

**AN INTERVIEW BY THE REVD DAVID READ AND REVD PHILIP ENDEAN
WITH CATHERINE WIDDICOMBE OF THE GRAIL COMMUNITY ON 26TH JUNE
2015/2016**

This account of my adult life came about as a result of an interview by Revd Philip Endean SJ and Revd David Read, originally recorded on 26th June 2012, and now re-recorded by Catherine and David on 11th June, 2015, and edited by Catherine in 2016.

I: *Interviewer*

R: *Respondent*

I: Catherine, thank you very much for engaging in this, and could you perhaps begin by giving us a brief overview of the phases of your life?

R: These are the phases of my life as an adult:

1. Attending St Mary's Training College, Newcastle on Tyne from 1946-1948
2. Teaching at St Benedict's Boys School in Ealing for one year in 1949
3. Joining the Grail Community in August 1949
4. Heading up a small Secretariat for the English and Welsh Bishops during the Vatican Council for the first two of its four years: 1962-1963
5. Being introduced to the Non-Directive Approach to Community Development and attending two courses run by T.R.Batten at London University in 1970, and meeting George Lovell and together working on Project 70-75
6. Setting up Avec with George Lovell, a training and consultancy agency in 1977
7. Closure of Avec
8. Working on Avec Archives with George Lovell
9. Working on the Grail Society Archives
10. Post-Retirement work and activities

I will say a brief word about each of these headings before going into greater detail.

First: I attended St Mary's Training College for a two-year course in teacher training in 1946. As I understand it, shortly after the last war, courses were reduced from three to two years because of the shortage of teachers. This was a very happy period in my life.

Second: I taught for one year at Saint Benedict's Boys School in Ealing and that I greatly enjoyed.

Third: I joined the Grail Community full-time in 1949. I had already decided at College that I would join the Grail Community. Before I did so, I wanted to put what I had learnt at College into practice and to establish that I could earn my own living. Having done both satisfactorily, and having had some experience as a Community Member, I realised it was my vocation in life. Fortunately, ‘the powers-that-be’ agreed!

Fourth: I headed up a small Secretariat for the first two sessions of the Second Vatican Council in Rome in 1962 and 1963. In 1961 the Grail had been asked to set up a small Secretariat in Rome for the English and Welsh bishops during the Second Vatican Council that lasted from 1962 – 1965. This experience greatly changed me as a person in my beliefs and attitudes, as indeed it changed the Roman Catholic Church.

Fifth: I was introduced to the Non-Directive Approach to Community Development and subsequently, keen put the insights and changes of the RC Church into practice, worked with George Lovell in ‘Project 70-75’, an Action Research Project. Subsequently George received permission to become a ‘Sector Minister’ so he could work full-time on the Project. I then received permission from my community to work full-time and became what we call ‘a Field Worker’. During 1976 we evaluated and wrote up what the Project Team and the participants in Hornsey had learned. “Churches and Communities: An approach to development in the local church” was published by The Search Press in 1978.

Sixth: In 1977 George Lovell and I negotiated the formation of Avec as a Training and Consultancy Agency and George became the Director. George and I ran courses for clergy and full-time church-workers. Some courses were for those working in churches and organisations at local level, others for people at regional, national and international levels. We were also asked to have consultations in different areas and with specific groups in England and Wales, and both in Northern Ireland and Eire.

Seventh: I retired a year after George in 1992 so that I could support the new the Director during his first year in the post. However, due to the financial situation the Trustees decided to close Avec. I was deeply upset by this decision. By then I had returned to live with the Grail Community and continued to do some Avec-type work mainly for returned missionaries and for religious orders. I also wrote two handbooks to introduce people to the basic ideas of the non-directive approach to community development.

Eighth: George and I organised Avec Archives after the closure of Avec. Happily they have found a home in Westminster College, Oxford (now subsumed by the Oxford Brookes University).

Ninth: Working on the Grail Society Archives. The former archivist had trouble with his eyesight and the Community archivist who took over was over-meticulous! I was asked to take on the archives due to my experience with those of Avec.

Tenth: Post-Retirement activities.

R: Shall I go on?

I: Yes.

R: College was a very good experience for me. I enjoyed studying and made what turned out to be life-long friends. We roamed the Northumberland and Co Durham countryside. I also started a Grail Group with a small number of people. These groups followed a series of Grail Handbooks designed to train young people in leadership skills. On one of our vacations I visited the Grail HQ in Eastcote, Middlesex and asked the Leader of the Grail Community to visit our group in Northumberland. It was only years later that such visits were made. Neither she nor I knew then how well we would subsequently get to know each other!

After I trained as a teacher I taught for a year at St Benedict's Boys' School in Ealing and then I joined the Grail Community, which I'd heard about through reading the Grail Magazine and asking my mother what the group behind it was all about. I don't know how much she knew about them, but she'd seen Grail members in Ealing

before the war with banners and bright uniforms, and she said, "Well, one day you might be peeling carrots in the kitchen and the next day you could be standing on a stage and giving a talk." I thought that was a very good example of Christian communism and it led me to find out more. From one issue of the Grail magazine I realised that it was a woman's organisation. Various women wrote about their War Work, among other things, through the WRNS, the WRVS and the ATS, driving ambulances, working in canteens and so on. I realised that their faith meant a good deal to them and inspired their work. Putting together ordinary life with one's deep beliefs was really something that appealed to me. During my year teaching in Ealing I became increasingly involved in Grail activities and joined the Grail community in August 1949.

There were various things I learnt from being in the Community. One was the importance of things you do being really connected deeply with the person you are and what you believe. My life in the Grail Community was really varied, working in the Grail Publications Department; cooking in our London house; I did a lot of youth work, running groups and residential weekends up and down the country and at Waxwell, our home in Pinner where our growing community had moved from Eastcote in 1950. I also initiated 'The Links'. This was a movement for thirteen and fourteen year-old girls with a leader who guided them through discussion outlines that a colleague in the Community and I wrote. All this was for girls and young women. Each group had a priest as its chaplain.

I: Catherine, I suspect that many of the people who will be reading this interview will have only the vaguest ideas of what the Grail is, and indeed what a Catholic Secular Institute is. Is it possible, please, just to do a little bit more explaining?

R: Yes

I: Maybe why you went that way, because that was unusual for a Catholic of your age, I would have thought.

R: Yes. A Dutch Jesuit in Holland started the Grail in 1921. Fr Jacques van Ginneken realised that the best, the cream of the women in the Catholic Church, were becoming Religious.

I: Were becoming nuns?

R: Becoming nuns, yes. Nuns, in those days, lived in communities behind convent walls and wore 'habits', that is, clothes similar to those worn or given by their Founders or Foundresses, most from way back in past centuries. They therefore looked and acted very differently from ordinary people. Fr. van Ginneken decided to start a group of equally committed lay people who would go out and be ordinary Christians and indistinguishable from people working in shops, factories, universities, schools, etc. So he gathered a group of young women together. He gave them a strict Jesuit-type training period to prepare them to go out and live their Faith while working among other ordinary people. It was really trying to live in a fully Christian way: going out to people, being friendly and kind, conversing with them, and maybe talking about beliefs if that was called for, or offering to pray for them, that sort of thing. It wasn't that they were any better than nuns, but just that they lived in a very different way and this was very important in those days. This strict training was still in place when I joined the Grail Community in 1949. Things are so different nowadays when many nuns no longer wear habits and some live separately according to what they see to be needed. But that's a later story.

I: How did you get involved with community development?

R: I was actually introduced to the non-directive approach to community development by John Broadbent, who was a Youth Officer in London. He was talking to a group of Grail Chaplains on a course that two of us had organised at Waxwell. He talked to them about the non-directive approach and Betty and I from the community attended all the sessions. Afterwards John Broadbent said to us, "If you ever want Jenny, my wife, and me to come down and give the community a weekend we'd be delighted to." I remembered that remark about six weeks later and we invited them to Waxwell to work with some of the community. They gave us a talk and, dividing us

in two groups, asking one of us to run a discussion using the non-directive approach. After this first-hand experience I decided it was something I wanted to explore.

That led me to go on a five-day course with TR Batten. The first day I was so shy I don't think I said anything. The second day I thought, 'well, I suppose I can learn something from this.' It was on the third day that I felt as though I'd really seen daylight. I had a session in which I was asked to work with the group on one of a list of problems we had previously drawn up of difficulties we all experienced when leading a group. I realised with a sense of liberation that it didn't depend on me to come up with the answers, it was up to all of us in the group. This was so different from what I'd always done when I ran the Grail groups before: then I knew what I wanted the group to think and decide and I was adept in steering them there! This time it was up to the group and myself together: if we pooled our ideas and insights, we would come to a better decision together and reach a better solution.

