

GOOD NEWS TO BE CELEBRATED AND SHARED!

Marian Izzard

MARIAN IZZARD, FORMER DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF SJI, TAKES A LOOK BACK AT A SNAPSHOT OF THE MINISTRY OF THE LATE REV DR ROB FROST.

As SJI (Share Jesus International) celebrates its 20th anniversary this year (see page 16), we thought that we should also take this opportunity to look back a little further as we reflect, give thanks and celebrate the ministry of the late Revd Dr Rob Frost and how his ministry has impacted many lives and left a deep and lasting legacy. I have been asked to write this as I was very much involved at the hub of the many and varied touring projects, Easter People, missions and events that took place over 20 years. So, it's a bit of a trip down memory lane! There is much to be said and this article will not be able to do justice to the wide

and ranging ministry in which Rob was engaged, so I will just be looking at a snapshot - taking a look at the touring projects and Easter People.

HOW IT ALL STARTED – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Rob had a passion for evangelism ever since he was a student at Cliff College prior to theological college in Manchester where he trained for the Methodist Ministry. It was during his training that he gathered around him a group of evangelical students and, during the college holidays, he would engage them in missions - including beach and village missions.

In his early years of ministry he toured parts of the country with the Gospel Roadshow in 1981. This was a presentation of drama sketches, with a small team conveying the gospel in a creative and imaginative style in Methodist churches.

Rob then began a ministry of presenting the gospel nationally by touring the country with a number of tours. It started with Daybreak which presented the Easter story in music and drama and toured in 1983. This was followed by Visions which focussed on the work of the Holy Spirit - and was presented to a 'sold out' venue at the NEC in Birmingham.

In 1986, Rob was released by the Methodist Church to work as a full

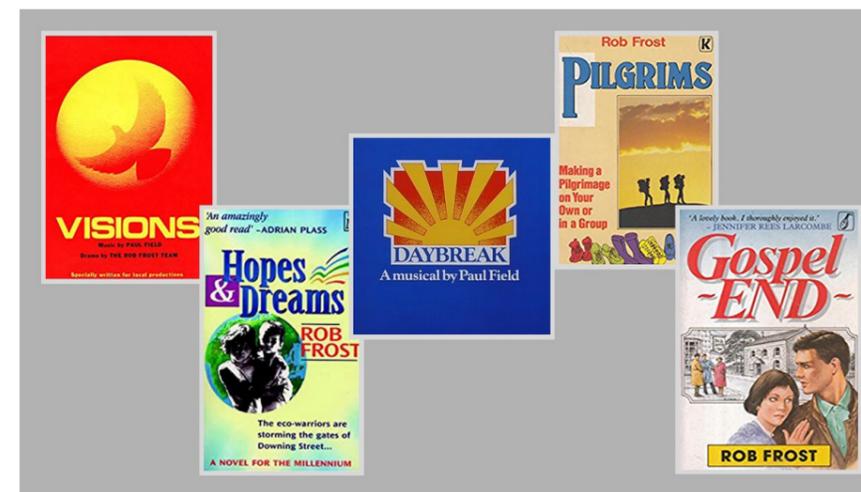
time national evangelist. From then on, a whole string of touring projects, missions, events and initiatives such as Easter People emerged which would span over the next 20 years.

AN OPPORTUNITY

It is amazing to look back and to see how God lines up people, places and opportunities to enable things to happen! I happened to be in the right place at the right time when I was asked if I would like to work on a venture with Rob Frost and his team back in September 1987. I was told that this was a short term opportunity that would be for around 6 months to a year. Little did I know then, that this 'short term opportunity' would span out to be 22 years!

It was a rollercoaster of an adventure, with many highs, lows, interesting twists and turns, 'living on the edge of your faith' stuff - but also an immense privilege and an incredible opportunity.

I was initially asked to work as a project co-ordinator for the touring project: 'Breaking Bread' - which was the liturgy of the Methodist communion service, set to music and interspersed with drama sketches, dance movements and poetry. The whole purpose was to bring a little more life and meaning to the act of communion by engaging in the creative arts. Breaking Bread became a national tour, touring to over 80 church venues up and down the country at weekends in 1988 & 1989.



