at the time. As his big sister Mary always said, "Without cricket David wouldn't have got anywhere." But God calls people to use their gifts and skills in unexpected ways. A life focused in this way is rarely predictable, and certainly never boring.

It's only now that my own calling has become clear that I understand what motivated my father, and that all of us are each called to our own unique "vocational responsibility". So yes, I hesitate when people say I must be so proud of him, or when people say he would be proud of me. It is less about pride than about wonder, at how God is at work in our lives.

Desmond Tutu once described David and Grace to me as "great collaborators with God". They remembered friends and colleagues by name in prayer together every night of their married life, despite all their own difficulties. They loved people. Believing in the communion of saints, many of us still feel their presence and thank God for their lives. Like all of us, they weren't perfect, but God calls ordinary people to do extraordinary things. As Pope Francis says, we're all missionary disciples now.

Their ashes, along with David's bishop's ring and Grace's engagement ring, are interred under the floor of the south aisle of Liverpool Cathedral and on the wall above is a striking memorial carved directly into the red sandstone with the inscription, "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you ... And pray to the Lord on its behalf."

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This is an adapted version of an article first [published](#) in The Tablet on 20 November 2019. The authorised biography, [David Sheppard: Batting for the Poor – the authorised biography of the celebrated cricketer and bishop](#) by Andrew Bradstock was published by SPCK in November 2019.