After this I wanted to get some experience of working with groups in what was such a new way for me, so I did two things. First, I contacted a local Anglican clergyman, John Budd, whom I knew had also done Batten's five-day course. I invited John round for coffee – he said later it was the most significant cup of coffee he ever had in his life! We decided to invite a group of local clergy from different denominations and, because we wanted a female contribution we asked two nuns if they would be interested. They jumped at the offer. During the weekly sessions either John or I would act as Group Worker while the other one noted down what the Worker had done well and not so well and the result. This we discussed afterwards. We both found this process enormously beneficial. Afterwards I would write it all up so we each had a copy and could learn from it. The second thing I did was to contact Patrick Fitzgerald whom I had previously met once over a meal and it seemed to me that we would get on well together. He was a White Father, or Missionary of Africa as they are now called. I asked him if he would be interested in running a residential course at Waxwell for members of religious and lay communities from different denominations. He agreed and we ran several such courses. It was in the early days of ecumenism and both participants and Patrick and I learnt a great deal from them. I could wax eloquent about this experience but will refrain from doing so! These

courses were later organised by Patrick and Jackie Rolo, another member of the Grail Community. That was later when I got involved in Project 70-75. I'll say more about that later.

To come back to the five-day course, which had a great effect on me. Walking down Gower Street after the session on the third day I felt the Holy Spirit had really spoken to me. I thought 'if only this approach was widely known and practised by those in authority in the Catholic Church, and among other Church leaders at every level, then Vatican II could be implemented'. As I thought about that idea, it developed in my mind. The next two days on the course reinforced my thinking. Furthermore, during the five days Madge Batten had told me about a 3-month course that Reg Batten and she ran. She said to me, "Miss Widdicombe, *you* could come on our 3-month course." It was actually a year's course concerted down to 3-months as the Battens recruited people with important jobs in government or voluntary organisations who could not be spared for a whole year. As I was walking down Gower Street that evening I felt the Holy Spirit was expecting something important of me. I felt moved and very excited.

I decided that one of us from the community ought to go on this 3-month course. I wrote a paper that I circulated to all the members, explaining this 'non-directive approach' and suggesting that if one of us went on it, it would be of benefit, not only to our own meetings but to put into practice the decisions of Vatican Two. After a few days we had a community meeting to discuss it. They agreed that it would be useful for us and then to my delight they said that as I was so excited about it, I should be the one to go. I could not have wished for a better outcome! And those three months changed my life.

I: How did you get to know George Lovell?

R: At the end of the Five-day course Madge Batten had also said to me, "There's someone I think you ought to get hold of called George Lovell. He's a Methodist Minister who has been on our 3-month course". So she gave me his phone number. I let several weeks elapse before phoning him and then one afternoon I gave him a ring, and he laughed down the phone. I thought, "He's a nut case". He immediately

apologised profusely and explained he had that moment put down the phone from a call by Madge Batten. He invited me round and we got on immediately. I realised that he and I had a common purpose in relation to the churches. Subsequently we ran several courses together. Then George suggested that that we did an action research project in a local area of London with John Budd and Patrick Fitzgerald whom I had told George about.

I: That was Project 70-75?

R: Yes. As part of the 3-month course everyone had to write and present a paper on how they were going to implement what they had learned once it was over. The group would discuss each paper and Dr Batten would critique it. We all found this beneficial. I planned to set up an ecumenical project that would take place in some local area in London with an ecumenical team working with me. We'd work with all the churches to try and put this non-directive approach to community development into practice and introduce Clergy and full-time Church Workers to this approach. It was to be an action research programme, so extensive notes would be taken of all we did. John Budd was a natural person to invite to join the team and so was Patrick Fitzgerald. I tentatively talked to George Lovell about it. I was tentative because I knew he was so caught up in his ministry at Parchmore in Thornton Heath and he was also writing his thesis about his work there, for which he was eventually awarded a doctorate. George immediately saw the significance of setting up an action research project to try out the non-directive approach to community development in a local area of London and was so enthusiastic I asked him to become a member of the Project Team. In fact, he was the most important member as he had far more experience than John, Patrick or myself and he became the virtual leader. Later, one of the Community, Elizabeth Rowan, became our full-time note-taker. The five of us formed what became known as the Project Team. For six years we ran Project 70-75 in Ronsey (a pseudo name was needed at the time). It was actually in Hornsey in North London. We worked with the various Churches, introducing them to the approach by working with them to solve problems they were up against, or to start new work or to review their work. We also ran a training course for clergy and another for lay people. We spent 1976 evaluating the work with the local churches.

George, with my help, wrote a report called "Churches and Communities: An approach to development in the local church" It was published by the Search Press in 1978. (ISBN 0 85532 387 6). The full text can also be found on the Avec Resources website: <http://www.avecresources.org/Churches.php>

I: Could you say something more about community life and its importance to you. It sounds as though it had changed since your first experience of it at Eastcote?

R: Community life had changed enormously. This came about when we moved from Eastcote to Pinner. That was only a couple of miles away but it was to a much larger property with extensive grounds and clearly opened up new and exciting prospects for residential courses and other activities. Community life was and still is very important to me, because you not only get a lot of support from other members of the Community, you also get a lot of your edges knocked off! Underneath is the realisation that other members are basically *for* you. So I learned to take criticism without going off at the deep end. That became important when I first worked with George Lovell, because I was very nervous and I was really trying to grasp what community development was all about. I explained it, I think, in a rather ham-fisted way to groups, who would ask questions and sometimes be quite critical. I was able to cope with it as I realised that we were all learning through my mistakes. It was also helped because I knew that George, when I was working with him, would pick me up afterwards if I'd been made to feel I was no good by group members. The other thing that happened in the Grail in the early days of learning about the non-directive approach was that the Community didn't know what community development meant and I was still struggling to understand it myself. I hadn't quite grasped it, and we used to do a lot of talking about it and I had to explain it over and over and over again to them. This process took some time, ages, until eventually I realised they had actually cottoned on and were using it. A simple example was after I'd been on Batten's course I realised that a group worked much better when sitting in a circle. I find it hard to visualise how we were sitting before that but it certainly wasn't in a circle. In the early days when I had to take a meeting with them, I would automatically put all the chairs in a circle. I can remember them saying, "Oh Catherine! You're not going to put us in a circle again, are you?" And now of course

it's become absolutely second nature: we'd never think of having a meeting without sitting in a circle, unless we're sitting around a table.

I: It sounds like community life is almost a way of being given permission to be yourself and to be the very best that you can be.

R: Yes, you've hit the nail on the head. We're remarkably closely bonded. It's always been a close-knit group of people. I don't think any of us would have chosen to live with X, Y or Z but in fact we manage to live together and we get on together. I suppose we just make ourselves get on together. There are occasions of course when we don't get on. I remember one person, who subsequently joined the Community, saying that it was when she saw two of the Community having a bit of a spat, she realised we were human beings with all our faults and failures and it was that which finally attracted her! Basically we're *for* each other and if anybody's in trouble then everybody rallies round. That's one thing. And we encourage each other – that's something else that went through my mind as we were talking.

I: Is that being yourself and being the best self you can be, I was asking?

R: Yes. And therefore it's always being ready to learn and accept new challenges. Actually I am a person who both enjoys and accepts challenges. I am also stimulated by achieving something that I had never done before. The Grail always challenged people to try out new things, both Community members and the Grail members who belonged to local groups. "In the Grail nothing is impossible" was a slogan we were brought up on.

I: How important is living in the community to you, because for quite a long time, I gather, you were living on your own in the centre of London when you were working with George Lovell at Avec?

R: Living in community certainly is important to me. But, for me, I realised later that it had also been very important for me to live on my own and experience that over

several years. I think it helped me to mature. Living my own had come about because I knew I would need to be in London: when running courses I would have to be at the Methodist Church in Kings Road, Chelsea, where we had our headquarters, before the course participants arrived we, that is George, or whoever I was working with, and I would need to discuss the day ahead in order to be well prepared. Things can come to mind overnight that we would want to share. It might also be necessary to prepare the rooms we would be working in. Furthermore, my experience of working on Project 70-75 while still living in Pinner had entailed having very early starts and late nights and I would at times need to spend the night in the local convent. That was OK for five years but I didn't think it would be feasible for an extended time.

During Project 70-75 some of the community members would joke and say that I was using Waxwell as a hotel – a joke I found disquieting and rather hurtful. Also, when members were asked to work together on something, whether it was picking apples in the orchard or shifting beds before one of our residential courses, I had to absent myself and, in fact, this gave me the feeling that I was a bit different to other members, the awkward squad. When the leader of the community said "You would be better going to live in London" my first reaction was quite negative as I felt I was unwanted, but gradually I realised she was quite right and saw that it would be the sensible thing to do.