TOURING PROJECTS

The vision for all the national touring projects was to present something on a particular theme which was creative, imaginative and engaging, which would ignite enthusiasm amongst church folk at each venue to get involved. Much of this involvement was as 'a local cast' - in some aspect of the presentation whether it was in drama, dance or as part of a local choir. Folk were drawn from across a circuit or several circuits for one of the venues. A whole package of resources was produced to accompany each tour so that local people could then take these and use them to put on their own presentation using some or all of the elements at a later stage. This enabled the gospel message to be communicated in an engaging and accessible way.

The key to the success of each tour location was to ensure that the local co-ordinator was 'one of Rob's mates'. This term referred to a whole band of men and women up and down the country whom Rob knew and could rely upon. These 'mates' were his 'movers and shakers' who could mobilise and make things happen at the local level and who believed in Rob's vision and trusted him.

Rob toured with a small team to every venue on a tour and his role was to present an evangelistic message at some point during the presentation. The touring projects that followed Breaking Bread were:

- **Pilgrims** (1990 & 1991) explored prayer as a journey, by way of a pilgrimage. Local leaders at each venue were assigned to lead small pilgrim groups along a short walking route and to pray together at

particular points. This culminated in a prayer celebration at the end of the pilgrimage at each venue.

- **Gospel End** (1992) was staged as a play and toured to around 50 large theatre venues. It was the story of a newly appointed minister to a very traditional, small congregation in a Methodist chapel with plenty of recognisable characters! Following the sudden collapse of the chapel roof, the congregation were forced to move their worship to a function room in the nearby pub. This provoked challenge and change to discover what faith and worship was really all about.
- **Burning Questions** (1993) was an evangelistic resource - featuring questions often posed by not yet believers. Each question was addressed using a Bible passage to convey truth in a creative mixture of songs written by Paul Field and sketches by Stephen Deal. The gospel was presented in a lively, entertaining and non-threatening way as a national tour and then made available for church groups to use themselves.
- **Jubilate** (1996) retold the story of Jesus, staged in large open air spaces up and down the country. Its style was similar to a Passion Play and drew audiences of hundreds of people. Each local coordinator had to source a donkey for the Palm Sunday procession, but some venues had to make do with a horse!
- **Hopes & Dreams** (1999) was a musical for the millennium. This was based on the Lord's Prayer which featured music from Paul Field, drama sketches from Stephen Deal,

along with dance movements from Jacqui Frost. This toured to around 50 venues in the UK and was hugely successful in terms of the 'buy in' to the concept. All venues were filled to capacity, and in Truro the take up was such that they put on two shows on a Saturday! Afterwards, many churches then used the resources to put on their own presentation locally and very successfully in the year 2000.

- **Dangerous Journey** followed in (2000) and was the story of John Bunyan and how that related to the pilgrimage of faith for us all.
- **Here and Now** (2002) was the follow on to Hopes and Dreams, based on the teaching of the Beatitudes.

Rob always saw his work as a movement - having life, energy and purpose, with Jesus at the centre. Rob's vision was to see renewal in hearts and lives of individuals, in the life of the local Methodist church and nationally in the Methodist Church across the Connexion.

EASTER PEOPLE

I am sure that Easter People - as an annual event - taking place just after the Easter weekend, meant different things to different people. Whether it was the solid Bible teaching, Spirit-led worship celebrations, interesting seminars, late night fringe entertainment, quality fellowship, sharing together with thousands of others, or a time out with family or friends beside the sea.

For many, this week long event was a time of refreshment, blessing and sharing with like-minded Christians from all around the country who were keen to see renewal in their own local churches. It was also a time to have fun, make new friends and to be challenged, changed and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. It was a place where God touched the lives of individuals, couples, families, youth groups and churches, leading them into new areas of faith, mission and ministry.

The first Easter People was in 1998 at Camber Sands holiday camp in Sussex. It was thought to be a 'one off' event for people in the Methodist Church to attend with their families as there was no other all age event for Methodist people at the time. The event had the blessing of the Methodist Church and the late Revd





Dr Donald English led the Bible Studies on the 'Four Alls of Methodism'. This first event attracted some 1200 people and it was clear that it wouldn't be the last! The following year Easter People returned to Camber Sands attracting 1800 people. Faced with a growing event, a brave, bold and radical decision was made to move the event to a seaside town and to host the event in the town rather than in the confines of a holiday camp. In 1990 Easter People moved to Llandudno, utilizing the conference centre, local churches and schools. This enabled the event to engage with the local churches and serve to be a witness to the town. Folk had the option to choose their accommodation to suit their budget, from 4 star hotels to 'kibbutz' style accommodation (sleeping on the church hall floor) - which was ideal for many youth groups.

