



AUTUMN 2016

ROOF 'N' ROOTS

The Newsletter of the Methodist Ministers' Housing Society



From wartime to wonder – Eric at the BBC, with military sweetheart Babs, and today at his Chichester home

HOW ERIC MADE THE MEDIA HIS PARISH

HE WAS THE DASHING YOUNG CAPTAIN WHO WON HIS BRIDE. HE WAS A PRESBYTER WHO MADE THE MEDIA HIS MINISTRY. ERIC BLENNERHASSETT SHARES HIS STORY...

The media world was his parish. Society tenant Eric Blennerhassett was ordained as a Methodist minister – but swapped pulpit for production

studios. TV and radio became his 'district' for more than 20 years.

A pioneer of religious broadcasting, he helped create BBC productions like discussion programme *Meeting Point*, hymns show *Sunday Half-Hour*, news programme *Quest* and contributed to *Songs Of Praise*. He worked with famous names – including the Dimpleby's – Richard and sons David and Jonathan.

Born in 1921, Eric was brought up in a Methodist home at Erdington, Birmingham. His father was a successful businessman and a local preacher.

Imaginative teachers at school showed Eric the power of storytelling. That interest grew on educational trips to Stratford. 'To see a Shakespeare play brought to life on the stage instead of on the page was a revelation,' he said.

'I decided that was going to be the life for me. I'd like to be an actor.' His father hired a drama teacher to give Eric extra tuition. But soon he was to play a role in the much bigger theatre of war.

Eric's father was president of The Birmingham Jewellers' Association. Guest speaker at their annual dinner in 1938 was Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain – who'd just met Adolf Hitler at Munich.



BLESS YOUR HOME

Decorative 'house blessings' proved to be something to write home about from the recent Methodist Conference.

Complimentary copies of *Pocket Prayers For Home Blessing* were distributed from the Society's stand. The leaflet offered simple prayers with Celtic-style artwork

by Mary Fleeson, who provided designs for Conference in 2010.

'We wanted a resource to help visitors "bless" their house or flat,' said Communications Manager Clive Price. 'Lindisfarne Scriptorium's *Pocket Prayers* really hit home.'



It's important to us that ministers at all stages of their ministries know about us and journey with us – and we with them, of course – especially when they consider their retirement options.

One of our tenants told us recently that knowing the Society was there had enabled and empowered him to get on with his day-to-day work of caring for his church. He didn't have to worry about his future because he knew MMHS would look after him in his retirement.

Stories like these are heartwarming. We are proud and privileged to serve in different ways – to make a difference where we can.

I hope you enjoy reading this second edition of our newsletter. There is plenty to enlighten, equip and even entertain. Please keep feeding back with your stories and comments!

• **Mairi Johnstone** CEO

SERVING OTHERS

'It was a joy to receive a card and a blessing from MMHS on my ordination.' That's what one new minister wrote on his Facebook page recently. As part of our service at Conference, we gave each newly ordained presbyteral and diaconal minister a greeting, a book of blessings and a memory stick to store their sermons and prayers!

SMALL TEAM, BIG HEARTS



Angelic chorus – (from left to right) Jamila, Theresa and Atawa

The MMHS 'finance angels' say – don't worry about it. Talk about it.

Every week these three experts handle diverse enquiries ranging from rent arrears to refunds – from service charges to standing orders – and more.

'We're here to serve the residents – and respond to their enquiries,' said Financial Services Director Atawa Aryee. 'Nothing is too hard for us.'

Atawa has led the team for the past year. A fellow of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, she's held a number of other senior finance and management positions.

'Reimbursements of residents' monies are always brought to the front of the queue,' Atawa pointed out. 'All we need is an eligible invoice or receipt so we can process approved payments on time.'

She makes sure tenants are supported by smooth-running services. That involves a wide range of jobs from drafting policy and reporting on financial performance to reviewing and upgrading systems, processes and programs.

Finance Manager Theresa Rattray has day-to-day contact with householders. She's concerned about the pressures on people.

'Losing a loved one can cause householders to slip into rent arrears – then they worry,' said Theresa. 'But

they don't need to feel that way. We're relaxed about it. We can even help sort out a payment plan.'

Theresa is an associate member of the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants. She's been working for the Society since 2007, and makes good use of her accountancy knowledge and experience.

Money issues produce massive stress. The MMHS 'finance angels' say – don't worry about it. Talk about it.

'We understand the challenges faced by our bereaved residents,' said Theresa. 'We're here to serve them.'