I: How did Avec Start?

R: Having completed Project 70-75 we, George Lovell and I, decided that, having used the non-directive approach to community development to good effect in Hornsey, we might form a team to start a Training and Consultancy Agency. It was subsequently called Avec. This meant the Team would be made up of an Anglican, a Methodist, and a Roman Catholic, contain both lay and religious, and men and a woman. Avec would enable us both to explain the non-directive approach to community development to others and help them to obtain the skills we now knew were necessary to make their use of authority more effective. We planned to run courses and hold consultations with individuals and groups. We had some initial

discussions with the British Council of Churches, but, although they were supportive, they did not feel it would be appropriate for them to take us under their wing. We realised we would need some powerful backing from the Churches if we were to become recognized and accepted by those with whom we wanted to work. Eventually we set up an initial meeting between the Rt. Rev. Derek Worlock, Bishop of Portsmouth, the Rev. Christopher Bacon, a Methodist Minister, and Owen Nankivil, a layman in an influential financial position in the Methodist Church. The meeting took place in Portsmouth. Of course, I already knew Bishop Worlock as he had been the go-between the bishops and ourselves when I was out in Rome during the Second Vatican Council. He was also very enthusiastic about the need to put the results of the Council into practice. So there was a meeting of minds. It was an exciting meeting and all three of them were enthusiastic about the idea of forming a training and consultancy agency. Afterwards the two Methodists had to return to London. George and I decided we needed take the opportunity to do some work together and plan the next steps. We also wanted a breath of sea air! So we took our brief cases, found two deckchairs on the beach and settled down to do some work! Eventually we got used to meeting in strange situations and ignore passers-by!

I: Can you talk a little bit more about the importance of Vatican II to yourself and maybe what that then meant to your ongoing life's work?

R: Yes, there are those who say Vatican Two was just a little tinkering with things and others who say it was a real change. I strongly believe that it was a real change. And so it has proved to be: the Catholic Church now is very different now from the Catholic Church I was brought up in. While I was out there Monsignor Worlock, who as the Cardinal's Secretary, was in on the Council sessions, compiled a diary that I typed from his dictating machine. In it he wrote about all that was happening. This varied from the jokes that the bishops had at table to discussions in the Aula, as the place in which the bishops met was called. The *perite*, the theological advisers to the bishops, also attended the sessions. So I knew about the secret meetings Cardinal Ottaviani had with colleagues who were opposed to the many changes being put forward by so many other bishops and cardinals from all over the world. Cardinal

Joseph Ratzinger, who after the Council became Pope Paul, was very forward looking. Monsignor Worlock tells us in his diary that a group of people would gather round Joseph Ratzinger at the back of the *Aula* after sessions and he was evidently sharing his forward-looking views with like-minded people. I think it was a pity that later, as Pope, he thought things had gone too far and he started drawing in his horns and becoming much more conservative. Of course there are still many conservative Catholics – in this country there is The Latin Mass Society, people who are very much pre-Vatican II, being unable to accept the changes being made. But they are a minority. There is also an active group, 'A Call to Action' (ACTA), which was started only a few years ago by seven priests and now has members and groups in most dioceses. The members are working to forward the changes of Vatican II. I remember Bishop Butler saying to Patrick Fitzgerald and myself, when we visited him to talk about the setting up of Project 70-75, that it would take 50 years for Vatican II to have any real effect. In fact, my experience was that it had immediate effect in a number of parishes, depending very much on the Parish Priest. Now, of course, it is 50 years later and with Pope Francis, we are even more hopeful, despite the on-going presence still of the Latin Mass Society.

I: Can I direct it back more to your personal experience?

R: Yes. Having been present at the first two sessions of the Council in a secretarial capacity I felt the Holy Spirit was inspiring the Church, and I was committed to the outcome from the first. In the intervening years it has seemed at times that Rome, that is, the 'powers that be' in the Vatican, the *Curia*, which consists of several cardinals, were trying to put the clock back. For myself, it took time to assimilate the changes – as it involved changing myself interiorly.

After this I was determined to do what I could to help others understand the changes of Vatican II and to become as committed to them and as excited about them as I was. I realised later that if Vatican II had not taken the place, if the Church had not renewed itself, it would have become increasingly unable to meet the changes and the needs of a rapidly developing society with all its opportunities for good and evil and the challenges they presented. It was a time of unease in the

Catholic Church, a number of priests left the priesthood and nuns left their convents. However I determined to struggle on and do what I could to contribute to the changes in the Church I love, a Church we will probably not recognise in 50 years' time. I am comforted by a quotation from a theological conference held in Leuven in Belgium in 1970: *The Church of the future will be the subtle gathering together of those who seek God*. I try to think and show love, compassion and forgiveness to people, despite so often being critical and at times even angry with some people in authority in the Church. In fact, in the Grail Community we are still doing what we can to implement Vatican II. There's still a ready market for our Grail simplified versions of many of the Vatican II documents. These are easy-essay versions of the various *Schema*, the documents containing the decisions of Vatican II. They are used, not only by lay people but also by many clergy who encourage their parishioners to read, discuss or study them in groups. For a time I was on the Diocesan Core Group of to ACTA which is again trying to implement Vatican II. (See their website). With a fellow Catholic in the parish we have started a local ACTA group that meets monthly. We started by discussing the Council documents and now have moved on to discuss other documents emanating from Pope Francis.

I: Once the Project was completed what was your next step?

R: We got *Churches and Communities, an Approach to Development in the Local* published by the Search Press in 1978 and reprinted in 1986. After that we decided to talk to various church authorities. First, we discussed our experience and ideas with the British Council of Churches but, although they were interested in what we had done and encouraged us to move forward, they did not feel it was appropriate or politic to take us under their wing.

George discussed our ideas with Methodists and I talked to Derek Worlock, who had become Bishop of the Portsmouth Diocese after Vatican II.

We decided that a joint meeting was called for between George and the two Methodists, and Bishop Worlock and myself. The four of us considered what our next step should be. We all realised that the partnership between George and myself was something that should continue. It was decided to set up a working party.

I: You became very, very committed to working with George and to Avec.

R: Yes. George and I are very different but we're also equally committed to the work and we have a common purpose in relation to the churches. When I first met him he was trying to do in the Methodist Church what I wanted to do in the Catholic Church. Of course, our work quickly became ecumenical, working in the churches and trying to help clergy and full-time church workers to really put their faith and beliefs and into practise through their work and to introduce them to working *with* people rather than *for* them, thus sharing ideas, making joint decisions with the congregation of the local church, or organisation or community. Now-a-days this is often referred to as *collaborative ministry*.

I: You said earlier that you and George were complementary. Can you say a bit more about that?

R: Yes. George has got a much better mind than I have and he pursues the exploration of ideas in a very detailed way, not leaving a stone unturned. He's got a sort of brilliance that I haven't got; for instance, he would be always be happy pioneering a course and working out new ways of going about things. I suppose you could say he is a pioneer of ideas. On the other hand I was quite happy to continue running the same course over and over again, using the same or very similar structure but as the people were different, obviously my ideas developed, but the basic structure of the course on the whole, has stayed more or less the same. For instance, I was happy to run three-day courses for people who'd never come across the non-directive approach before and to introduce them to it and to see, even over three days, how their thinking clarified. They would develop and question things and be able to work with each other in a way that they hadn't to begin with. On each course there would be new problems and situations. On the other hand, I was very much better than George at networking with people. I was quite happy to phone people up and try to explain as clearly as I could the value of coming on a course or a seminar. One of my talents was introducing people to Avec. So George and I complemented each other.

Although George was better at explaining what we were doing to people in authority in the Churches, he did find that sort of thing more difficult. I think that's the difference between our backgrounds, because George is from a working class background and I'm middle class, so I naturally had more self-confidence.

I: How did you co-operate over the work? How important were your differences?

R: George was an enormous help to me when I was facing a new situation or some problem in the course of my work. I would discuss it with him. Out would come a sheet of paper – sometimes a large one or, if over a meal, a paper napkin – on which he would draw diagrams. This would often happen when I was preparing to work with a lot of Religious to facilitate their chapters or help them with some problem they faced. I would do a lot of preparation beforehand and work out what I what my purpose was and how I was going to achieve it. Then I'd talk this through with George, sitting with a bit of paper on the table between us and explain what I had planned to do. He'd ask a lot of awkward questions and I'd suddenly feel terrified and think that he was saying what he would do in that situation. He would ask me whether that was something I could do. I would know he could do it but wouldn't be so sure that I could do it. We would reach an impasse. Eventually I learned to say "I'll think about it, but it may take overnight or a couple of days". So we both realised what was happening and I took to listening, trying to understand what he was saying and take my notes, and often his diagrams, and look at this overnight or for a few days and I'd work on what he'd said to see what he was trying to get at and then I'd check whether it was something I could do or whether I could make it work or needed to adapt it. In this way he always influenced and improved my work. I helped him too, in a way. When he'd been writing things – articles, papers and letters – he'd frequently give them to me to read. If I couldn't understand what he was saying I'd say so and he'd realise that, for some people, like me, he wasn't being clear enough. I always knew my brain wasn't equal to his. I always prayed that he would find a woman who was more able to work alongside him than I was.

