

Meet The Members: John Lansley



I recently came across the phrase: *If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans*. I imagine it may be true for many of us!

I left university with an English degree in 1964 with few plans, but knowing that I didn't want to be a teacher nor, despite a lot of soul-searching, was I called to follow my father into the Methodist ministry. The university appointments board came up with what sounded a socially useful compromise - a post with the Liverpool Council of Social Service (LCSS), and without any real idea of what this would entail I applied and got the job. ('Liverpool', said my London friends, 'you'll find a lot of *problems* there'.) LCSS was a small

but wealthy organisation which coordinated voluntary organisations and liaised between them and the local authority. I worked with youth and community organisations learning committee and development skills, and by the end of three years felt that I had found my niche I took a one-year course at LSE to get some wider background (and, as it turned out, to meet my wife). I then moved on to a job with Nottingham CSS, which included developing local community care groups for older people in different parts of the city.

After a year there, however, I got a phone call from a friend in the Extra-Mural department of Liverpool University. He was setting up a diploma course for local people involved in community work in the city: would I be interested in joining him? I did, and without expecting to, worked there for the next thirty-two years. At first, the teaching took up all my time – keeping one lecture ahead of the diploma students, who were very friendly and supportive group, but I was also required to run day and evening classes. As well as general courses on social policy I started building on the work with older people which I had done in Nottingham, and in time this grew into a two-year part-time certificate course in the care of older people, aimed at people like home helps and care assistants who did not usually have access to any wider training. We formed a group of teachers working in social and health care, and I relied particularly on two friends and colleagues, a geriatrician and a psycho-geriatrician and I began to describe myself as a gerontologist.

As well as teaching gerontology I was also, of course, running courses and day conferences in broader fields of social policy, and additionally I was responsible for organising a programme of religious studies courses for the department. Since Liverpool did not have a theology department I found help from Lancaster University's department of Religious Studies – and I learned a lot myself. More generally, I had joined a lively inner city Methodist Church when I first came to Liverpool, and gained a lot from discussions about community work and the churches. Over time, I became involved with clergy from several denominations who were exploring the role of the churches in community work and joined in a number of working parties for the churches as a sort of social scientist at large.

In a similar way, I became involved with a range of voluntary organisations and campaigning groups in the city – Child Poverty Action Group, Age Concern Liverpool, and, not least, Christian Council on Ageing (as COA was then known). The Merseyside Branch had been formed early on, mainly by Paula Francombe, an active Roman Catholic and a friend of Mannes Tidmarsh, the national founder of CCOA. The Merseyside branch was always fairly small in number, though

we had a large mailing list for when we arranged day and half-day conferences, and I was able to assist with this through my university work. In general, I became a go-to person for voluntary bodies wanting to run conferences or working parties, and my interest in older people steadily increased.

Of course, there were lots of others already involved in this field, both secular and religious (the Roman Catholic archdiocese was particularly strong on encouraging support for people with dementia and their carers), but one group of people who particularly stick in my mind were a group of women in their 80s and 90s who had been involved in left-wing politics and peace campaigning since the 1930s. They were a wonderful group, for ever going off on conferences and demonstrations, leaving their disconsolate partners with a fridge full of sandwiches labelled for different meals.

After I had been teaching in the extra-mural department, the University closed our department and the staff were transferred to teaching in internal departments – in my case, the sociology department. It took some time for me to adjust to teaching full-time students, but I came to enjoy the students, particularly the more mature ones. I gradually realised that I had some pastoral skills, however limited, and that I enjoyed this side of the work. Since doubts about pastoral skills had been one of my main reasons for rejecting any call to the ministry, I realised that this excuse no longer stood, and more generally I had learned over a long time to live with any faith doubts. The idea of the ministry had never completely gone away, and now it rose in my mind again. I was approaching my sixtieth year, and the university was offering a tempting early retirement scheme and things were coming together. One evening I found myself on the phone with my superintendent minister, and with a bit of a mental gulp, I said: ‘There’s something I think I ought to talk to you about’ – ‘Don’t move,’ he said, ‘I’ll be right round with the forms!’ And so, in the end things fell into place, and I became a Methodist Minister. Friends and colleagues said how right they thought my decision was (two of my referees were an atheist philosophy lecturer and a Roman Catholic priest), the Methodist Church was very generous in arranging part-time training for me while I completed my last two years of university teaching, and I was given a very flexible range of duties within my local circuit, including chaplaincies in the university and at the local MHA (Methodist) home – from which, again, I learned a great deal. I was also given pastoral responsibility for a little Methodist chapel: ‘It’s a dying church’, they said, ‘just give them a little tender loving care.’ What they had failed to take into account was that there was also a ramshackle family centre attached to the church, run by a local woman who was the loving mother hen to the whole local community, between us we managed to keep the centre running for 14 years, until finally the funding ran out. The centre closed one week, and the church closed the next. It wasn’t what I had expected ministry to be about, but I am sure it was the right thing.

Oh, yes, and while all of this was going on, I had been elected onto COA’s committee, and became editor of *plus*, our magazine, for nine years.

As I approached 80 it felt right that I should start dropping responsibilities, and I am now very largely retired – though I can’t guarantee that God has had the last laugh yet. Looking back, it has been a rewarding, if unexpected life, and I give him thanks for it.