Finance Co-ordinator and Analyst Jamila Afkari-Edlou processes invoices, reimbursements and service charges. She agrees there's no need to worry. 'For instance, service charges are capped at £50 per month,' she pointed out.

'Any amount over that is paid from a generous funding arrangement.' With a BA from the University of Azerbaijan, Jamila has eight years' experience working in a housing association. She's served MMHS since June 2014.

'Householders need to get in touch if they have any financial concerns,' said Jamila. 'We're a small team with big hearts.'

HOW ERIC MADE THE MEDIA HIS PARISH

In a private conversation, Eric's dad asked the PM what he thought of the Führer. 'He's a mad dog!' was Chamberlain's response.

'We thought that made war inevitable,' Eric recalled. 'Within a week or two, my brother and I had joined the Territorial Army.'

Eric rose to the rank of captain and met his future wife Babs. 'I thought I'd pop into a dance,' he remembered. 'In she came, in her WAAF uniform.'

When war ended, Eric changed his plans from plays to pastoring. He wanted to help build a better world. 'I was wondering how on earth this had happened,' he said of the conflict, 'and how could it be prevented again?'

Changing his demob suit for clerical garb, he attended Handsworth Theological College. He was ordained in 1950. He and Babs married that same year.

Changing his demob suit for clerical garb, he attended Handsworth Theological College

When the BBC needed Methodists to join its ecumenical religious broadcasting team, Eric was appointed. He trained as a TV and radio producer, and later ran media workshops for ministers, before taking religious broadcasting to BBC London.

During this time, he and Babs had started a family – Sue and then Tim were born. They grew up to pursue careers in the health service and music industry respectively.

After his many years in broadcasting, Eric returned to lead churches in Winchester and Southsea. He always aimed to work as ecumenically as possible, operating beyond denominational borders.

When he retired, Eric still pursued his long-time love of drama. He and Babs moved into an MMHS property at Chichester in 1989. They watched plays at the city's famous Festival Theatre.

It was the ideal retirement spot. 'The housing society take over from what the Church would normally do,' Eric said of MMHS, 'and I'm grateful. It's worked very well in our case.'

Sadly, Babs died in spring this year. 'All



Eric enjoying his retirement

the people who'd known her well and worked with her, sent me messages,' said Eric. He continues to live in the house with son Tim, who'd given up work to care for his mother.

Now 95, Eric reflects on how he and Babs first met: 'She was alone and I was alone, so I went up to her, and said, "Would you like to dance?" And she said, "Oh yes, please". That was the beginning of a beautiful friendship!'

MEET THE FINANCE 'ANGELS', AS THEY FLY TO YOUR AID

Keep calm and carry on talking. If the finance team's message could be summed up in one sentence, that would be it.

Money issues produce massive stress.

BOILER SERVICING? IT'S A GAS!

Tenants are walking on air about the Society's gas checks and boiler servicing. Not only have they gone with the flow of the current arrangement – but they've also given it almost 100 per cent approval.

As a result, MMHS have decided to renew their contract with British Gas, who've been carrying out this essential work over the past three years. Staff are just as buoyant as householders about the servicing.

'Getting gas checks right is one of the biggest challenges in housing,' said Reactive Maintenance Manager Glenn Fry. 'It's so hard to find a decent company who'll do all your gas servicing.'

'There were some minor teething problems at the beginning – such as

arranging appointments and reaching the right contact. But I've never seen any organisation come anywhere near British Gas in terms of customer service,' Glenn explained.

'Customer satisfaction levels have boomed,' said Property Services Director Godfried Addo. 'Residents have highly recommended the service.'

The contract covers an annual safety check of every gas-fired appliance in every Society property. It also includes a full service, clean and inspection of every gas-fired boiler owned by MMHS.

The process is simple. Property Services Administrator Conrad Mercer-Graham sends British Gas a list of properties. Then British Gas contact each householder to arrange

their inspection. Some tenants have been confused about the extent of the Society's duty. While MMHS checks all gas appliances are safe and sound, servicing is carried out only on boilers and does not extend to gas fires, cookers and hobs. Those appliances are the tenant's responsibility, when it comes to servicing. In addition, householders need to arrange their own servicing of oil-fired, LPG and electric boilers – and the Society will reimburse their costs.

Full details are in the *Tenants' Handbook*.





METHODISM IN OUR MADNESS

ARTS AND CULTURE BY CLIVE PRICE

Popular literature's greatest hero is a Methodist. Superman came from planet Krypton and ended up in Wesley's world.

Various web sources say this has been the case for most of the comic book character's existence. Many of us may have missed it, even while reading the graphic novels and watching the films.