I: Alongside all the things that you've said – your commitment to the Project and to Avec and to George – do you think that in itself was important, that you were committed to making sure that what he was doing, and which you were involved in, was successful and you would go out of your way to do whatever needed to be done?

R: Yes. I think neither of us would have got where we've got without the other. We both encouraged each other. George gave the impression of self-confidence but he hasn't actually got a lot and I certainly hadn't in those early days. We were both hard workers. Until I met George I'd never met anyone who works as hard as I did, and that was very rewarding. And also his ideas were so exciting. We would explore them together and spark each other off; I found that both stimulating and exciting. Working together, as we did, from 1971 to 1992 was a wonderful time. We got very fond of each other. We had a friendship bond as well as a work bond. And Molly, George's wife, was wonderful. She never minded at all that he and I would spend hours working things out together in their house; she was very, very, good.

I: Can you say something more about the Second Vatican Council which, of course, happened before you met George.

Yes, and in a way it prepared me for meeting and working with him. Monsignor Worlock was Secretary to Cardinal Godfrey of the Westminster Diocese in which we lived. He was asked by the Cardinal to set up a Secretariat in Rome during the Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965. Cardinals and bishops from all over the world met together to decide on the future of the Roman Catholic Church. The Council Fathers, as they were called, only met in the autumn terms, and in the mornings, and I was privileged to be in the Grail Secretariat for the first two sessions. Four of us were in Rome for the first two sessions in the autumn of 1962 and 1963. We had a penthouse flat overlooking Piazza Navona. In our work for the Bishops, Worlock was go-between the Bishops and our Secretariat. He would bring us the work, letters to type, talks in Latin that our bishops would be giving to the Council Fathers. Also, every day, Worlock, who had been in the *aula*, where the Council Fathers met in St Peter's Basilica, was also present there as the Cardinal's Secretary. He would dictate

into an old Dictaphone what had been happening each morning. And my job, because I didn't know shorthand at that stage, was to transcribe his account, so I heard all sorts of things that were going on in the actual sessions as well as the jokes of the Bishops over breakfast etc. It was a real live view of what was happening. We also met various people, such as Brother Roger of Taizé and Hans Küng, who came to supper in the flat below ours, which was an ecumenical centre run by the Women of Bethany, which had also been founded by Fr van Ginneken. Another was Charles Davis, who was a theological advisor to our Hierarchy. I remember one night he came to supper and talked about the importance of the concept of 'The People of God' and how lay people, priests and religious, were all on a pilgrimage together and, as in any pilgrimage, one person would take the lead and then another would take over, and some would fall by the wayside and others would pick them up. It was everybody on an equal footing, everybody doing what they could do from the position they were in. At that time I found this something of a bombshell: I was shocked, having been brought up to put priests on pedestals, nuns on slightly lower ones and us lay folk well below!

After two sessions in Rome I came back to the Grail in Pinner. My work was training the newcomers to the Community. During that period I, along with others, was gradually assimilating the ideas of Vatican II and we realised we were in a good position to help other people do the same. We also had many priests coming to visit us at Waxwell, the Grail Centre. We ran weekends, courses and evening sessions, both for priests and lay people. So we were really updating ourselves and being updated by those we invited to give the talks. I slowly assimilated the various reforms of the Catholic Church. I remember walking up the path at Waxwell with Ruth, another member of the Grail Community, who was also the Parish Catechist, walking ahead of me. I knew she was also ahead of me in a lot of her thinking. I said to myself, "yes, you're ahead of me now but one day I'll catch you up!" If I want to assimilate or understand something, I have to take it really slowly and chew it over inside myself and when I can explain it clearly to myself in simple terms, I can explain it to others with conviction and enthusiasm, so they can understand it.

I: I'm guessing that, in a sense, you went to Rome, to Vatican II, as one person and came back as somebody else?

R: Yes, when I went I was a good law abiding Grail woman.

I: So you were law abiding?

R: I was law abiding as a Jesuit. I came back with that struggle inside me. My head knew that it was all right, all that I was hearing, all the changes were right. My emotions had been programmed to do what I was told and to toe the line and then I would be okay. I'd had a real good old fashioned Catholic upbringing at a Catholic school, and that's the way things were. The whole experience of being out there for those two sessions of the Council, where I felt as though the Holy Spirit was flying around Rome and things were changing. As I was typing Worlock's diary I knew that there were underground groups of people, like Cardinal *Ottaviani* and those who were trying to ensure that nothing changed in the Church and other go ahead people trying to do the opposite such as Bishop Butler and others. I can remember one morning Worlock phoning us and saying as soon as he came out of the session: "We've won, the English have won this time, and Our Lady, she's not going to have a special document, as such, for herself, she's going to be part of the doctrine of the church." That was something the English Bishops had been fighting for. I learned much later that at least one other Hierarchy, I think it was the Dutch, had been working towards the same end. There were a lot of influences on me which made me realise that there were people of real significance, people in the church, people that one would look up to, who accepted these changes. It was my emotions and training I'd had in my upbringing that I had to work through and, to work through it properly, I couldn't have done it immediately.

During that time when I was out in Rome the Grail work that I had been involved in came to a natural end, because the group training I had been involved in was for girls. Looking back, I realise we were not far-sighted enough to see the time might have come to have both sexes of young people involved. And I was wondering what I could do to put the insights and changes of the Vatican Council into effect. I can

remember one night kneeling by my bed and really challenging God to give me some job to do in my life that was going to be valuable, something worthwhile. So I felt coming across the non-directive approach and meeting George Lovell, and later working with him, was really providential. George calls it my 'vocation within a vocation', that is, my vocation to work in church and community development within my Grail vocation.

I: The Grail is a Secular Institute, isn't it?

R: Yes. Perhaps I'd better explain what a Secular Institute is. For many years groups of lay people, some of men and women, others of all women or all men, wanted to commit their lives to God and work among ordinary people without the rules and regulations laid down by the Roman Catholic Church for nuns and priests. We made a commitment to the evangelical councils of chastity, poverty, and obedience, but we lived our life as lay people. Poverty, for us, is living simply and sharing our goods and assets. We remain celibate, and obedience is given to the community leader. Things have changed since then and now, probably because we are fewer members, we make decisions together as a community and we see the final authority as in the community together. Times have changed and one sees things differently. Around the late 1940s, because there were various such groups of men and women already existing in various parts of the world, Rome decided to regularise the situation and recognise them officially. The leader of the Grail community in this country was a very forward-looking woman. She realised the English Grail, which consisted of the Community and the Companions, who were celibate women who continued to live in their own homes and be involved in their work as teachers or whatever.

I: Would it be true to say that had it not been for Vatican II and your personal experience there you might never have got into the non-directive approach and Avec?

R: I don't know. It might have come about some other way but that was the way it came about for me. That's all I can really say.

I: It was a very important step.

R: It was a vital step for me. The fact that I was out in Rome that first session was enormously important because the Council Fathers, as they were called, took control into their own hands. Whereas the *Curia* just wanted the *schema* already prepared and which they approved of, to be accepted as they were. They thought the Council would be over by Christmas. And in that first session the documents, which had been prepared over three years or so, were thrown out. I think it was Cardinal Suenens that made a speech, and all the Bishops responded positively. They worked on the document on the liturgy as that was the most forward-looking one due to the fact that many liturgists had been preparing and pressing for liturgical change for years. As the Second Session would not be until the autumn of 1963 it gave time for the other papers to be changed and rewritten. The Council Fathers returned to their dioceses and some started to educate their priests and some didn't. Likewise some priests tried to educate their parishes, and some didn't.

I: But for you, once the Council period was over, that was when you discovered the non-directive approach?

R: Yes. Well the Council was over in 1965 and I came across the non-directive approach in 1968 or 1969. Belonging to the Grail Community at Waxwell was key: if I hadn't been in the Community I wouldn't have been in Rome and if I hadn't been in Rome, I wouldn't have that first-hand experience. Everything seemed to come together for me. I was just approaching 42 when we started Project 70-75. That's when I matured much more than I ever had before. I'd reached a stage of maturity, which I think many people do around that age anyway, and so my whole life took off with a new zest.

I: In what way did the ethos and the spirituality of the Grail drive you as you went into Project 70-75 and into Avec?