From then on Easter People each year was located in a place beside the sea - alternating between the resorts of Llandudno, Torquay, Scarborough, Bournemouth and Blackpool. Many who sampled the event one year brought a few others the following year and soon large groups from churches were attending year by year.

The unique selling point or 'USP' of the event was that it was largely run by volunteers - who provided the basic infrastructure to make it happen. Some came with specialist expertise and experience to source and operate equipment such as the PA or lighting

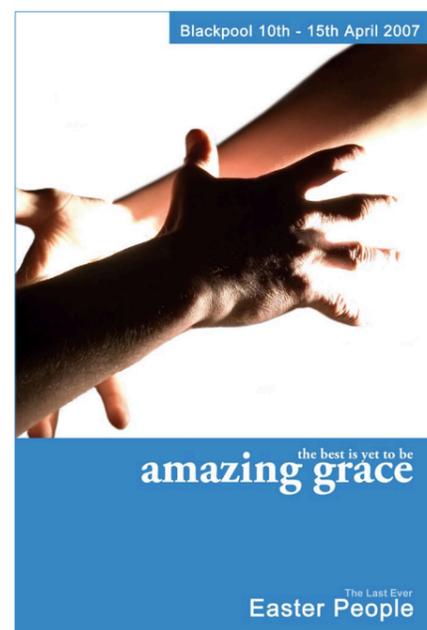
rig. Whilst others sourced toys for the children's work, brought together a worship band or made banners and backdrops for the various venues. People were also encouraged to volunteer and get involved in all aspects of the event, from stewarding, helping with children's or youth work, being part of a prayer or pastoral support team, to being part of the 'tech team' or the outreach team.

Rob was very much an investor in people, not only giving them time, but in offering them opportunities to develop their skill base, or to have a go at something new. He saw the potential in individuals, even if they couldn't see it themselves.

In 2000, the late Easter weekend ran into the early May Bank holiday, so an extended Easter People took place in Bournemouth and the event had grown to nearly 10,000 attendees. Multiple venues across the town and at the end of the pier were filled to capacity and folk had the opportunity of selecting different evening celebrations according to their preference: from 'quiet and reflective' to 'all age interactive' and 'radical and rocky' with all types in between.

As capacity for the event was at a peak, it was decided to split Easter People into 3 venues at Llandudno/Southport, Scarborough and Torquay from 2001. Each event was to be led by a team under the direction of a Site Team Leader. Rob was released to visit and preach at each of the venues during the Easter People week.

The final Easter People was held in Blackpool in 2007. It was decided that the 20th anniversary of the event would be a time to draw it to a close, before it became 'too stale'. Alongside that, the Easter school holidays were changing to be the first two weeks of April and the conference centres were no longer able to offer a discount to us as a trade off from the accommodation taken up in the town. The last Easter People was an amazing event which was stacked to capacity at the Winter Gardens, Blackpool. The theme that year was 'Amazing Grace'. Nobody knew then how timely that decision had been, since Rob died just 7 months later.



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A LEGACY IN PEOPLE

Rob always believed that the legacy of his work was in people - in changed hearts and lives who would be encouraged, equipped and enabled to serve God in so many and varied ways. Many folk have looked back at Easter People saying it was a pivotal part in their lives - whether it was at a particular event or over several years. Stories from countless folk have shared of how God met with them: either for the first time, by being called into full time ministry or a new direction in ministry or mission. Many have testified how Easter People was transformational in the lives of their churches too.

Two other major pieces of Rob's ministry which deserve at least a brief mention are the Share Jesus Mission Teams that took place every year from 1985 to 2004 involving hundreds of people working in teams for a week of mission and outreach alongside local churches in a designated area, and the Seed Team programme which ran from 1988 to 2000 enabling 268 people to be part of a year-long mission team.

So many people, including myself would not be where they are now if it were not for the opportunity that Rob

gave them in his ministry. Rob would be thrilled today to see the fruition of the seeds sown in the lives of countless individuals. He would be the first to give God the glory and then would probably say something like, 'Well, it was all worth it then!'

Marian Izzard is General Secretary, Administrator of MET and Editor of MET Connexion magazine. She currently lives on the Isle of Wight with her husband John who is the Superintendent Minister of the island.