America's United Methodist Church ran an article headlined simply, 'Superman was a Methodist'. Supe's adoptive parents Jonathan and Martha Kent were both churchgoing Methodists. Clark grew up attending Smallville Methodist Church.

Such claims have also been shared by websites like comicbookreligion.com and adherents.com. The latter pointed out that while growing up in Smallville, Clark Kent attended Sunday church services at the local Methodist church every week until age 14.

While it's nice to think of the Kryptonian singing about 'the triumphs of his grace', we could rightly think, 'So what?' However, one observation is important as the Superman movie *Dawn Of Justice* streams into countless TVs across the nation right now.

'When people need help, Superman responds,' said Methodist writer Douglas Cannon. Methodist churches and charities are known for similar actions. They might not be faster than a speeding bullet, but they're quick to care. Up, up and away!

HOME TRUTHS

REFLECTION BY BARRIE TABRAHAM

Not all people like gardening. It can be maddeningly frustrating. Who hasn't successfully tidied a border, only to find the next day weeds smiling defiantly at us? Who hasn't fought to maintain a neat lawn, only for ants and unrepentant worms to renew their guerrilla warfare?

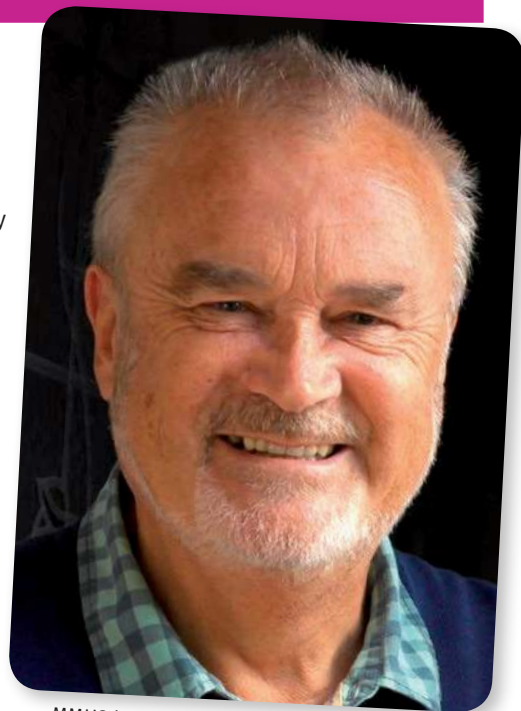
However, there are huge compensations – whether you're a beginner, expert or 'enthusiastic potterer'. We can even bring a little theology to bear upon our musings. But I won't write about 'the best way to garden, like praying, is on your knees'!

The enormous range of trees, shrubs, flowers and vegetables we can plant, can speak to us of the extraordinary richness and variety of God's creation. Back in Sunday School we were taught those sugary 19th century hymns which gave a naïve picture of nature and ignored its less attractive features. Along with roses come thorns and suckers, black spot and greenfly! Perhaps, therefore, the weeds, brambles and 'pests' remind us that the world God gave us is no Eden. It's a vale for soul-making, where we struggle against adversity and – by God's grace and strength – triumph.

The world God gave us is no Eden. It's a vale for soul-making

While no one would suggest gardening should be the basis for natural – as opposed to revealed – theology, we might ask, 'How does the process of planting, tending, nurturing and pruning speak of the way we use our God-given gifts?' It comes as no surprise, for example, that Paul's letters are littered with gardening metaphors. And you won't need me to remind you of Jesus' own illustration of the vine and the branches.

Even if there's only room for window boxes and patio pots, a tiny garden can still offer challenges and opportunities. When we're older, it's easy to become disheartened if we



MMHS householder Revd Barrie Tabraham

feel the contribution we can make has diminished. But there are always possibilities for fulfilment, even in old age.

To see plants grow is a perpetual source of wonder. I once asked my mother-in-law – who could get almost anything to grow – 'What's the difference between a plant and a weed?' She smiled, 'If it lives, it's a weed – if it dies, it's a plant'. Some would say a weed is simply a plant in the wrong place. Now, there's an interesting line of thought, if we apply it to the whole of the natural world!

It's as well to remind ourselves that we can actually create nothing. We're simply co-operating with God to try to bring order, interest and beauty to fruition. Psychologists tell us it's all too easy to bury the 'child' within as we grow older. We should never lose a sense of wonder or curiosity.

It's all too easy to bury the 'child' within as we grow older

To put it another way – if you're as incompetent a gardener as I can be, then to see tomatoes, runner beans, dahlias or sweet peas emerge can be a paradigm of our attitude to life. It reaffirms our sense of dependence upon the grace of God for all that we are or seek to be.