R: Well, my life was completely committed to doing something useful for God. I hadn't got as far as wanting to be useful in the world yet. When I first asked to join the Grail Community, Yvonne, who was the leader of the community then, said, "Why do you want to join?" And I said, "I want to be useful." And I think that's always been something in me, being useful for God, for the Church, for Jesus, so I was open to new challenges. The other thing about the Grail is that you were always expected to do what you were asked to do, whether you'd ever done it before or whether you thought you could or couldn't do it. This was true for ordinary Grail members who were in groups: they would always be challenged to go beyond anything they had ever done before or thought they could do. That happened even more so for us in the Community. I was asked to do all sorts of work, give talks and run meetings, which I'd never done before. Usually we had one of the others with us, or two or three would be doing it together, and we'd encourage each other. We also did a lot of discussion on spiritual topics during our time of initial formation.

I: The importance of being a Secular Institute then was that it was committed women, as it were, coming out from behind the walls where the nuns, the religious, still were. Is being a Secular Institute of equal importance to the Companions of the Grail who lived separately?

R: It is. But more important for them is the fact that various members of the Grail Secular Institute, or Secular Institutes in general, live on their own, as the Companions do. We're one of the few Secular Institutes that actually live together in community. Most of them are scattered like the Companions. So when the Grail started if you wanted to commit your life to the Church, to God, the only road open to women was to become Religious. So in the Grail Community we were very different from most of the other Institutes. As I said earlier, there was a place for a community member to live on her own as a Field Worker, and for a time I lived as one when I was working for Avec.

After the Council was a difficult period for me when I became a Field Worker living in Clapham, first with a friend in her flat, and then I got a flat of my own, thanks to the Anglican Church. Living in London gave me much more freedom to work. And by

then George and I were working in Avec and I needed that freedom. There was so much to be done and we were both very much committed to working and getting it done. Although I knew it was necessary to move out of living in community and become a Field Worker, I found it hard. To begin with I felt very lonely: I'd go to Church on a Sunday and come back and see other people walking hand-in-hand or families all together and I would be almost weeping by the time I got home. But gradually I made contact with friends and neighbours and I became a member of a little community in Lindore Road in Clapham, which met for the Eucharist every Sunday. It was a very informal Eucharist but that was a lifeline for me at the time. Then I made other friends, and I used to cycle all over London to meet with them. So eventually I revelled in the freedom of living on my own. Batten, whose three-month course both George and I had been on and who was our Consultant for Project 70-75, suggested that I try to get an MPhil. Because I hadn't been to university, I had first to get qualifying exams, and I had to do that on top of my Avec work. That took me three years and then I started working for my MPhil, and that took another six years. T R Batten was my Consultant and Mentor all that time.

I: Before we move on to that, just to check out then, when you lived independently, were you detached from the Grail and what the Grail meant to you? How did that relationship continue or not continue?

R: I remained as attached to the Community as I could be, given the work I was involved in. Some community members used to come and visit me. I went to Waxwell, where we lived in Pinner, occasionally, not very often. During Easter and Christmas I'd go down there for a break. They kept in touch with me by sending the *In Touch*, Grail magazine, and the *Grail Exchange*, which was a Grail newsletter circulated to all Grail people. By then the Grail included, not only the Community and the Companions, but also the Grail Partners, who were married couples all over the country. The Grail also had some Associate Members, which could be anybody and everybody, men and women, of any religion, or none. They were people that were in touch with Grail and liked our Grail ethos.

I: So in a sense you became part of this extended Grail family or community?

R: Yes, I was part of that while remaining a full member of the residential Community. In fact there were three Community Members who were Field Workers at that time. The other two actually left the Grail Community eventually. But I didn't. I nearly did but, with George's support, I realised how important it was to me and thankfully, I remained a member of the Community as I still am.

One of the things which helped me was a book called 'Marriage: Dead or Alive' by Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig, and the bit that struck me was that he wrote, "It isn't necessarily the Darby and Joan marriages which look perfect on the outside and in which couples always get on, that are really the best marriages, it's the ones in which couples have to struggle together and it's really difficult for them to make a go of it. But they do and they bring up their family, warts and all." And it just struck me why I belonged in the Grail Community. It wasn't perfect, it wasn't as perfect as I would like it to be, but nor was I! Warts and all, I was going to stay with them and they were going to stay with me, warts and all.

I: The third member of the partnership was the Holy Spirit, and I think earlier you said on the third day of Batten's course you were walking down Gower Street and you had an overwhelming experience.

R: Gower Street, yes. I just felt I had never been knocked on the head by the Holy Spirit before. The idea of joining the Grail had come gradually over the years. I knew I had to join the Grail long before I joined it. That was when I was at college. But this Gower Street experience was a sudden thing and I felt so utterly committed and convinced by it. Then to meet George Lovell and discover that we had the same basic purpose with regard to the church was just wonderful. It had to be providential. I think I've already said that I had never met anyone before who liked to work as hard as I did. We shared our basic commitment, our common purpose, and our need for a work partner to encourage us in what we knew we must do was wonderful.

I: So the Holy Spirit is committed to the non-directive approach as well?

R: Well that's the way God works, isn't it? When we ran our courses we always had a session working on what we all believed and how the non-directive approach fitted or didn't fit. These sessions I found particularly helpful, because although I had had some theological training in the Grail (lectures that I'd try not to go to sleep during!), I'd never been taught to think theologically. So these theological reflections were very important to me as well as to participants, both during our courses before and once Avec had started. At first, we got Barry Hefford, another Methodist minister, just to come and talk to us on the theological insights of the course. Eventually we ran theological sessions ourselves. They became in a sense the central part of the course, because they made members explore why they did what they did, or wanted to do. We used diagrams, which we did in all the sessions, and they proved extremely valuable and useful in the theological sessions. We naturally drew diagrams as we'd been using them to explain various things throughout the course and people found this helpful. Participants also were able to explain themselves in this way. I remember one man, I think he was a clergyman, he came up to the board and he drew a huge boot with himself as a tiny person under it, and he explained that the boot might well come down on him. That was his picture of God. That diagram provoked much discussion. Working with a group always led us to share new ideas. We were all learning together and it was this that made courses so exciting for everybody. So we benefited from the courses we ran as well as participants. We worked on courses with people in senior positions in the Church, Bishops and Provincials, Mother Superiors of Religious Orders, the leaders of various Christian organisations, people at regional or national, or even international level. They all got sparked off together, discussing and learning from each other. I found all that exciting.

During the sessions George and I were doing together I would be taking notes and chipping in if I saw someone wasn't following what he was explaining. Occasionally I'd see George put his head in his hands and sit back in his chair and I knew he was trying to think something through. So I'd go on batting the ball, usefully or not, but just to keep things going, until he sat forward again and then he'd come out with some new insight that he'd seen and been trying to clarify. You can't do that if you're

working on your own. We were also able to talk about things afterwards. Sometimes this happened with a male co-worker. It was the first time I'd ever worked with a man, apart from priests in the Grail groups, and in those days, as I saw priests on pedestals, I would never contradict or try to explain something in my own words. I just let them get on with it and listened. So I learnt the joy of working with someone who had a masculine approach to life. At times, outside the session, I and the person with whom I was working would get into a tangle and disagree with what we had done, how we'd explained something, what we were going to do or what we wanted to say about what should have happened. Then we'd realise it was time to go into the next session and we would put what we had disagreed about 'on the shelf' and go and work together as co-operatively as we normally did with a group. Afterwards we'd sort things out between us. George and I had a lot of painful sorting out sessions but we always got through them and I think we both learnt a lot from them.

I: Talking about the change in theological reflection, can you describe any of that? Can you say how your thinking changed as a result of it? It may be a similar question, but you said that God is non-directive, and that would have been in the '60s, and for a century and a half before that, a pretty explosive thing to say. God is quite definitely directive, the Church knows what God wants to say and...

R: The 10 Commandments.

I: ... indeed, and tells you what to think, whereas here you were encouraging people to think for themselves and saying how absolutely important that was. That's a pretty radical thing.

R: Yes, I realise that. I can't remember when I realised how dangerous it was to get people to think for themselves. This is why all these totalitarian regimes are so heavy handed. But once people really start thinking for themselves about what they're doing and why they're doing it, then it leads obviously to thinking critically about what other people are doing, or trying to make them do. That is "highly dangerous".

I: And were you perceived as being highly dangerous, or had Vatican II opened the floodgates anyway?

R: I think I was perceived as being a bit dangerous or at least awkward by some people..

I: Really? By whom?

