

Chaplaincy to industry

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I retired in July 1992, when I was 54, after working as a chartered engineer and a senior manager for BT. I have never felt called to preach, but have held various offices at church, Circuit and District levels.

In 1995 at a District Synod there was an appeal for people to train as Industrial Chaplains. I decided that my industrial experience was good (having risen from apprentice) but my theology was very weak. I attended Luton Industrial College at an annual meeting and found myself in a sea of vicars, with only one other unordained attendee! I was placed under the care of a wonderful theologian (whose name I forget - to my shame) from Bristol University.

At the entrance of the college there was a crest with a logo in Greek, which seemed singularly inappropriate, and we spent much time over two sessions deciding what we should be called, coming up with Mission in Business Industry and Commerce (MIBIC). I was awarded A Diploma in Industrial Mission in spring 1997.

I started my visits in October 1995 to a woollen mill in Saltaire. The first weaver I spoke to was a Muslim who wanted to tell me about his 'prodigal son' who needed to be brought home, 'like a sheep to the fold'.

I visited that mill for about five years until its closure; a sad time, very worrying for many. Whole families put out of work, many with no experience elsewhere. I felt particularly sad for the roomful of burlers and menders, all ladies who had never been to an interview and feared for their future.

On one visit the Mill Manager was waiting to see me; there had been a fatal accident at a sister mill and he wanted me to give bereavement counselling within the week to those who had witnessed the event. I realized that I wasn't trained to do this but promised to get someone who was. I tried unsuccessfully with my contacts within Methodism; so I rang the vicar of that particular parish who agreed to go with me to this new, to me, mill. While we were travelling I said it was lucky that he had had a clear diary. He replied "I cancelled all my other engagements!"

I continued to visit this second mill for about three years until its closure. I heard swearing fairly regularly (sometimes my own) as one would expect, but on one occasion the culprit was using "Jesus" as a swearword. I told him that if he wanted to offend me I would rather he hit me. His attitude changed towards me.

I was interviewed by the manager of a Bradford Council Industrial Estate and was accepted as a lay chaplain. The estate has 52 units and to speak to their occupants I had to knock on their doors. I had great help from the Estate Secretary, who let all the occupants know about me via their pigeon holes in reception.

I visited from 2003 to 2016 until frailty got the better of me, when unfortunately walking around the estate became too much for me.

There was one occasion I remember. A unit got a new occupant and, on my second visit to him, he wanted to talk about religions. He seemed to be very knowledgeable about Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity and wanted to know how he should worship God. He was preparing for an argument. My theology is still very poor, but I have learned to trust in Jesus, and His Spirit gave me the answer before I could think. I just said "Why don't you ask God and He will give you the answer!" Theology isn't everything!