R: Let me give you an example. The Grail had a house in Sloane Street in those days and I was living there with two other people, and one of them was the boss of the house, and at that time, it was after the Vatican II, I attended several sensitivity courses, as did several members of the Community. In the first one I went to, I found myself in a group as the only woman, which was quite a shock to me. The other nine were Anglican clergy from the Newcastle Diocese. Gradually I realised, from the way the conversation went, that although they were all highly trained, several with degrees and so on, that sometimes I said things that were useful to them and they obviously appreciated my contribution. That was a real revelation to me, to think anything I said could be of value to them. I'd been a very good little Catholic, and was still a very good little Catholic: one of the clergy took me to a nearby monastery every morning for Mass. Of course in those days I went to Mass every day and it never occurred to me that I needn't do so. When I got back from that course my behaviour changed. We used to have ecumenical clergy lunches. Whereas before I'd always been behind the table pouring out coffee for people or taking sandwiches round, now I was mixing with them, talking and discussing with them. I grew up a bit and eventually was on several of those sensitivity courses and was even used as a staff member partnering somebody more experienced than me. In this way I learnt a lot and it helped me to realise that we all have failings and how we all need to encourage each other, and it doesn't do any harm to own your own failings as that can encourage other people. We all have our good and bad or shadow sides and being open about them can be helpful.

I: You said a few minutes ago that you seemed to be dangerous.

- R: Well, one time when I came back from one of these sensitivity courses, the leader of the house said to me, "Catherine, you're awful once you get back from these sessions!" This was because I'd speak up and question her, "Why do we do this? I don't think I agree with that, it's not a very good idea."
- I: Would that have been the same sort of tensions that would have been going on among religious women, among nuns, or was there something different about the Grail's version?
- R: Well, I'll answer that in a roundabout way. In the early days of Avec I didn't do any work with nuns. We had the odd nun on a course perhaps, but I didn't work with groups of nuns. However, I accepted a request to work with a group of Superiors and the Provincial Council of a particular Congregation. There were about 14 of them and it was a residential course of about three days. Having arrived early, I went into a session that was being run by an American nun, and I cringed because she was talking down to them so patronisingly. Suddenly said, "Come on, let's get up and do some exercises!" And she was jumping around and everyone was jumping around. I couldn't bear it. I thought 'how awful. Whatever I do I'm going to talk to them like ordinary women, adults.' And I did and they warmed to it and you could see them blossoming, and at one stage I had a session where I drew a diagram, the Provincial Council at the top, the local Superiors with their Council below them, and the sisters at the bottom. I said, "This is where the work's done, on the bottom. You wouldn't have a Provincial Council or local Superiors if you hadn't got the communities working in all these different places." So I asked them to go into groups. I said, "Go into groups and you people at the top list what you need from your local Superiors in order to be a good and useful Provincial Council." And to the local Superiors and their Councils I said: "What is it you want or expect from the sisters in your communities?" And to the ordinary Community sisters, "Now, sisters what is it you need and want from your local Superiors and their councils so you can get on with the work you need to do?" And I was terrified because I'd never done this before. I prayed to the Holy Spirit and hoped for the best. I went around all the groups to make sure they were ready to return to the session. On their return I asked each

group to report back. They were very open, very honest and I got the impression that they'd never spoken to each other like that before. When I realised that I could do this with Religious, it was helpful. After Vatican II Religious Communities were asked to review the lives of their Founders or Foundresses and read the implications for their lives today. To begin with I fought against the requests to work with Religious Communities because I thought they'd take too much of my time. But eventually I did a lot of work with them and a lot of Religious came on 10-day courses. I found it a real joy to see them waking up and becoming themselves. Then some Provincials and General Superiors would come on a course and get me to work with groups of their local Superiors or to help them run their Provincial Chapters, and I loved it.

I: An unfair question, but how then would you evaluate the impact of your work on the development of Religious communities?

R: It's hard to evaluate Avec's impact on anything. It seems to me it was a time when things were moving and changing anyway. Nobody was doing exactly what we were doing but lots of community work of different kinds was going on. I think Avec came at a time when people would pick it up because it chimed in with what they were hearing and seeing. At the same time the Religious were struggling with such things as the meaning of 'subsidiarity'. At first I didn't know myself. And they were trying to work out what an 'Option for the Poor' meant. It was a time when they were renewing themselves and struggling to go back to the roots of their congregations. It was a slow and painful process for them. However, I think my experience of living in community in the Grail with all its joys and difficulties helped as we could each understand where the other was coming from. In the Grail we were ahead of them because our purpose was to live as ordinary people and meet the needs of those around us. When they looked back to their Founders as they had been instructed to do by Rome, they saw they had got their vision of starting to meet needs such as visiting the poor or starting a school, etc. when *they* were just ordinary people.

We also had the advantages of being out in Rome during the Council as I've already said. Immediately after the Council Charles Davis came regularly and gave a series of

talks to some priests at Waxwell. Most of them had been his students but not all. He invited us to sit in at the talks. I have a vivid picture of one old priest from the Isle of Dogs standing up suddenly and he said, "I've got it, I've got it!" and he gave a wonderful exposition of the People of God on pilgrimage. I think we were all moved. You never forget something like that. It goes deep inside you. So with the Community I was being educated more deeply than ever in the Vatican Council's teaching. I doubt if this happened in any or many convents: they were all busy teaching or nursing or had some other apostolate they were doing. As I said, they had been asked to change and I think our contribution, or my contribution, was useful in that it helped them to make those changes being asked of them.

I: Reading *Small Communities and Religious Life*, many of the ideas in the book were distilled from your work over the years. It must have initially seemed quite radical. When you discover what God is saying to you, you will discover your way forward as you think together and talk it through together, rather than being obedient to what you were being told, I presume?

R: Yes. Though we still live out obedience, it is after exploring a suggestion or instruction with whoever is concerned.

I: And that was why I asked the previous question, because it seemed to me that, as you worked with those communities, their whole approach to how they make decisions and how they live together was being changed, something that I think you suggested had to happen because that was the spirit of the age. But my suspicion is that you, yourself, made a tremendous impact by introducing those arguments to them and enabling that change to take place.

R: I suppose so, yes. I was so committed to it and especially feeling able to be useful and work with the same Order or Congregation over a number of years. There was one Congregation where the Provincial Superiors and her two Councillors came to Dublin from England on a 10-day course. Then I was asked to work with that

Congregation for several years, and these ways of working together just went right through the whole Congregation.

I: Were they perhaps were obstructive at times?

R: We had some sticky times. There was one order where they decided they needed to close some houses, and they got a woman professor from a university to help them with it, help them with their difficulties. She'd gone away on retreat and worked out a way forward, a sort of plan of how they could organise the Province differently. And then I was brought in to facilitate their Chapter and other local community meetings. I had with me another nun from a different Religious Order whom I had worked with previously, and I suggested three of their own sisters from the Province might form a team with us, because they knew the Congregation from the inside. We facilitated the local sisters' understanding of what was being suggested and sought their co-operation, even though it might end up with closing their own convent, which would be painful for them. But it was all extremely difficult. The Provincial Superior who invited me in and whom I liked, I also felt bullied me into doing the job. However I felt I could work with her; but she was voted out at the first session. The new Provincial was a very good woman but she hadn't really wanted us, and this Professor hadn't wanted us. They'd much rather do it from top down, and so our team had a very difficult job. At one stage the three of their sisters with whom we were working, my co-worker and I were asked to go to a meeting at headquarters with their Provincial Council and the professor and her team; she'd also got a group of sisters working with her. We all sat round with a tiny coffee table in the middle of the room, on which I had put a sheet of paper. I can't remember the details of the session but I know it was very, very difficult and I couldn't think how to make this Professor understand that we weren't fighting against her ideas just because we were questioning them, but we were trying to get them really explored. I suddenly I got an idea and I rushed to the coffee table with a felt pen, knelt down, drew a diagram and explained it. Suddenly the Professor said "I thought you were fighting us!" By then it was 12 o'clock and they all had to go to Mass. So they all decamped, except the five of us, and we felt like worn out wet rags by then. It was

terrible! Anyway, after that things went more smoothly. The Professor and I became quite friendly.

I: Were the nuns at this sort of period accepting broadly what you were doing?

R: Yes, I think so. For various people a Methodist Minister wouldn't have been quite as acceptable as I was as a Catholic. But George Lovell did work with one or two congregations and of course he went down really well. He worked with them in a way I couldn't.

I: One of the reasons, it occurs to me, that Avec was so absorbing and such hard work was that it was trying to do three major things at the same time. It was trying to develop a new way of working, it was trying to convince the churches of the value of this way of working and at the same time running very demanding courses.

R: Added to that was trying to get money to keep the organisation, Avec, afloat, and that took an enormous amount of time. When Mrs Thatcher was in power we were going to become part of the Roehampton Institute, which would have secured funding, and they were keen that we should be part, especially after a meeting there with the relevant people from the three colleges. Rev Ted Rogers came with us. He was a Methodist minister, a very prestigious one. He was a very small man, and I always remember he walked into the meeting, went straight to the table and took charge of the meeting. He was determined he was going to chair it and that was it. We had an excellent meeting, it was all going to go through, but then the political situation changed and it was after that, that the funding was stopped and we were unable to become part of the Roehampton Institute. So George and I had to approach various trusts, and we were greatly helped by The Gulbenkian Foundation, and by the Methodist Church that paid George's salary while he was Director of Avec. If it hadn't been for that we'd never have been able to do anything else.

I: And so the pressure to run as many courses as possible to try to keep income coming in must have been considerable?

R: Yes, we were running at least twice as many as Batten recommended. We worked hard, because we really prepared the courses very thoroughly, and we also evaluated them very thoroughly afterwards. This was all part of the actual research that we were doing. Did George tell you that Batten wanted him as his assistant in the university?

I: Not until later.

R: When George had been on the three-month course and done some work at Parchmore Methodist Church, which he wrote up for his doctorate, Batten asked the London University whether he could have an assistant, and this was agreed but he would not be paid unless he ran his own course. However there were no facilities in the place where Batten held the course or elsewhere, so that was the end of that.

I: How would you describe the ending of Avec?

R: This is sad, really. It was a tragedy. Malcolm Grundy was appointed Director when George retired. The Trustees had decided that George should retire a year before me, and that I was to assist Malcolm as he took on the job. He spent much of his first year visiting Avec Associates, and his fellow Anglican clergy whom he knew, with the idea of recruiting people for Avec courses. Charles New, a Methodist Minister who had come to the very first course run by George and myself before Avec came into being and with whom I had worked closely on a number of courses, decided, after meeting Malcolm, that he couldn't work with him and so he resigned as an Associate. That was a close ally that I no longer had there to support me. I did a 10-day course with Malcolm and realised he was wedded to adult education methodology. Looking at his books and his website you can read more about the way he worked. As he used his undoubted skills in using the adult education methodology rather than the non-directive approach I found it a really hard year. I also felt torn between my close comradeship with George and trying to be loyal to Malcolm, because I knew if I allowed my negative feelings towards Malcolm to surface I would be in an untenable position. So it was a very painful period both for

George and myself. Malcolm was also a very personable young man. George and I realised later that when the Trustees were appointing a new Director and asked for our advice, we should have advised against him having the job. So we really blamed ourselves to some extent. Another factor was that when George retired, so did Molly his wife. Molly had always kept the accounts scrupulously. Previously when George and I attended Trustee meetings we knew of the likely money we would receive through the courses we would conduct during the coming year, but it was a calculated risk we always took. In fact, we never ran at a loss. We also described to the Trustees in some detail how the courses we'd recently run were going. So this was an educative process: they really understood what we were about and so knew they were supporting a useful and worthwhile venture. The Methodist Church paid George's salary, as I said before. With the retirement of George and Molly, the Trustees appointed a new treasurer. He was an excellent treasurer but he had no idea what Avec was about. He saw everything in financial terms. He said the money would not be enough to employ Malcolm, let alone a second member of staff, and that the money would only last until the end of the year. Then, as an Anglican priest, with no job security beyond December, Malcolm let it be known to the powers that be within the Anglican Church that he would therefore be seeking a job. He was offered one, which was a step up the ladder for him, as he was made an archdeacon. He put that he had been a former Director of Avec on his CV. In my view Malcolm's tenure of the post as Director of Avec was anything but good because, as I said above, he was true to his adult education skills rather than the non-directive approach. This disappointed me and I felt negative towards him – a negativity I tried to hide.

So the Trustees decided to close Avec. They told George and myself and said we were not to tell anyone. George and I wrote separate letters to all the Trustees saying that as Avec had been set up by an ecumenical group and all the churches had been involved, particularly the Anglicans, Methodists and Catholics, that the Churches should be involved in closing it down or in seeing what should happen. This was not done. They had a full meeting of the Trustees and Avec was closed down and then they let us know. To make matters particularly painful for me it was just at the time when the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales decided to hold an

extraordinary meeting in Cumbria when they would focus on what the future of the Catholic Church in England and Wales should be. They decided that the time had come for 'collaborative ministry'. They set up a group to get that going. The group discussed the matter and interviewed a number of different people but they didn't interview George or myself. I suppose you wouldn't expect them to ask George as a Methodist Minister, but the fact that they did not interview me, after all my experience in Avec, I felt to be short-sighted of them. I also felt quite hurt by this. Most of the Catholic Bishops had supported Avec financially, albeit in a small way, and they knew about Avec and what we'd been doing, and three of the Bishops: David Konstant, Victor Guazzelli and Derek Worlock had been Trustees at different times. In fact Derek Worlock still was a Trustee but he must not have been at this meeting; I don't remember. Our work in Avec over the years was ignored and the work we had been doing could certainly be described as 'collaborative ministry'. This group wrote a handbook, for priests and people in parishes. Again it contained either no or merely the barest mention of our work.

When I heard that Avec had been closed down I went to my room and wept all morning. It seemed that Avec was closed down just when it was not only needed but might well have had the backing of the Catholic Hierarchy.

One of the Avec Associates suggested that we must have a meeting to talk it through. So we met at Waxwell with the Rev. Ted Rogers, the Associates, and George and myself. The Associates wanted to set up an association to carry the work forward but in fact that never got off the ground. It would probably not have worked because they were all in full-time ministry and would not have had the time, together with their existing work, to do what George and I had been doing full time. I was very angry and distressed when Avec closed down so arbitrarily. It was awful. Two members of the Grail Community, Philippa Craig and Jackie Rolo, had been Trustees at one stage so they sympathised with me, knowing what I was going through.

So Avec closed and the Avec courses stopped, apart, that is, from the courses I continued to run from the Grail Centre. I did that for returned missionaries by negotiating directly with each of the missionary departments of the Churches. The

Methodist Church Overseas Division (MCO) and the Anglican USPG, both of which had been using our courses for returned missionaries fairly regularly over the years. So that work went on for about five years from Waxwell, the Grail Centre in Pinner. I also did a lot of work with women in Religious Orders.

The highlight for me came when I was asked to go to Nigeria to work with local Catholic community workers that included nuns and priests. I had always been rather envious of George, who had been to Africa. He worked with the Methodist Ministers in Zimbabwe after their War, and he had also been to Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Up to then, except for working in Ireland I had never had the chance to go abroad. And then within a fortnight of each other I got this request to go to Nigeria and another to work with an international group of Religious Sisters for their General Chapter in Rome. This was preceded by conducting a week's retreat for them. I both enjoyed and valued these two experiences.

After five weeks in Nigeria and three intensive weeks in Rome I was quite exhausted. I returned to get on with my Grail work. I was then co-chairing the Grail Development Group and was at the end of a year's stint as Chair of the Pinner Association of Churches. Being thoroughly run down, it was suggested both by my doctor and my Grail Community that I should stop work until I had recovered.

However, I had been already been asked to do two things: one was a half-day Conference for the Pinner Association of Churches, of which I had recently been President. The members wanted to work out more satisfying ways of clergy and lay members working together, as it had long been unsatisfactory. The second piece of work concerned a request by 'Reconciliation in Northern Ireland', with whom I had worked before. I was determined to do both pieces of work. I remember putting my feet to the ground when I got out of bed one morning and saying to myself, "I've got to get better for these two events," which were both in the next 10 days, and I did!

The half-day Conference in Pinner went really well. They enjoyed what was a new experience for them: working hard in mixed groups on some penetrating questions that, with their agreement, I had put forward. The small hall buzzed with life. The groups worked hard and were creative.

George and I had run several 10-day courses in Northern Ireland over the years. I was asked by 'Reconciliation in Northern Ireland', that did a lot of reconciliation and peace work in Belfast and in Europe, to run a three-day course to improve their group work skills. Fred Graham, a Church of Ireland Minister, who had worked both with George and myself on several 10-day courses, was a member of Reconciliation in Northern Ireland. We went to Corrymeela. It was the second time I'd worked with this group. There were about 19 or 20 of them and we worked for just three days. It went really well. They were so bright, they knew all there was to know about reconciliation, and bringing that about, and had experience of working with varied groups of people. But they didn't know anything about actual group work; they picked it up quickly and they worked extremely hard and with enthusiasm and skill. Fred and I felt it had been a useful experience for them.

I: In what you've just said, quite a big chunk, you'd sort of gone down to the depths, with the closing of Avec, but you seem to have come back up again, and I think you described it as retirement but it sounded pretty busy to me.

R: My retirement has been pretty busy. I like hard work. I do like working at things and I find it very difficult not to have something to get my teeth into. One important job I was given to do was to work on our Way of Life. This is a small booklet describing our ideals and how we aim to live them in practice. I think before I go on, I need to mention two other groups of people who have particularly strong links with the Grail Community. Their members make an annual commitment to live out the Grail ideals in their lives. The first group to form was 'The Companions of the Grail', celibate women living separately rather than in community. They had varying jobs ranging from a university lecturer and an international judge of dance to being a nurse or a teacher.

The second group to form was the 'Grail Partners', married couples who also wanted a closer connection with the Grail Community and who have their own 'Way of Life'.

Whereas the Companions and Partners had done some work on their respective 'Ways of life', we in the Community still had further work to do on ours. I had to do some work on our Way of Life, which had been on the go for about eight years and hadn't been finalised. So my work included working on the Community Way of Life, that of Grail Companions and that of the Grail Partners, and ensuring that the three were compatible. Then the whole thing needed to have an introduction. I can't remember now whether somebody had done that or whether I did it. I think I did a lot of work on it. During the Avec days when Jackie Rolo was Leader of the Community, she had attended a ten-day Avec Course. George worked with her on her work paper. Through the course she not only realised the importance of getting people talking together, but it was when she was doing her work paper that she realised that the Community, the Companions and the Partners should be three equal bodies working together to form the Grail Society and be three groups on an equal footing. Before that the Community was at the top of pyramid, as it were, above the Companions and Partners. Henceforth we would make decisions together as three equal partners. The Companions and the Partners described in their respective 'Ways of Life' what this major change meant for them. So my task was to go through all the 'Ways of life' and make sure that they were consistent. That was quite a job.

Later I was asked to work on the Grail Archives, because the man who had done them, who wasn't a trained archivist, was going blind, and one of the Community was asked to work on them. She started, but she was a person who found it hard to make decisions, and she was over-meticulous with a fear of throwing anything away. Realising it wasn't her field, she asked to be relieved of the task. At the time I had been working with George on the Avec Archives, which, as I said, had found a home in Westminster College in Oxford. George had worked out their basic structure, with me helping him. So, on the basis of my experience, the community asked me to take over the Grail Archives, which I did and I enjoyed doing. After a few years the decision was made to move from Pinner because the Community had become too small to manage our large estate and run courses etc. This entailed me doing a lot of work trying to get rid of material, because, for example, I often found there were

five copies of something when we only needed one or, in some cases two, copies. I was trying to thin the Archives down, and then as the move got nearer I realised I had to get them all ready to be moved. So I was working over-hard in the last two or three years. We were fortunate in finding a removal firm who also had storage space for archives. I then had the task of trying to find a place for them in Winchester. The Winchester University are keen to have them and are currently building on a place for their own archives and ours.

I: Which brings us to the present. Can I take you, well not back, but to have an overview, because one of the things that you mentioned in your writing is the importance of the place of women, which you've kind of hinted at, but would you like to say a bit more about the importance of that to you?

R: Well, having men certainly changed the feel of the Grail for the better, I think. I'm not an ardent or fanatical feminist. The Grail never has been fanatical about that. But what we're really working at is getting men and women working together on an equal footing. The international Grail isn't. They're still a woman's movement, and maybe they have to be because they're working in a lot of developing countries, in Africa and places, where the native women wouldn't have much chance to take the lead.

I: But you spoke at the beginning, when you were talking about Vatican II, about the importance of equality of laity and clergy in a situation where all clergy are male. That says something probably about gender balance too, doesn't it? And it actually enables women to have a place in a church with all male clergy that they couldn't have?

R: Well they never will have if it remains all male clergy, I believe. I believe that it won't always remain an all male clergy. Some people are campaigning for it. I'm afraid I'm not a great campaigner like that.

I: But you've lived it?

R: Yes, I think that's one of the strengths of the partnership between George and myself. We were a man and a woman, clergy and lay, Catholic and Methodist working together, and the Avec Associates were Catholic, Anglican, URC ministers, some nuns, some lay people, not so many lay people, who were running courses. But I believe that women have an enormous amount to give and I think the Catholic Church is the poorer without their contribution. I get really angry, for instance, well, I did get angry, when I saw a nun pretty well running a parish that had no Catholic priest, and they'd have to wheel in a priest for Mass on Sundays. But she was running the whole show and getting a lot of co-operation from the laity, both men and women. Then the bishop of the diocese changed and she was told to get out of the parish, and the parish went back to being run 'top down' again with a visiting priest on Sundays.

I: So there's something particular about the way that women work?

R: Yes.

I: And that's very important.

R: Yes. Women approach things differently from the way men approach things, and neither is necessarily better than the other, but one without the other is less good than if both co-operate. This means that with only a 'wheeled in on Sundays' priest a parish is less good than it could be. I think the partnership between men and women is really vital for things to go well, or as well as they could go. Archbishop Worlock was very strong on this and he was very, very much for George and my partnership when he saw it working.

I: I read somewhere where you talked about visceral beliefs, what burns within us.

R: 'Here I stand I can do no other', that sort of thing?

I: What burns within you?

R: Well, I believe I have something to give, or some contribution to make in life. I can't quote the exact word of Cardinal Newman but in essence what he said was that we have been sent here with a mission, put on earth with a purpose, with something to fulfil for God. This means that, unless I do my utmost to fulfil my God-given mission, I won't be the person God wants me to be. One of the prayers of Jacques van Ginneken, the founder of the Grail, was "*Lord, let me grow to be the person you want me to be*". That's very deep in my being. The other thing I've not mentioned so far is silent meditation. 1970 was an important year for me. It was the year I went on TR Batten's three-month course and in that year I also got initiated into Transcendental Meditation brought to England by the Maharishi. This is similar to John Main's silent meditation. In both, one tries to still the mind by using a 'mantra' or holy word. I'm still using the original one I was given in 1970. I don't think I could exist without meditating, morning and evening. It's been a wonderful thing for me. Somehow the worst parts of you get ironed out or you become conscious of them in a way that otherwise I probably wouldn't have. It hasn't by any means made me thoroughly good but then, even St Paul wrote to the Romans "I desire to do what is good but I cannot carry it out". Meditation helps one to live in the depth of one's being. So, as I said earlier, I believe God sent me here with a mission and I want to try to do all I can to fulfil it. There are all sorts of opportunities and I'm trying not to be blind to them. I don't know that I can say much else about that.

I: Thank you. Is there anything we've missed?

R: No, those three threads in my life: the Grail, community development, and meditation are the three strands that are sort of interwoven in me. When I retired from Avec and came back to Waxwell, to the Community, I felt that I didn't know how to put Avec and the Grail bits together. In my mind I had two circles, one was Avec and one was the Grail and they didn't overlap, or just a little bit, and it took me quite a time to see that in fact they had overlapped. It took some years for that to happen. I'm not sure what the process was but probably it was getting more

involved in the Grail life and Grail work and doing my own Avec type work and so on, and seeing other Grail people doing similar sort of work. So now I'm just wondering what's going to happen next. I mean, I physically feel that I've got a new lease of life being here in Winchester, where we moved in 2012. I'm much more energetic than I was, not that that's saying very much, and I love people, I just love being with people individually and in groups. But, I love being on my own in my room too. That's my favourite place: my room, my books, my hobbies and so on, and I also love walking and music. I suppose it will just be small ways of mixing with people. Somebody, when I went to the Parish Centre the other day to get some information, said, "Oh the Grail" and she started chatting away and said, "We've got lots of groups and things you could join here, you know. There are all sorts of things going on. I mean there's the Catholic Women's League." I said quickly, "Well, we don't usually join all Catholic or all Christian groups. We like to join with everybody, because then we're mixing with people of all beliefs, and none." This is becoming another of my beliefs. I believe that all faiths are God-given and that people of all faiths are finding their 'way to heaven' as well as I am, or we are, and we've all got something to learn from each other. I'm not saying that I don't think Jesus is the Son of God or special. I'm a big follower of Bede Griffiths as well, who has a Christian ashram in India, and he has a lot of followers in this country who have their Sanghas, which is their community meetings, and they use a lot of the Indian chants, or Bhajans, as they call them, which are another way of quietening oneself for prayer.

I: Catherine Widdicombe, thank you very much.

PS. This is not part of the Interview, but I just want to say that looking back on my life, I feel that I have been so fortunate. I can't put the following items in any priority. I have had such interesting and worthwhile work to do in community development; I was so fortunate to meet George and work with him for so long, and still to have him as a 'soul friend' as he would say; I have now or have had such good friends down the years, though many have now died; I come from and still have a loving family; and in both Pinner and Winchester I have been or now am in such a good parishes. Finally, I live in the firm belief that 'the best is still to come'.

